Hollowed Promises and Crooked Kingdoms: Supernatural Predation and the Integrity of Court Systems in Three Medieval Romances

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Abstract

Supernatural beings in medieval romances are a ubiquitous feature of the genre, yet seldom have these beings been the centralized point of analysis in scholarship. Instead, otherworldly beings have been viewed as ancillary characters acting as a complementary necessity to the hero's journey. This study aims to disengage from this tendency and instead analyze the supernatural beings within *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Sir Launfal* as independent and intentioned characters. When viewed through models from folklore studies, supernatural beings demonstrate their agency, openly challenge courts and court figures, and create a predatory power dynamic with their human counterparts that favours the otherworldly. By means of an attentiveness to the place-lore of their narrative and mimicry of court customs and conventions, supernatural beings upset and fracture the hegemony of human courts. In their interactions with individual chivalric or royal figures, otherworldly creatures prey upon their targets through binding contracts that demand a literal commitment to the contract clauses. As these court representatives grapple with their resulting compromised ideals, supernatural beings challenge the integrity of the courts' institutions through spectacle. By using the otherworldly as a focal point, therefore, these supernatural characters take on greater narrative meaning and reflect the discursive complexity imbedded within these poems.

Sommaire

Les êtres surnaturels sont un aspect omniprésent à travers les romans médiévaux. Pourtant, dans la panoplie d'études dédiées à ce genre littéraire, ces personnages font rarement l'objet d'une analyse centrale. Au lieu, ces êtres sont typiquement traités comme étant des personnages auxiliaires, qui, par nécessité, complimentent le parcours du héros. Cette étude a pour but de se défaire de cette tendance et d'examiner les êtres surnaturels dans *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* et *Sir Launfal* comme étant des personnages indépendants et intentionnés. Lorsqu'on les examine à travers des modèles d'études en folklore, on réalise que ces entités surnaturelles expriment une volonté qui leur est propre, qu'elles lancent des défis à la cour et à ces représentants et qu'elles créent une dynamique de pouvoir prédateur avec leurs homologues humains qui favorise le côté surnaturel. À travers l'attention qu'ils portent au « place-lore » du poème et leur mimétisme des coutumes et conventions de la cour, les êtres surnaturels bouleversent et fracturent l'hégémonie des cours humaines. Dans leurs interactions individuelles avec un personnage chevaleresque ou royal, les créatures surnaturelles ciblent leur proie à l'aide de contrats contraignants qui requièrent une adhérence littérale aux clauses contractuelles. Alors que les figures chevaleresques ou royales doivent faire face au compromis de leurs idéaux résultant de ces contrats, les êtres surnaturels défient l'intégrité des institutions de la cour par moyen d'un spectacle. Ainsi, selon une optique encrée dans le surnaturel, ces êtres prennent une plus grande signification narrative et reflètent la complexité discursive ancrée dans ces poèmes.

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Introduction

The supernatural is an essential and ubiquitous feature of Middle English romances,[1] whether it be qualified as marvellous, otherworldly, or unnatural. As Northrop Frye explains, "the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended; […] enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established."[2] In the texts examined in this study, the supernatural is embodied by a fairy king who steals Orfeo's wife in *Sir Orfeo*; by Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight who both challenge Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; and by a fairy princess who seduces Launfal in *Sir Launfal*. All three romances circulated in the fourteenth century and built upon pre-existing material from Breton lays or common motifs like the beheading game. The presence of magical items and creatures, as Frye noted of romance generally, is equally a domesticated feature in these tales, but one of their more fascinating common facets is the inclusion of intelligible otherworldly beings; that is, what Richard Firth Green identifies as "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."[3]

Scholarship on medieval English romances, however, has tended to resist engaging with these supernatural beings in more than a superficial manner. Academic emphases on otherworldly elements have typically addressed one of two features: the possible literary histories of key supernatural figures, or the perceived dangers of paganism in an increasingly

[1] John Finlayson, "The Marvellous in Middle English Romance," *The Chaucer Review*, vol 33 (1999): 1-2.
[2] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essay*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 33.
[3] Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 4.

Christian world.[4] Examination of medieval romances through literary inheritance makes sense; scholarship in the last five decades has attempted to give otherworldly elements validity in scholarly discourse by repatriating them to a pre-existing and well-established literary tradition. A theological approach is similarly valid; medieval courts in romances are often portrayed as bastions of Christianity, and critics at the time frequently qualified supernatural figures as demonic opposites of the Christian divine. In contemporary analyses, dynamic relationships between supernatural beings and humans are similarly confined to a binary interpretation. Fairy princesses, for instance, are typically considered exclusively in light of an amorous relationship with a knight figure while supernatural beings who showcase dangerous behaviour are deemed a "necessary concomitant of the hero's heroism, its necessary dramatic setting."[5] Supernatural beings, as a result, are relegated to an ancillary position and tend to fall in one of two categories: as a hero's foe or a hero's asset. In either category, supernatural beings are generally seen as flat characters whose agency and complexity are questionable. Though some strides have been made in recent scholarship to center discussion on otherworldly elements, supernatural beings are rarely analyzed independently or on equal footing with the human agents of medieval romances and, rarer still, in combination within a greater discursive context.

This study aims to bring supernatural beings to the fore as active agents within these

[4] See Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952) for contemporaneous observations on marvels as originating from devils and magicians affiliated with devils, and William of Auvergne, *De Universo*, trans. Roland J. Teske, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998) for contemporaneous observations of fairies as devils. For modern analyses of Arthurian romances in the context of Christianity and literary histories, see C.S Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Peter Meister, "Arthurian Literature as a Distorted Model of Christianity," *Quondam et Futurus*, vol. 1 (Summer 1991): 32-49; Roger Sherman Loomis, "Arthurian Tradition and Folklore," *Folklore*, vol. 69 (1958): 1-25; Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960); Tom Peete Cross, "The Celtic *Fée* in *Launfal*," *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues of George Lyman Kittredge*, (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1913):377-87; John Darrah, *The Real Camelot: Paganism and the Arthurian Romances*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

[5] John Stevens, *Medieval Romances: Themes and Approaches*, (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 99.

narratives; it seeks to situate the purpose of their actions and decisions as independent of the hero's quest. By highlighting the otherworldly elements and their associated discourses in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*, and *Sir Launfal*, previous interpretations of supernatural beings broaden into a more nuanced and productive acknowledgement of the tension they share with their human counterparts. Antagonism still permeates these relationships, but to situate supernatural beings as central, defining features of these romances restores a sense of agency and purpose to these fundamental characters and explores the plurality of discourses that led to the crafting of these narratives. The deftness with which these poets use these bodies of knowledge within their works reveals an impressive dexterity in navigating a variety of source materials. Sites of encounter take on a kind of agency, as it were, in qualifying the dynamic between supernatural creatures and humans by mediating the behaviour that is permissible within these dedicated spaces. Their agency relies on the "supernaturalisation of spaces,"[6] or what Mari-Ann Remmel calls the concept of place-lore, a "mostly narrative lore, which is strongly bound to some toponym, site or landscape object, and which includes (place) legends, place-bound beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore, memories, etc."[7] In this study, place-lore is understood to be the privileged knowledge of natural and supernatural properties associated with specific times and places. The poets of *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain,* and *Sir Launfal* craft these supernaturalised spaces with an array of overlapping lores, all of which impose conditions for entry and for conduct. Supernatural creatures, however, are liminal beings who traditionally appear at such imbricating yet distinct places. To be liminal, according to Victor Turner, is to be "neither here nor there;

[6] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore, Liminal Storyworld and Ontology of the Supernatural: An Introduction," *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2018): 10.
[7] Mari-Ann Remmel, "The Concept, Research History and Nature of Place Lore," *Monuments, Site, and Oral Lore II, Lore and Places* (Tartu: University of Tartu, 2014), 67.

they [liminal beings] are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."[8] For supernatural creatures, such a disposition allows them to navigate and make use of these supernaturalised places to impose power dynamics that favour them. That is, while humans are unknowingly made subject to the place-lore of an encounter, supernatural creatures operate within this body of knowledge and are thus poised to exploit human vulnerability.

In addition to qualifying the dynamic between humans and the otherworldly, sites of encounter also have a secondary function in that they may be "read" to provide points of insight into the inner workings of supernatural communities. Meetings in the realm of the supernatural expose how the otherworldly is fundamentally constructed to rival and then destabilise courts that purport to operate by chivalric values. Specifically, theirs is a community that mimics courtly institutions. Through their liminality, supernatural beings directly reflect and respond to the customs and conventions of the human court, but in much the same way as sites of encounter, they also include other discursive sources. Their mimicry, in other words, is not a perfect representation of the chivalric court; it is a syncretic affair, where other cultural contexts are combined in such a fashion as to refract and in some way reconfigure the mimicked. Between being similar to but distinct from the courtly community, supernatural courts expose the inner faults within human courtly institutions and hold a natural disposition to enact judgement.

Indeed, through models from folkloric studies, a third category by which to understand the connection between supernatural beings and their human counterparts comes to light: as predatory appraisers of both individual knights or sovereign figures and their collective courts. On the individual level, supernatural beings contrive legal contracts with their human targets in

[8] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

their most vulnerable state. Once sealed, the contract's enactment pushes the boundaries of both parties to their jurisdictional limits and ushers their human targets into a trap to measure their espoused ethical commitments. Against the human court, otherworldly beings leverage a challenge to the entire community in order to test the integrity of a given courtly institution. Faced with the failings of their representatives, human courts are given an opportunity to publicly reckon with the faulty performance of their institutions. Both types of ordeal take their shape from a supernatural code of conduct: an unwavering and literal adherence to their every commitment. The actions of otherworldly beings speak to their purpose, as their predatory behaviour aims to offer a reckoning of the chivalric supremacy in their narrative world. There remains, of course, an interdependency between humans and supernatural beings in these tales—heroes need their foes and predation requires both predator and prey. What this study highlights, however, is the importance of reading these Middle English romances in a decentralized mode. These tales may bear the names of prominent knights whose progress we trace, but a focus on the supernatural allows for a redistribution of agency and even emphasis to more characters than the knight or sovereign figure. Such a perspective uncovers the narrative ingenuity that sees supernatural agents as forces that deflate the bloated reputations of knights and courts and, on a larger scale, as reflections of the discursive complexity that informs these poems.

Chapter 1: Place-lore and the Power Dynamics of Encounters

Sites of encounter between supernatural beings and humans in *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and *Sir Launfal* participate in typified meanings that draw on what Mari-Ann Remmel calls "place-lore," that is, narrative lore that is typically associated with a given topographical site. For Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg, place-lore is a perpetually active mode of folklore, as the "storyworld, landscape and people all participate in the creation of this realm

[place-lore], in the supernaturalisation of places."[9] When supernatural creatures travel to the human realm in these romances, therefore, they often meet with their human counterparts in such places. Poets commonly choose locations that are storied, folklorically rich spaces in encounters initiated by otherworldly figures, since location itself plays an active role in the encounter. Landscapes are of particular interest for this study, since

> the landscape, as it becomes storied, turns from a passive surrounding into an active participant in creating the supernatural environment. […] [Landscapes] participate in [the] creation and shaping of the liminal reality where this world and the otherworld meet. People who enter this environment beyond the boundaries of the everyday reality transform themselves ritually into story characters and become participants in the legendary realm.[10]

Place-lore, however, extends beyond geographical considerations of space. Specific times and moments can also carry stories and memories, and characterize a setting. Recognizing this, Valk and Sävbord argue that "the temporal aspects of legends – the magical time of special nights – plays an active role in making the supernatural place" as much as a given, meaningful spatial location.[11]

Part of the reason why location and time can be such active participants within supernaturalised environments in these romances has to do with the placement of Faery and Otherworlds in relation to the human realm—that is, as an integrated part of the same world. "Folklore," Piotr Spyra explains, "has it that the fairy plane of reality occupies the same space as

[9] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore," 10.
[10] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore," 10.
[11] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore," 13.

the human world."[12] As many scholars have noted, the presence of the supernatural within the human realm is breathtakingly common and expected in Middle English romances. Such ubiquity of supernatural phenomena has led John Finlayson to believe that the marvellous or supernatural in romances are not meant to create a sense of "unreality," nor should they be considered out of the bounds of the "ordinary" of the medieval chivalric world.[13] While Finlayson argues such a recurrence of supernatural appearances is proof of its inconsequentiality,[14] however, his emphasis on supernatural normativity is misplaced. Rather, if the presence of the supernatural within romance is commonplace, the mode by which they can appear depends on a series of imbricating factors, as moments of encounter with otherworldly creatures within *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain,* and *Sir Launfal* indicate. These occurrences require certain spatial, temporal, and narrative prerequisites of the poem's place-lore, such as in the court orchard in *Sir Orfeo* or the Yuletide season in *Sir Gawain,* wherein the boundaries between the human and otherworldly realm overlap and integrate one another—creating, as it were, a liminal opportunity. Though Spyra speaks exclusively of *Sir Orfeo*, his explanation is also applicable to *Sir Gawain* and *Sir Launfal*, as he espouses that such requirements "[begin] to make sense once the acknowledgement is made that the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* are the liminal fairies of the folk tradition. They appear at liminal places and at liminal times, and their ontological status, that is the mode of their existence, is founded upon this ambiguity."[15] When place-lore prerequisites are met, therefore, supernatural incursion into the human realm is made permissible, thus allowing supernatural creatures to cross the boundaries between realms, engage an encounter along the

[12] Piotr Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies: Readings in Late Medieval English and Scottish Romance*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 66.
[13] Finlayson, "The Marvellous in Middle English Romance," 392.
[14] Finlayson, "The Marvellous in Middle English Romance," 404-6.
[15] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 64.

expectations of the supernaturalised space, and initialize the purpose of their intervention in earnest. Acknowledging the complex set of discursive constraints within the narrative world of these poems effectively reveals a power dynamic between supernatural beings and humans that is tilted towards the otherworldly. Humans are, in this view, unwittingly subject to the constraints of the properties of a given space, properties that come to be known in the lore surrounding it, while supernatural beings showcase a mastery of their environment that makes them capable of attracting humans to their sphere of influence. Hence, in their position of power, supernatural beings have the ability to administer challenges to their vulnerable human counterparts.

In *Sir Orfeo,* supernaturalised spaces that offer a liminal opportunity are ones that build upon a collection of histories, legends, and folkloric beliefs. Scholarship has often noted the extensive cultural syncretism of the lay and the ways the original tale of Orpheus is parsed, repurposed, and made into a patchwork within a new, Middle English romance setting. Though an intermittent source text (most likely French in origin) is thought to have existed,[16] the poet nevertheless takes pains to create a genealogy of land and character that includes the lay's textual origins while incorporating new traditions. The poet traces Orfeo's ancestry, therefore, to mythological origins in how "his fader was comen of King Pluto, / and his moder of King [sic] Juno."[17] Both Pluto and Juno are former Roman gods here euhemerized into kings ("that sum time were as godes yhold / for aventours that thai dede and told"[18]) and, in the case of the goddess Juno, oddly made male.[19] England is similarly conjoined with Southeast Europe, as

[16] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Sir Orfeo: An Introduction," *Sir Orfeo* in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, Western Michigan University, 1995), 15.
[17] *Sir Orfeo* in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), l. 43-4.
[18] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 45-6.
[19] The use of the male gender may be attributed to a scribal corruption.

Orfeo is said to be a king in 'Inglond', who "sojournd in Traciens, / that was a cité of noble defens - / for Winchester was cleped tho / Traciens, withouten no."[20] And though the speaker names him king of Thrace, Orfeo will only bear his title at the very end of the tale. Instead, the speaker states that "Ichil you telle of "Sir Orfewe,"[21] prompting a recognition that the lay about to unfold is one whose core may well be that of a Greek myth, but whose content nevertheless follows the conventions of courtly romances.

As a genre, courtly romance itself responds to and reflects a demographically, socially, and religiously diverse society. Hence, romances incorporate an extensive and complex set of tales, motifs, legends, beliefs and literary history from which to 'story' or supernaturalise a landscape. Among the numerous hermeneutic possibilities of the text, the poet guides his[22] reader to preferred narratological perspectives by which to understand the poem. From the very beginning of his tale, the speaker tells audiences that this mosaic work of highly mythologized and redefined spaces owes much to an earlier collection of Breton lays, of which the poet "can tel sum, ac nought alle."[23] The narratives and themes of these Breton literary predecessors vary widely:

> Sum [are] bethe of wer and sum of wo
>
> And sum of joie and mirthe also,
>
> And sum of trecherie and of gile
>
> Of old aventours that fel while;

[20] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 47-50.
[21] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 21-4.
[22] The identity and gender of both the *Orfeo*-poet and *Gawain*-poet are unknown and most likely lost to time. The possibility of both poets being women cannot be discounted, but in the absence of firm evidence and considering the prevalence of male literacy in the fourteenth century, the male pronoun will be employed for the purpose of clarity.
[23] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 22.

And sum bourdes and ribaudy.[24]

Through intertextuality, in other words, *Sir Orfeo* has a point of literary reference that ensures its landscapes and locations are duly tied in context and meaning to its Breton predecessors. Yet the poet emphasizes that, of all these pre-existing topographic stories included in the poem, none inform his work (or lays in general) more than supernatural folklore, specifically fairy lore. In a move that foreshadows both the prominence of fairies in the poem as well as the liminality that allows their incursion into the human realm, the speaker makes a notable break from his use of anaphora, as he includes how "mani ther beth of fairy."[25] Such an emphasis, of which only love seems to surpass,[26] highlights the ubiquity of fairies in the narrative topography of Breton lays through its sheer abundance ("mani" as opposed to only "sum"). More importantly, however, it also implies how the land of Faery and fairy phenomena operate within the genre: as part of its central themes and motifs, but decidedly made distinct. As it straddles the thematic line, Faery and all of its facets and characters are immediately shrouded in dualities: accounted for, yet separate; named, yet unexplained; dominant, yet peripheral; part of the human world, yet never its central tenant. If anything, as recent scholarship has shown, dwelling in the in-betweens and the half-exposed is a necessary feature of Faery and its community; full disclosure would be too unsettling for humans.[27] As the poet thus delineates the poem's narrative framework, fairy lore becomes an integral and integrated discourse by which to understand and analyze the world of

[24] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 5-9. Most of the text from this edition was taken from the Auchinleck manuscript, but it should be noted that the first 38 lines are a reconstructed addition made by the editors. There is evidence that the page preceding line 39 was cut out of the manuscript and by using the Auchinleck's *Lay le Freine,* as well as the Bodleian Library Manuscript (Ashmole 61) and the Harley 3810 manuscripts which both contain the lay, Laskaya and Salisbury remade *Sir Orfeo*'s prologue.
[25] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 10.
[26] The last addition to the speaker's list of the "ferli thing" (l. 4) found in these lays is that, "of al things that men seth, / mest o love, forsothe, they beth" (l. 11-2).
[27] Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*, (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2018), 15.

Sir Orfeo as well as the context, reasons, and purpose of a fairy's infiltration in the human realm.

The poem has a total of four encounters between fairies and humans: Heurodis's dream vision at the ympe-tre, her abduction at the same ympe-tre a day later, Orfeo's meeting with the fairy hunting party in the forest, and his visit to the fairy king's court.[28] Of the four, the meetings occurring at the *ympe-tre* are anomalous for two reasons. First, the fairy king actively seeks to prey upon and abduct a human (Heurodis). Second, the location itself is the pre-condition of a fairy-human contract, according to Tara Williams, and this leads to Heurodis's abduction and her subsequent treatment in the fairy king's kingdom as part of the gallery of the undying.[29] Within this locus, the *Orfeo*-poet combines the subtleties of literary precedent—what other scholars have referred to as 'tradition'—and folklore to underline how liminality directs fairies, mediates meetings between humans and the supernatural, and characterizes the power dynamics between fairy and human.

Location and time are crucial factors in the creation of a liminal space. The poet instructs his readers how the first encounter was "Bifel so in the comessing of May / When miri and hot is the day," where Heurodis "Tok to maidens of priis, / And went in an undretide / To play bi an orchardside."[30] Eventually, "Thai sett hem doun al thre / Under a fair ympe-tre / And wel sone this fair quene / Fel on slepe opon the grene."[31] It is difficult to ascertain if Heurodis knew of the lore that would have forewarned her of the possible dangers in such a setting.[32] The text,

[28] The gallery of the undead at the fairy king's court would necessarily suggest more fairy encounters between humans and fairies, but only four are directly discussed within the poem.
[29] Williams, *Middle English Marvels* 20-1.
[30] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 57-8; 64-6.
[31] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 69-72.
[32] Katherine Durham Oldmixon states that "the allegation that Heurodis should be aware of the dangers of sleeping under a tree at noon in her husband's orchard would have to be premised on the assumption that Heurodis is not a character in a Middle English Breton lay, but a reader of them" (*Otherworlds/Otherness,* 215). However, considering the widespread belief in the supernatural, in folklore, and in magic within fourteenth-century England across all social classes (Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature," *Journal of the*

however, does not suggest that Heurodis had an explicit desire to encounter fairies—only that she was made vulnerable to a meeting by the time and location of her midday slumber. "The month of May," as K.M. Briggs explains, "although it is a time of fertility rites, is also traditionally a time of danger,"[33] and in combination with the heat and the "undretide"—that is, the noon hour—Heurodis fell asleep in the precise moment when "the powers of the supernatural, faery or devil, are supposed to be strongest."[34] In addition to these "magical times" is the choice of the orchard as the encounter's setting. Though they offered apparently idyllic scenery, orchards—specifically those tended for the court—required an invested amount of care and security. As Seth Lerer points out,

> Historically speaking, 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. Records from Henry III's court stress the need to prevent intruders from entering orchards, and an order from 1250 commands two walls to be built around the queen's orchard so that 'no one may be able to enter' and the queen may 'be able to amuse herself' within. Heurodis's motivation, 'To play bi an orchard-side' (66), is thus perfectly in keeping with royal custom, and the poem and its historical analogue stress the well-planned security of such cultivation."[35]

In theory, Orfeo's orchard should have been a safe space for Heurodis and her maids, but the fairy king and his retinue prove themselves unbothered by any amount of human-made security. If anything, it is *because* such a space is human-made that an incursion can take place, since an

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Folklore Institute vol. 13 (1976): 315), the assumption is not entirely without grounds. Whether she disregarded the dangers or was simply ignorant of them, Heurodis was nevertheless made vulnerable by this specific setting.

[33] K.M. Briggs, "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead," *Folklore*, Vol 81, no. 2 (Summer, 1970): 81-2.

[34] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010): 201.

[35] Seth Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum*, Vol 60 (Jan 1985): 95.

orchard is meant "as the supposed domain of human mastery over nature, but also where two worlds overlap."[36] Heurodis, in other words, falls asleep at the seam of two conflicting worlds, that of the domesticated, human-crafted orchard, and the outside world of nature.[37] "Thus the orchard," Corinne Saunders argues, "becomes a limen or passage to the world of the supernatural, and Heurodis wakes to reveal that the King of Faery has commanded her presence."[38]

Such factors are nevertheless not quite enough to have attracted the fairy king's attention. After all, Heurodis' two maidens did not meet with the fairy king or his knights despite having been placed in almost the same conditions. What differentiates Heurodis from her maidens and makes her more easily accessible is her unconscious state and a story-laden tree. Sleep, according to Dorena Allen, provides a false sense of security: "In modern tales of the *sidhe* many of the actors consort with the fairy host while to their families they seem safe in their beds—a survival of the wide-spread primitive conception that during life, and especially during sleep or unconsciousness, the 'soul' or 'self' is able to wander from the body on adventures of its own."[39] Accordingly, in Heurodis' case, "The maidens durst hir nought awake, / Bot lete hir ligge and rest take. / So sche slepe til after none, / That undertide was al y-done."[40] Yet like the family in more modern *sidhe* stories, the maids were unknowingly made an accessory to the fairy king's plans. Though full culpability is difficult to attribute to these maids, their inaction nevertheless left their queen at the mercy of the fairy king for an afternoon in a parallel dream world.

The final component that secures an encounter between the fairy king and Heurodis is the

[36] Tom White, "Medieval Trees," *Dandelion: Post-Graduate Arts Journal & Research Network*, Vol 4 (2013): 6.
[37] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 61.
[38] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance,* 201.
[39] Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: the Dead and the 'Taken,'" *Medium Aevum,* Vol 33 (Jan 1964): 103.
[40] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 73-6

ympe-tre. It is this tree that cements the king's choice to cross the boundary, take the queen instead of her maids, and leave Orfeo and his kingdom in complete disarray. Typically translated as a "grafted tree," "the ympe-tre," as Spyra explains, "is effectively two organisms, as well as species, in one, its identity hovering between that of the base and the graft transplanted onto it—both unknown to the readers."[41] Though the species of the tree are unknown to the reader, its very definition reprises the notion that such a tree is not—in medieval conception—fully part of the natural order. While the traditional etymology of "ympe" comes from the Old English *impa*, from the verb *impian,* or "to graft,"[42] an other connotation reveals a direct connection if not to Faery, then to a Celtic otherworld. According to Alice Lasater, "ympe" has the meaning of "an offspring, child, progeny, scion; an evil or malicious child; a small demon, devil, or wicked spirit"[43] akin to the idea of a fairy changeling. The poet may well have chosen a tree as a liminal meeting point to invoke ideas of the Tree of Knowledge from Genesis as well as associated distinctions between good and evil, but the grafted tree has also found many of its iterations in Celtic—and specifically, Irish—tales under the guise of the apple tree of Emain, its branches, and/or its golden apples. *Tam Lane*, stories of Cormac, Cúchulainn, Connla Chaim, Tadg (or Teigue), Oisin, and Bran are some of the many tales and sagas that relate how the tree of Emain Ablach connects both humans and fairies, and in most cases, facilitates human visitation or fairy abductions to Faery.[44] Breton lays which would be inspired or sourced from these Irish tales also employ the image of the grafted tree and its significance to foreshadow the coming of one or more fairies.[45] So common is the motif, in fact, that A. J. Bliss claimed "nearly every visitor to

[41] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies*, 61.
[42] Curtis R.H. Jirsa "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*," *English Studies* vol. 89 (April 2008): 142.
[43] Alice E. Lasater, "Under the Ympe-Tre Or: Where the Action is in *Sir Orfeo*," *Southern Quarterly* vol. 12 (July 1974): 355.
[44] Lasater, "Under the Ympe-Tre," 358-61.
[45] Jirsa, "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre," 143.

the Celtic otherworld has found an orchard of apple-trees; and there is some evidence of the importance of a magic apple as a passport."[46] Heurodis, of course, had no need of an apple passport, given that her 'visit' to the Fairy King's world is forcibly made under threat of torture.

Her abduction does, however, require the *ympe-tre*. Where in other tales, the tree's significance may stop at a compounding effect with the 'undretide' or the month of May, here the *Orfeo*-poet makes the *ympe-tre* an integral component to the method and reason of Heurodis' forced visit to the fairy king's castle. More than a Celtic point of migration between human and fairy realms,[47] the *ympe-tre* becomes a necessary condition in Heurodis' imposed contract from the fairy king. That such a contract was made under duress is self-evident. Within the dream wherein Heurodis first meets him, the fairy king gives her a tour of his lands and then gives the condition of her capture: "Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow be / Right under this ympe-tre, / And than thou shalt with ous go / And live with ous evermo."[48] Should she fail to appear as directed, the king then stipulates the consequences of voiding their verbal contract by promising to "totore thine limes al," a fate that bothers him little since in the end, even dismembered, "thou worst with ous y-born."[49] As Williams remarks, it is noteworthy that the fairy king does not stipulate that she come unaccompanied or that she present herself in a specific state of consciousness.[50] Only her physical presence at the grafted tree is required. Defaulting on this stipulation would incur much fairy displeasure: "And yif thou makes ous y-let," warns the king of Faery, "Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet".[51] Though Orfeo orders all of his knights to confront the fairy king and his retinue, his command does not act as a breach of contract, since "there is no actual

[46] A.J. Bliss, "Introduction," *Sir Orfeo*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966): xxxvi.
[47] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 27
[48] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 165-8.
[49] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 171.
[50] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 20.
[51] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 169-70.

confrontation, and the knights do not hinder the fairies at all. […] His [The fairy king's] primary concern is "whar" Heurodis will be, and the chief way in which she might defy him, he suggests, is by being elsewhere."[52] The fact that Heurodis's physical absence would be considered defiant behaviour suggests that the fairy king would face some amount of hardship to attain her were she not to respect their contract. In effect, her absence reinforces the notion that when the prerequisites that allow for a given space to become liminal are not met, fairy movement and action are severely impeded. In the moment, however, Heurodis is made impossibly vulnerable. Caught within a dreamscape, alone, and faced with a powerful supernatural creature, Heurodis has no recourse. Power dynamics between humans and fairies are thus implicitly inscribed within the place-lore of this encounter, as they allow for the fairy king's crossing, the exercise of his will, and the subjugation of Heurodis to his demands. Whether or not the fairy king would be able to act on his threat is impossible to know. Considering his ability to visit Heurodis in her dreams and then physically at the ympe-tre, as well as the frequent outings of his hunting party and the number of humans collected in his gallery of the undying, however, the poet strongly suggests that the fairy king is capable of finding another liminal opportunity to keep his promise. Regardless, Heurodis returns to be taken.

On the whole, *Sir Orfeo* presents a collage of stories, beliefs, and superstitions from a variety of sources to re-encapsulate the original Orpheus tale. By deciphering the place-lore imbedded in the meeting between Heurodis and the king of fairies, the location and time work as a motific language to spell out the danger of the moment, the heightened power of the supernatural, the thin veil between worlds, and the gateway that would allow a crossing. Combined with Heurodis' vulnerable state under the grafted tree, the fairy king operates within

[52] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 20-1.

the poem's place-lore to exploit the ideal circumstances to grow his gallery of undying humans. In this sense, *Sir Orfeo*'s fairy king exploits his and his community's ability to navigate supernaturalised spaces in order to draw an advantage over humans and reap the benefits of such a dynamic.

Yet if storied settings take the form of specific times and locations in *Sir Orfeo*, stories themselves can serve as the space that creates and shapes "the liminal reality where this world and the otherworld meet" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*[53] The world of Arthur's court in this poem is itself a place whose lore invites supernatural incursion, dictates the manner in which the otherworldly interacts with courtly knights, and outlines the purpose of such an interaction. In much the same manner as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*'s opening lines map the landscape and the narrative precedents that create the supernaturalised realm in which the poem's plot unfurls. The *Gawain*-poet situates Britain's origin from when "þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye," where such famed characters as Romulus, Ticius, and Langaberde set forth to establish Rome, Tuscany, and Lombardy, respectively. Britain's eponymous first king, of course, carries the central emphasis, as the poet explains how

> Fer ouer þe French flod, Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
> Wyth wynne
> Where werre and wrake and wonder
> Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne
> And oft boþe blysse and blunder

[53] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore," 10.

Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.[54]

What Brutus adds to British history "quen þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych,"[55] however, is not only the history of his conquest, but also his own—that is, the historical legacy of the hero Aeneas and his descendants. Intertextually, such an inclusion harkens to the very first written Arthurian chronicles, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae* and Laȝamon's *Brut*, while also appropriating the histories of Roman and Greek classical literature as fundamental to the origins of this Arthurian romance. Yet by specifically underlining how "þe tulk [Aeneas] þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt / watz tried for his tricherie þe trewest on erþe,"[56] the *Gawain*-poet outlines an essential trait in Aeneas's descendance. As part of Aeneas's "highe kynde / þat siþen depreced prouinces and patrounes bicome / welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles,"[57] Brutus bears the banner of a legacy that would see heroes being tried and tested for their loyalty and virtue, and found "þe trewest on erþe." As his scion, Arthur is meant to uphold such a legacy—and as Arthur's nephew and Brutus's descendant, so too is Gawain.

Britain, however, is to be understood as more than a conquered land of grafted cultures. For though Brutus would see that "bolde bredden þerinne baret þat lofden / in mony turned tyme tene þat wroȝten,"[58] and would impose his reign and mastery over the land through a line of British kings,[59] he and his successors were ultimately unsuccessful in reigning over all of Britain. "Wonder" or "ferli' things resist and thrive outside of their control. To signal this supernatural persistence in the face of the "highe kynde," the *Gawain*-poet uses the term "wonder" as part of Britain's five dominating characteristics prior to Brutus's conquest in the first stanza: "werre and

[54] *Sir Gawain in the Green Knight* in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014): l.13-9.
[55] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 20.
[56] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 3-4.
[57] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 5-7.
[58] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 21-2.
[59] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 25

wrake and wonder, / […] and oft boþe blysse and blunder / ful skete hatz skyfted synne."[60] Nevertheless, even after Brutus and his warriors conquered Britain, wonder remains. As the poet reports immediately after announcing Brutus's successful conquest, "mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen here oft / þen in any oþer þat I wot syn þat ilk tyme."[61] War, vengeance, bliss and blunder from sin might well have been subsumed into the rule of British kings, but the wonderous, notes the poet, remains an essential and unchanged feature in Britain.

For Arthur and his knights, wonders are encountered both physically in their many adventures, [62] and in narrative form. At court, storytelling creates a collective experience where knights discuss the marvels they face and it is the collection of such adventures that gives the court its repute. In fact, narratives of wonders and the supernatural hold such a crucial role within the functioning of Arthur's court, its revelries and well-being, that a lack of such stories pushes its most prominent figure to forego his most basic necessity: food. Even the speaker notes the oddity of this prioritization, as he explains how

> […] also an oþer maner meued him [Arthur] eke
> Þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen he wolde neuer ete
> Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
> Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale
> Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe
> Of alders of armes of oþer auenturus
> Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt

[60] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l.13-9.
[61] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 23-4.
[62] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 237-9. When the Green Knight first enters Arthur's hall, "al studied þat þer stod and stalked hym nerre / wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde what he worch schulde / for fele sellyez had þay sen bot such neuer are."

To joyne wyth hym in iustyng in joparde to lay

Lede lif for lyf leue vchon oþer.[63]

The timing of Arthur's fasting is significant. His refusal to eat is carried out at a Christmas feast, traditionally one of only five occasions when he held court,[64] and though Arthur's habit of refusing food before being told a tale of wonder is often noted in the genre, such restriction is typically observed only during Pentecost.[65] The poet goes against this tradition, however, by shifting the liturgical celebration and reporting that Arthur behaves in such a fashion at every feast.[66] Hence, Arthur's fasting is not an exception; it is a personal and court ritual in its own right. Though little information is given as to when Arthur demands his tales at other feasts, in this instance, his ritual is specifically introduced at the most liminal point of the festivities: "wyle Nw Ȝer watz so ȝep þat hit watz nwe cummen / þat day doubble on þe dece watz þe douth serued / fro þe kyng watz cummen with knyȝtes into þe halle / þe chauntre of þe chapel cheued to an ende," and when "Nowel nayted onewe neuened ful ofte."[67] Squarely at the end of the Christian Christmas customs, amid the feasting, but at the cusp of a new year, Arthur brings about his storytelling interlude.

By carving out such a space in these festivities, Arthur does not, however, simply disrupt Christmas traditions for his own personal entertainment. As Larissa Tracy points out, "the validity of tracing the Christian feast days in the context of the poem cannot be ignored, but neither can the underlying pagan traditions that served as the basis for many of those 'holy

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[63] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 90-8.
[64] Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (fn. 1.37) "According to French romance, Arthur held court five times a year on the great Christian festivals, Easter, Ascension, Whitsun, All Saints (cf. 536-7), and Christmas."
[65] Elizabeth D. Kirk, "'Wel Bycommes Such Craft Upon Cristmass': the Festive and the Hermeneutic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* vol. 4 (Summer 1994): 105. "The feast at which the Round Table is gathered together and Arthur will not eat until he has seen a wonder is normally Pentecost."
[66] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 100.
[67] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 60-3; 65.

days.'"[68] The *Gawain*-poet makes a point of mentioning Yule, the Christmas season, and the New Year as overlapping,[69] but the intricacies and folkloric beliefs that were associated with this season include more traditions. According to Elizabeth D. Kirk, the winter solstice was often a crucial and mystical moment in many cultural calendars. "Christmas-tide," she explains, "by combining a major Christian festival with the winter solstice and the New Year, had attracted to itself observances originally associated with the Celtic and German Yule […]; with the Roman Saturnalia; with the Mithraic festival of Sol Invictus; and with spring rites enacting the victory of summer over winter, or the annual death and rebirth of summer,"[70] to name but a few. Storytelling during this season was also not a novel tradition. "Christmas and New Year's were until recently a time for ghost stories and stories of the supernatural and the dead, stories which stress," Kirk further explains, "how thin the wall is between humanity and the Other in all its forms, New Year's Eve in particular being a time of portents, omens, and foretelling the future."[71] What Arthur's demand for wonders effectively accomplishes, therefore, is to create a temporal space that is both part of and yet separate from these overlapping traditions and customs. Moreover, by equating such a space directly with Arthur's nobility, [72] the *Gawain*-poet engages the literary precedents that characterize the place-lore of such a moment and sets Arthur's narrative ritual as one that quantifies and qualifies his reputation as well as his court's.

While Arthur's moment for marvels is most likely used for entertainment, it also allows a liminal opportunity in the overlap of traditions for the Green Knight (though, perhaps more accurately, Morgan le Fay through the Green Knight) to exploit. To be able to enter Arthur's

[68] Larissa Tracy, "A Knight of God or the Goddess?: Rethinking Religious Syncretism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* vol. 17 (Fall 2007): 40.
[69] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 283-4. "forþy I craue in þis court a crystemas gomen / for hit is ȝol and nwe ȝer and here ar ȝep mony"
[70] Kirk, "'Wel Bycommes Such Craft Upon Cristmass,'" 104.
[71] Kirk, "'Wel Bycommes Such Craft Upon Cristmass,'" 105.
[72] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 91.

court during this Christmas season, the poet innocuously inscribes certain requirements within the space. In Arthur's demands for a tale of marvels, he specifies only that such stories be on the topic of "sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale / of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe / of alders of armes of oþer auenturus."[73] These demands create a golden opportunity for the Green Knight to exploit. After all, though Arthur's moment for marvels creates a space for an intermingling of human and otherworldly traditions, it also narrativizes itself. As previously stated, Valk and Sävborg have argued that the "people who enter this environment beyond the boundaries of the everyday reality transform themselves ritually into story characters and become participants in the legendary realm."[74] The Green Knight does fulfill Arthur's requirement by offering him a wonder, but his arrival and the challenge he extends to Arthur's court present a verbally related marvel insofar as it is one *in medias res*. Arthur himself and all of his court (which includes his 'alders' and 'arms') are no longer an audience to the tale: they are characters within a marvellous adventure, since the Green Knight is a marvel twice over. Scholars have often debated whether the Green Knight can be considered a supernatural entity, if he is or is not of fairy kind. Yet whether the Green Knight can be considered fairy, elvish, a half-giant, or any other non-human denominator is a moot debate. To both internal and external audiences of the poem, the Green Knight's very appearance is a marvel of a kind that even the worldly Knights of the Round Table have not seen in all of their adventures. He is also able to survive his beheading after Gawain's great swing, maintain posture and mobility, as well as speak while beheaded. His survival is thus both a supernatural feat and a second marvel for public consumption[75]—making such an event, in other words, a supernatural story told during

[73] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 93-5.
[74] Valk and Sävborg, "Place-Lore," 10.
[75] See also Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance,* 194. "The Green Knight's powers extend far beyond the natural, including the ability to overcome death itself: the graphic beheading, the grotesquely

Christmastime as folk custom dictates.

Though the beheading game cannot be considered jousting exactly, the Green Knight nevertheless responds to another condition within Arthur's narrative ritual, that "sum siker kny3t / […] joyne wyth hym in iustyng in joparde to lay / Lede lif for lyf leue vchon oþer."[76] The otherworldly origins of the Green Knight may be ambiguous, but he is nevertheless a 'siker kny3t' both in appearance and—as his alter ego, Sir Bertilak—in standing as Morgan le Fay's representative and Hautdesert's lord. Though Gawain's fate at the end of the poem fully disavows the possibility of losing one's life in the beheading game, the threat of death is nevertheless taken seriously when the Green Knight extends his challenge to Arthur and his court.[77] Moreover—and perhaps more importantly—the Green Knight's challenge adheres to the oldest literary requirement in Arthur's court: that the descendants of Aeneas prove themselves "þe trewest on erþe."[78] Gawain's apparent failure to uphold this legacy will be explored in the third chapter, but through his mockery, teasing, and demand for proof of Arthur's and his court's courage, the Green Knight conforms to the lore and literary histories of Arthur's realm. And it is through this conformity that the Green Knight imposes a new power dynamic, one wherein he exercises his authority to test the moral and ethical aptitude of Arthur and his young court.

C.S. Lewis famously argued that the Green Knight is or is influenced by an *eniautos daimon*, and that ultimately, he is "a living *coincidentia oppositorum*; half giant, yet wholly a 'lovely knight'; as full of demoniac energy as old Karamazov, yet, in his own house, as jolly as a

surreal scene of the court kicking around his head, and then the horrific image of the torso holding up the still-speaking, severed head render the scene profoundly uncanny."

[76] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 96-8.

[77] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance,* 194. "The extraordinary scene that follow his request for a 'Crystemas gomen' (283) – the challenge that a knight strike a blow at him, to be repaid a year later – affirms his supernatural quality and disturbingly suggests the potential violence of the otherworld."

[78] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 4.

Dickensian Christmas host."[79] Where Lewis sees an embodiment of oppositions, however, a discursive analysis reveals a carefully constructed supernatural response to the requirements of the court's place-lore. This response in turn ropes the court's members into a narrative spectacle that questions the very ethics of their chivalry.[80] The Green Knight's duality, as both a knight in his own right and as a supernatural being, gives him a privileged position: "his chivalry legitimizes the ethical aspect of the test that he administers, while his supernatural qualities make that test more intense," and the public nature of the spectacle he creates is thus appropriate "because it represents a challenge to the community of Arthur's court and to the chivalry that it espouses—in other words, to its public identity and ethics."[81] The Green Knight thus inverts the court's expectations: what should have been a guest is a challenger; what should have been a told tale is a lived one; and what should have been human is possibly supernatural.

Otherworldly creatures leveraging court expectations and conventions to enter human spaces is a trope found in works other than *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In *Sir Launfal*, Thomas Chestre outlines the dangers of lacking a lore to one's name. He ties narrative lore to apparent wealth in such a way as to make it act as both a signifier of affluence and a boundary-crossing currency. Courtly perceptions of financial gain consequently offer a liminal opportunity that allows for fairy-led incursions into the human realm—and more precisely, into Arthur's court—to challenge the judicial ethics that guide Arthur and his knights. Of course, as an adaptation of Marie de France's *Lanval*, *Sir Launfal* carries the legacy of Breton lays, briefly alluded to when the poet begins his poem:

Be doughty Artours dawes

[79] C.S. Lewis, "View Points," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Denton Fox, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968)
[80] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 80.
[81] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 85.

That helde Engelond yn good lawes,

Ther fell a wondy cas

Of a ley that was ysette,

That hyght "Launval" and hatte yette.[82]

However, unlike *Sir Orfeo*, the context that holds and informs the lay of Launfal is not predominantly its Breton predecessor, Chestre suggests, but the 'dawes that helde Engelond yn good lawes.' Comparatively, *Sir Launfal* lacks the international literary mapping seen at the beginning of both *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gawain*, and instead concentrates on literary antecedents in the form of individuals rather than locations. Chestre thus emphasizes not larger literary traditions, but the narrative lore of more localized and contemporary texts within the Arthurian genre by cataloguing the many knights—and their attached literary fame—that join Arthur at his Round Table in Kardevyle:

Sere Persevall and Syr Gawayn,

Syr Gyheryes and Syr Agrafarayn,

And Launcelet du Lake;

Syr Kay and Syr Ewayn,

That well couthe fyghte yn playn,

Bateles for to take.

Kyng Banbooght and Kyng Bos

(Of ham ther was a greet los –

Men sawe tho nowher her make),

[82] Thomas Chestre, *Sir Launfal* in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), l. 1-5.

Syr Galafre and Syr Launfale.[83]

Such a list calls upon a foreknowledge of other lays or romances that pertain to the many famous figures of Arthur's court, such as *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal, Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la Charette,* and *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lion*. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury argue, however, that more than simply listing the impressive members of Arthur's retinue, Chestre's cataloging has a specific purpose: "Notably, the list proceeds from the most important knight, Perceval (who achieves the Holy Grail) to the least important: Galafre and Launfal, both otherwise unknown as Round Table knights. The ordering may suggest a hierarchy of worth, or it could simply be determined by meter or be a way of placing Launfal in the ultimate position among the company of the best and greatest of Arthur's knights."[84] It could also be all three. Chestre's decision to organize the knights by their reputation or 'importance' would, in effect, emphasize Launfal's social standing among his peers and imply that his reputation is lowest among the named, since the literary history of his exploits is, comparatively, non-existent. Reputation or one's "greet los" is,[85] after all, the known collection of one's stories. The term 'worth,' however, is perhaps misleading, as a character's storied reputation has, in this poem, more of a financial understanding. Tellingly, instead of following tradition and discussing the nobility or high courtesy of Arthur's knights, Chestre defines them as the "knyghtes that wer profitable / Wyth Artour of the Rounde Table."[86] Though 'profitable' is typically rendered to 'worthy,' the term also held financial valences in the fourteenth century, that is as "yielding profits, revenue, or income; lucrative remunerative."[87] Chestre achieves two purposes by qualifying Arthur's knights

[83] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 13-22.
[84] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Notes," in *Sir Launfal* in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), 240.
[85] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 20.
[86] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 10-1.
[87] *Middle English Compendium*, s.v. "profitable", https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED34814/track?counter=1&search_id=5833576.

on the basis of financial gain and equating their reputation with that qualification: first, that literary precedents are understood in terms of reputation, as well as an apparent wealth. To have a literary reputation makes a character profitable to Arthur, the court, and the narrative, and is expressed through the ability to produce—and not, as is Launfal's case, expend—wealth. The second is that wealth is a definitive requirement to enter the knightly community and human spaces in general, providing anyone—even a fairy princess like Tryamour—with the means to cross the boundaries.

Chestre first signals how wealth is an entry barrier in human spaces when Launfal departs from Arthur's side under the pretense of having to attend his father's funeral after being given short shrift by Guinevere. Before his departure, Arthur bequeaths him "greet spending, / and my suster sones two"[88]—that is, Sir Hue and Sir Jon, who act as his companions but neither of whom figure in the earlier catalogue of knights. Upon his arrival to Karlyoun, Launfal has some difficulty securing lodging from the mayor who used to be his servant. The exchange between mayor and knight is tense, since Launfal's standing as Arthur's steward and the addition of his companions who are also knights of the Round Table should provide them at the very least basic lodging and hospitality. Yet the three of them cannot compete with the seven nameless knights that had already taken lodging with the mayor, and are instead relegated to a room outside of the hall by the orchardside, where they remain for a year. Whether the seven knights also remain for the same amount of time is not disclosed. Nevertheless, Launfal and his companions are never invited to stay with the mayor and are kept strictly apart from the inner circle of Karlyoun's nobility. As time passes, so too does Launfal's finances, and what was given to him by Arthur is presumably no longer sufficient to support all three knights. Launfal grows incredibly poor and

[88] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 81-2.

unable to properly attire his companions, let alone himself.[89] The increasing disparity in wealth, however, becomes more pronounced, as the physical spaces Launfal is allowed to enter grow fewer in number both by his own choice and that of other townspeople. Launfal refuses, for instance, to attend church, as he explains to a damsel that "for defawte of clothynge, / Ne myghte y yn the peple thrynge. / No wonder though me smerte!"[90] The church would probably have accepted Launfal despite his poverty, but his inability to generate the wealth necessary to purchase proper clothing is too shameful to bear and becomes a consequential barrier in its own right.

Launfal's anxiety about his appearance is concordant with the overall attention to aesthetic appearances within the poem. D. Vance Smith points out that "the poem's clear and obvious fixation on the state, effect, and value of clothing is a focused, not to mention reified, emblem of its underlying interest in sumptuary identity, the implicit connection between spectacle and economic function."[91] To lack the funds to properly attire himself for public viewing would besmirch Launfal's identity—an identity that already does not hold enough storied currency to deserve basic hospitality from his host, the local nobility, or the townspeople. Though Launfal's absence at church could arguably be deemed a matter of personal pride, his exclusion from social gatherings for the nobility in Karlyoun cannot. The poet reports how

> Upon a day of the Trinité
> A feste of greet solempnité
> In Carluoun was holde;

[89] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 154-6. Of the condition of Syr Hue and Syr Jon's clothing on their return to Arthur's court, the poet reports that "Noon other robes they ne hadde / Than they owt with ham ladde, / And tho wer totore and thynne."
[90] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 199-204.
[91] D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 169-70.

Erles and barones of the countré
Ladyes and borjaes of that cité,
Thyder come, bothe yongh and old.
But Launfal, for hys poverté,
Was not bede to that semblé.[92]

Launfal is pointedly not even given the opportunity to decline an invitation, despite having the titles that should have granted an easy access to a gathering of rural nobility. Instead, he is deliberately excluded, since "[l]yte men of hym tolde,"[93] and when people did speak of him, his reputation was such that even a market boy would claim that "Nys he but a wrecche!"[94] Lack of wealth in both reputation and clothing become a delimiting force, in other words, as it enforces an environment in which access to human spaces is mitigated through a liminal object: wealth that is both tangible and storied.

Such wealth is not, however, unique to humans, and since supernatural creatures in this tale have an excess of both apparent wealth and storied wealth (either from folklore or literary history), their affluence affords them the means by which to cross boundaries and assert their greater power in their interactions with humans. When Launfal encounters fairies for the first time, Chestre constructs a setting that uses some of the same key supernatural motifs as *Sir Orfeo*: "the wether was hot the underntyde; / He [Launfal] lyghte adoun, and gan abyde / under a fayr forest,"[95] which the poet later specifies is a "holtes hore" or "ancient forest."[96] Contrary to *Sir Orfeo*, however, Launfal is not approached by Tryamour herself, nor is he visited in a dream

[92] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 181-8.
[93] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 189
[94] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 394.
[95] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 220-2.
[96] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 230.

or threatened with dismemberment should he try to escape a fairy royal. His is a fairy meeting that falls more under the category of a voluntary, if unwitting, visit to the fairy realm than a fairy abduction, since he willingly crosses into the ancient forest where Tryamour's pavilion lies. By all accounts, his meeting with Tryamour is a gentle one, seductive in both its eroticism and financial benefits. Two of Tryamour's (presumably fairy) maidens ask him to follow them back to their mistress's pavilion, where love is professed between knight and fairy princess under a strict condition: Tryamour promises her love and all the wealth Launfal could ever desire so long as he refrains from boasting of her. It is self-evident that Tryamour can hold her end of the bargain; to say that she has apparent wealth would be a gross understatement. According to the poet, not only is Tryamour herself adorned with an inordinate amount of exoticized luxury, her surroundings, too, are filled with such riches that "Alysaundre the conquerour, / Ne Kyng Artour yn hys most honour, / Ne hadde noon scwych juell!"[97] In terms of apparent wealth, therefore, Tryamour not only outdoes her chosen lover, but her profitability and storied wealth surpass even Arthur's.

Access to human spaces is not, therefore, an impossible obstacle for Tryamour, as her wealth not only produces the liminal opportunities necessary for her to cross into the human realm but places her authority above Arthur's when sharing the same space. Quantity of wealth in *Sir Launfal* equates to one's overall power. Where Launfal's ineptitude at producing wealth incurs a dependency on Arthur, Guinevere, and Tryamour, Tryamour's affluence is such that she can supplant Arthur's role in his very own court. This difference in power is made especially clear when she initiates the encounter at Launfal's trial in the form of a conquering display of affluence. Ahead of her arrival, Tryamour sends forth ten maidens to Launfal's trial with the

[97] Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, l. 265-76.

instructions to "bede hym [Arthur] make aredy hastily / A fair chamber, for her lady [Tryamour] / That was come of kynges kende."[98] Since Launfal had only ever mentioned his lover's beauty and not her supernatural identity, her lineage as daughter of the king of Faery, or her wealth, Arthur inquires as to her person, but is kept ignorant.[99] Instead, he and his court first come to know of Tryamour through Launfal's boasting (that she is greater in beauty than their own queen) and through her maidens' expensive demands in preparation for her arrival. The first ten maidens ask for a chamber—which "[t]he kyng commaundede, for her sake, / The fayryst chaunber for to take / In hys palys that tyde"[100]—then another group of ten maidens follow, each "[f]ayryr than the other ten of sight."[101] They ultimately judge Arthur's own hall unworthy of Tryamour's presence:

> And oo mayde thys words spak
> To the Kyng Artour:
> "Thyn halle agrayde, and hele the walles
> Wyth clothes and with ryche palles,
> Ayens my lady Tryamour."[102]

By demanding that Arthur decorate his hall in a richer fashion, Tryamour—through her maidens—outlines a disparity in wealth between her and her human monarch counterpart. More than simply being found lacking, Arthur's court is made to display the standards of fairy wealth (both apparent and storied) instead of his own. It is also noteworthy that Tryamour never sets foot in the fairest chamber of Arthur's court; only her twenty maidens reside within it as Arthur's

[98] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 862-4.
[99] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 865-6.
[100] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 868-70.
[101] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 884.
[102] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 902-6.

hall is metamorphized to fit Tryamour's preferences and expectations. Indeed, the only human space she enters—the hall in which Launfal's trial takes place, and in which Arthur is meant to rule and pass judgement as monarch of the land—is outfitted to her specifications and co-opted to her own purposes. Though the power dynamics of such a scene seem subtle, their enactment has distinct repercussions. Simply by reclothing the hall, Tryamour's spatial modifications of Arthur's court repurposes it for her own spectacle, making it a fairy space within a human hall. Effectively, Tryamour both respects and supplants Arthur's authority, as she becomes the witness, testimony, and evidence for Launfal's trial, as well as the judge, jury, and executioner of Guinevere's.

Arthur and his knights could well have met the fairy princess at her pavilion; instead, Chestre's choice to keep to the Marie de France's original narrative and hold this encounter within the human court reveals how efficiently Tryamour can cross boundaries and fashion a space for herself within the human realm. After all, though it is redecorated with greater displays of riches, Arthur's court itself is not made supernatural in the same fashion as the fairy king's court in *Sir Orfeo*. Rather, Tryamour refashions it as one that is still recognisably Arthurian, but infused with a touch of Faery to measure if Arthur does, in fact, keep England in good laws. Her incursion into the Arthurian court, her display of immeasurable wealth, and her need for a richer environment than Arthur's court would otherwise normally provide efficiently plays into and manipulates the traditional prerequisites needed to enter human spaces. Moreover, if the notion of wealth is directly connected to literary precedents and storied spaces, then Chestre suggests that the narrative lore embodied in her character is more 'profitable' than the very best of the Round Table knights—including Arthur himself.

Under the lens of place-lore, therefore, location, time, and narratives in *Sir Orfeo, Sir*

Gawain, and *Sir Launfal* have value beyond organizing the poem's setting for plot development. By decentralizing the human hero, his court, and his quest as the main points of analysis, the narrative worlds of these three tales reveal encounters between supernatural agents and humans as coordinated incursions. Through a deft application of liminality and place-lore, the poets of these three romances craft supernatural mobility as hinging on the overlap between the human world and greater discursive contexts. The ability of the otherworldly to use this liminal space provides them with a powerful advantage in their dealings with humans and their respective courts, and thus defines their positions of power within the relationship they share with humans. Sites of encounter, however, have another use. Though otherworldly beings navigate place-lore to their advantage, meetings in supernatural spaces expose the intricacies of the supernatural community as designed to rival and reconfigure the customs and conventions of human court systems in these romances.

Chapter 2: Supernatural Mimicry and Cultural Syncretism

The poets of *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Sir Launfal* portray supernatural beings as having defined, hierarchical social roles: a fairy "king," a green "knight," and a fairy "princess." It follows that otherworldly beings participate in larger, hierarchic communities and should not be considered exclusively in isolation. When the human knight or sovereign figures in these romances meet supernatural beings in their own realm, therefore, they witness a community that emulates their own. Some otherworldly realms offer clearer insight into the inner workings of their courts than others, such as Bertilak's Hautdesert compared to Tryamour's mysterious Faery kingdom on the island of Olyreoun. The supernatural in all three works that this study treats, however, uses mimicry in much the same way as Homi Bhabha and Jacques Lacan present the term to reflect and refract the central human court community in

splendour and medieval courtly customs. Though both authors' understanding of "mimicry" pertains to a different time period and subject matter, the act of copying an observed phenomenon and the occurrence of skewed power dynamics between two cultures are not unique to modern histories; they only vary in particularities across time periods. Lacan's and Bhabha's understandings of mimicry can thus shed light on how supernatural beings make use of a similar concept to define themselves and their dealings with Arthur's court. For Lacan, mimicry acts as a type of camouflage: "The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."[103] Supernatural mottling would, in this case, encompass not only the adoption of human court customs and conventions, but also ideas of moral consistency and the duties of those bestowed with institutional power. Where Lacan sees mottling in mimicry, however, Bhabha also sees colonial menace. One would assume that in the power dynamics that characterize *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*, and *Sir Launfal*, chivalric communities would have the larger claim to supremacy since their reputation partly relies on their members' ability to overcome impossible odds and marvellous dangers. Yet when emphasis is placed on the otherworldly in these three Middle English romances, the opposite reveals itself. If we accept Bhabha's explanation of mimicry as "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power,"[104] then the 'Other' in this case would not be the supernatural realm, but the human court system. It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine whether supernatural beings can be considered colonial powers; nevertheless, the presence of

[103] Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 99.
[104] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* vol. 28 (Spring 1984), 126.

institutional violence and the predatory behaviour of supernatural agents qualifies their actions as invasive, appropriative, and dominating towards humans and their institutions. Bhabha further elaborates that "mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance that coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers."[105] The "difference" in the three romances that concern us here, what Bhabha later calls "the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*),"[106] takes the form of cultural refraction in the supernatural realm, notably expressed through cultural syncretism. Put differently, when supernatural creatures express a difference through their mimicry of a human court, they combine in their distortion elements of different cultural discourses, highlighting their alterity. As a result, liminality and syncretic meaning are integrated features of supernatural courts, threatening by their very composition the sanctity of what they aim to mimic. Lacan's and Bhabha's concept of mimicry allows audiences to view this threat as a signifier of the supernatural communities' ability to trouble and destabilize the hegemony of human courts. Situated as they are between the human, medieval social order and different streams of culture and folklore, "mottled" supernatural institutions and their agents have the foreknowledge of courtly institutions as well as an innate alterity that grants them the authority to challenge the ethics and moral consistency of human courts.

In *Sir Orfeo*, mimicry and refraction are most poignantly displayed in the forest and gallery scenes, where Orfeo, in his exile, observes a frequent presence of fairies and the fate of abducted humans, respectively. In the first instance, the activities carried out when Orfeo "might

[105] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 126.
[106] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 127.

se him bisides, / Oft in hot undertides, / The king o fairy with his rout"[107] are those that would traditionally be enacted in the courts of human nobles. The *Orfeo*-poet describes how the fairies would go hunting,[108] parading with "ten hundred knightes […] with mani desplaid baners,"[109] dancing,[110] and make "al maner menstraci" within the forest. [111] As Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury note, the enumeration outlines a familiar image, since "the fairy occupations – hunting, parading, dancing, making music, and hawking – correspond to the royal activities Orfeo had enjoyed before his exile."[112] The connection between fairy behaviour within the forest and Orfeo's own court, however, is made more intimate and explicit in the details. Much like Orfeo himself, fairies engage in minstrelsy and make music that captivates attention—here, Orfeo's—akin to how Orfeo's harping captivated his own court and the beasts of the forest. When they parade, the fairy king's retinue number "ten hundred knightes"[113]—the exact number Orfeo roused to save his wife. The fact that the fairy king's knights are simply there for show, a display of power with no real purpose, seems a subtle mockery of Orfeo's efforts. After all, Orfeo's gathering of knights was about as effective at safeguarding Heurodis as an aimless parade. But while a mocking tone may characterize some of the fairies' activities in the forest, for the most part, the purpose of their behaviour is inscrutable. Both minstrelsy and parades of such grandeur would typically have an audience at least matching in size to enjoy the entertainment. Save Orfeo, however, the fairies do not interact with their environment, since the poet makes no mention of their effect on the beasts of the forest as he did with Orfeo's music. Most importantly,

[107] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 281-3.
[108] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 284-5. "hunt him al about / With dim cri and bloweing."
[109] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 294.
[110] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 298-9. "And otherwile he seighe other thing: / Knightes and levedis com daunceing."
[111] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 302.
[112] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Notes," in *Sir Orfeo in The Middle English Breton Lays*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), 54.
[113] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 291.

both the hawking and the hunting are seemingly ineffective, since "no best thai no nome."[114] Yet the fact that beasts are not taken by the fairy company does not make it an aimless venture, as Laskaya and Salisbury have argued, [115] nor is it necessarily a "repetitious, purposeless activity" as Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis has stated.[116] Since the fairy king is himself at the helm of the hunt, it follows that the "game" or prey he seeks might not be animal in nature. As Spyra points out, "the sense of empty mimicry that subtends their [the fairies'] activity also has a dark side, for while they take no woodland game, they do not return to their land empty-handed, taking humans instead."[117] Indeed, with the exception of the scene within the fairy king's kingdom, the king is always portrayed as hunting with his retinue not for something, but for someone. Heurodis figures as one of his captured prey, and her abduction is not an exception; the fairy king's courtyard is filled with other human individuals whom the king has, presumably, forcibly taken mid-dying. As is customary with hunting trophies, these humans are exposed and left "liggeand within the wal."[118] Moreover, since Orfeo only observes a fairy presence in the forest "[o]ft in hot undertides"[119]—one of the prerequisites for supernatural entry into the human realm[120]—the poet further intimates the notion that hunting game for the fairy king means hunting humans. Supernatural mimicry, therefore, takes a sinister turn, and what would originally be copy-acting becomes a distortion that threatens the mimicked.

Even the making of courtly art comes to be imitated and refracted to outline dangers. Orfeo's harp is both his most defining feature as an individual and his most direct connection to

[114] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 287.
[115] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Notes" in *Sir Orfeo,* 54.
[116] Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "The Significance of Orfeo's Self-Exile," *The Review of English Studies* vol. 18 (1967): 248.
[117] Spyra *The Liminality of Fairies,* 64.
[118] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 388.
[119] *Sir Orfeo* l. 282.
[120] See Chapter 1.

his environment. His music has a divine quality, the poet intimates, since

> In al the warld was no man bore
>
> That ones Orfeo sat before –
>
> And he might of his harping here –
>
> Bot he schuld thenche that he were
>
> In on of the joies of Paradis.[121]

Such is the compelling sweetness of his melody that even the natural world comes to hear him play:

> all the wilde bestes that ther beth
>
> For joie abouten him thai teth,
>
> And alle the foules that ther were
>
> Come and sete on ich a brere
>
> To here his harping a-fine.[122]

This mastery leads Seth Lerer to claim that, for the *Orfeo*-poet, "only the artist can find that order [the order inherent in Creation], and the poem contrasts deceptive structures which offer but the semblance of security with an art which can harmonize man with nature and with man."[123] Pointedly, Lerer argues that fairies are incapable of the same artistry. Instead, he proposes "an interpretation of fairyland as a kingdom of artifice: a display of human craft which manipulates surfaces for the awe and delectation of the beholder." [124] But whereas Lerer uses the splendour of the fairy king's castle to ground his argument for artifice, he ignores how artistry is present within fairy behaviour, though in a gruesome and mimetic expression. If art is meant to

[121] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 33-7.
[122] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 273-7.
[123] Seth Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry in Sir Orfeo," *Speculum* vol. 60 (Jan 1985): 93.
[124] Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 93.

offer "a restoration of natural and civic harmony,"[125] then, as I will demonstrate, the collection "[o]f folk that were thider y-brought / And thought dede, and nare nought"[126] provides a natural harmony akin to Orfeo's divine harping.

Lerer argues that the goal of art is to "harmonize man with nature and with man." I suggest that an artform that creates institutional harmony with the ways in which humans meet death also falls logically within the parameters of this definition. Death is, after all, a point of common ground between humans and all other living things. As with other instances of mimicked behaviour, however, fairy artistry is a distorted form of human artistry. Fairies in *Sir Orfeo* create an undying exhibition, a gallery curated along the wall for viewers of the internal audience (the fairy court and Orfeo) as well as the external audience to observe death in its most anxiety-inducing expressions. Suspending humans mid-death would seem to contradict the purpose of art as Lerer defines it, since such a suspension is unnatural to both man and nature. The gallery, however, is a paradox; it is through its composition of unnatural death that its function to harmonize unnatural ways of dying can be enacted. For K.M. Briggs and Alan Fletcher, the gallery depicts how "those of the Dead who inhabit Fairyland are people who have no right to be dead at all,"[127] since the land of Faery had the long-standing notion of being a land where the dead or 'taken' still lived.[128] Within the fairy king's collection of undead humans, however, the *Orfeo*-poet cultivates and syncretizes a second discourse,[129] that of late-medieval

[125] Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 102.
[126] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 389-90.
[127] K.M. Briggs, "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead," *Folklore*, Vol 81, no. 2 (Summer, 1970): 96.
[128] Allen explains how, "The proceedings of the witchcraft trials and the *Secret Commonwealth* of Robert Kirk bear witness that many Scots of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were persuaded that in fairyland the dead still lived, while earlier, and well before the date of our poem, the same convection may be traced in a small number of stories which have been handed down to us by Latin writers." ("Orpheus and Orfeo," 106) See also Richard Firth Green and his discussion of Fairyland as a purgatorial space in *Elf Queen and Holy Friars*.
[129] Alan J. Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* vol. 22 (2000): 165. Fletcher also argues that the gallery attends to other discourses in conjunction with the late-medieval English Christian discourse, namely that of fairyland and medieval astrology based on Ptolemy's treaty. Though the latter

English Christianity and its inadequacies in dealing with the many ways a person could feasibly meet death. Fletcher espouses the idea that what fairy art captures—both through abduction and artistic arrangement—is the problematic deaths left unattended by civic and religious procedures.

> In the later Middle Ages, the ideal form of Christian death—one might say the normative death—was the death well prepared for. […] To die in one's bed, in a controlled environment where one could be fortified, as death's door swung perilously open, with the last sacramental rites of confession, extreme unction and viaticum, was a consummation devoutly to be wished. The converse, a *mors improvisa*, was greatly feared. It lacked the reassurance of a neat Christian closure.[130]

The catalogue of humans captured by the fairy king is, in this way, an intentional collection that plays both to the visual repulsiveness of the scene as well as to the trepidations of "dying beyond the pale of church and churchyard."[131] The gallery opens with a group of mutilated bodies, with "[s]um stode withouten hade, / And sum non armes nade, /And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde."[132] As Fletcher notes, the imagery in this section of the catalogue points the audience's collective imagination towards the carnage of war,[133] a carnage that would have been all too familiar to every social stratum of fourteenth-century England, given the seven wars waged in that period. Though death by battle may have held a note of romantic nobility, bodies from the battlefield were discouraged from entering the church, according to the thirteenth-century canonist William Durandus, "ne pauimentum ecclesie sanguine polluatur,"[134] and "more often

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two discourses are weaker in argumentative strength, in his view, such a conglomeration can only push the meaning of the gallery into hermeneutic freefall, leaving an aporic scene deliberately constructed to resist singular interpretations.

[130] Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," 146-7.
[131] Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," 147.
[132] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 391-3.
[133] Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," 148.
[134] A. Davril and T.M. Thibodeau, eds, *The Gvillelmi Dvranti Rationale Divinorum Officiorum I-IV*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 62.

than not it happened that they received no adequately supervised Christian burial at all."[135] Those driven to madness ("And sum lay wode, y-bounde,"[136] and "Wives ther lay on childe bedde, / Sum ded and sum awedde"[137]), according to the church, were so afflicted because of their sinful behaviour or demonic possession. Madness would conventionally lead to suicide, which was also a sin.[138] Other undying humans present a death as a consequence of applied justice, either in the form of trial by ordeal through fire and water ("And sum were in water adreynt, / And sum with fire al forschreynt"[139]),[140] or "as a justifiably merited end, one commensurate with, and diagnostic of, some spiritual malaise within the asphyxiated patient"[141] ("And sum astrangled as thai ete"[142]). And chief among the reasons to be placed outside of secure, Christian ways of dying, according to the *Orfeo*-poet, is to be made prey to the fairy king's hunt. The last kind of undying human to be placed among the gallery is through fairy association: "And wonder fele ther lay bisides / Right as thai slepe her undertides."[143] Perhaps more than any other human in the gallery, those like Heurodis who were vulnerable to fairy abduction and made prey to the fairy king's hunt are denied a natural, church-sanctioned death: though their body lives on, these humans are believed to be dead by their communities and made to reside indefinitely within the

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[135] Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," 148.
[136] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 394.
[137] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 399-400. There were also conflicting views on how to bury a woman who died in childbirth. For the woman herself, the general view was that she could not be buried within the church, but could well be buried outside of it. Her child, however, was another matter. Durandus notably believed that the child should be removed from the woman's body and buried outside the cemetery as it was unbaptized. He notes, however, that there were other canonists "qui dicunt quod partus debet una cum muliere in cimiterio sepeliri, eo quod pars usicerum esse censetur." (62)
[138] Penelope B.R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 49-53.
[139] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 397-8.
[140] Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 94. Though often tied to judicial methods of the church, notably through the idea of 'judicum dei,' it should also be noted that the notion of 'trial by ordeal' predates the church's use, going so far back as to be mentioned in the *Code of Hammurabi* (a Babylonian legal text dating back to 1755-1750 BC) and the *Code of Ur-Nammu* (the oldest surviving law code in existence today from Mesopotamia dating back to 2100-2050 BC).
[141] Fletcher, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from Enchanters," 150.
[142] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 396.
[143] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 401-2.

imbricating space of Faery. Church doctrine also fails to provide these humans with an opportunity for salvation. Rather, as will be explored in chapter 3, it is through the fairies' own contractual devices that humans—specifically Heurodis—can be returned to the land of the living.

To be found guilty of a crime, of sin, of heresy, or in the grip of fairies destabilizes the religious and civic order of the human, Christian realm, as those who die under such circumstances are ordinarily made outliers in both their community and in their path to the afterlife. Yet by abducting these humans and making them part of an eternal, curated exhibition, the fairy king removes the moral dilemma completely. As these individuals never truly die, their death need not be dealt with at all, and the social order is thus preserved.[144] In the same stroke, however, the poem's Otherworld displays a necessary "beautiful courtesy and insouciant cruelty,"[145] since, while removing these deaths eliminates the immediacy of the issue, it nevertheless creates a dependence on the otherworldly. Though it is a concealed dependence, since the humans were "thought dede,"[146] Christian institutions that have trouble categorizing ambiguous deaths are all the more undermined by their inability to acknowledge this arrangement. Such a solution is also troubling on a number of accounts besides implementing a

[144] Recent scholars have commented on the possible apocalyptic associations of Faery and its potential designation as a purgatorial space, which lends itself to my interpretation of the undying gallery to some extent (See, for instance, Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and his *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Richard Firth Green's discussion on Arthur's problematic immortality in his *Elf Queen and Holy Friars*). Reading the fairy kingdom purely as an ecclesiastical allegory would, however, be disingenuous to the other discursive streams embedded in the poem. Evidence would rather suggest that the *Orfeo*-poet deliberately constructs the fairy kingdom and the gallery itself with interpretive ambiguity so as to resist an easy source attribution. Instead, what is emphasized is a mimicked idea of Christian purgatory, similar yet distinct, and such a space cannot, therefore, fully belong to the Christian order of Creation. Recognizing the lack of full adherence to a Christian afterlife instates an agency within the fairy king and his kingdom; that is, if there is a purgatorial space to be had in Faery, it is because the king and his community have made as such. Lerer's argument of the fairy kingdom as an artifice, therefore, falls short of this complexity since he reads a "moral vacuity" and hollowness in both king and kingdom ("Artifice and Artistry in Sir Orfeo," 104).

[145] Neil Cartridge, "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?," *Age of Chaucer* vol. 26 (2004): 226.

[146] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 390.

reliance on the supernatural. Specifically, the gallery itself is a fashioned product of two mimicked courtly customs—hunting and art-making. Ordinarily, both customs are meant to offer if not some form of bodily or psychological sustenance, then at the very least entertainment to the court. Here, however, the purpose is warped to become a threat against humans. Put differently, supernatural creatures have refracted hunting and art-making in such a way as to make the mimicked the product of these customs. All the while, the product itself reveals the flaws and inconsistencies inherent within the institutions of the human realm as these institutions are proven to be incapable of providing proper burial rights for all human deaths in accordance with human ethics. The fairy king has managed, in other words, to take innocuous customs like hunting and art-making and leverage them to undermine the integrity of Orfeo's court.

For his part, the *Gawain*-poet fashions supernatural mimicry and cultural syncretism from a different human social system. Where *Sir Orfeo* concentrates on the *lacunae* of institutional power through the fairy kingdom's composition, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* concentrates on the moral and ethical inconsistency of sovereign power in Arthur's court. As Gawain discovers when he sets off on his journey to find the Green Knight, no supernatural community presents as blatant a challenge to his court nor as effective a mimicry, as Morgan le Fay and Bertilak's castle, Hautdesert. The nature of the castle, much like the nature of Morgan herself, has historically made scholars hesitant to cast it in a supernatural, divine, or demonic light, as leaving matters that present an alterity to Arthur's court in ambiguity seems to be the *Gawain*-poet's favoured writing style. Richard North has recently gone so far as to suggest that Hautdesert and the Green Chapel may, in fact, be one and the same, with the court being but

another of Morgan's crafted enchantments.[147] What is clear, however, is that, beneath the uncertainty, a supernatural quality is undeniably pervasive within the narrative's landscape. The area that surrounds Hautdesert recalls familiar motifs of a journey to an Otherworld, where the hero faces off against monsters and marvels ("at vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed / he fonde a foo hym byfore bot ferly hit were / and þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode / for mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez"[148]) and encounters disastrous weather that hinders his progress ("for were wrathed hym not so much þat wynter was wors / when þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadden / and fres er hit falle myȝt to þe fale erþe"[149]). After an exhausting journey and in a moment of anguish, Gawain prays, "I beseche þe lorde / And Mary þat is mildest moder so dere / of sum herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse / ande þy matynez to morne mekely I ask,"[150] and within less than ten lines, his prayer is answered. Hautdesert, in its visual glory, then appears before him. The immediacy of this appearance has led Corinne Saunders to note how

> the scene recalls the sudden appearance of the Grail Castle in *Le Conte du Graal*, and the name Hautdesert may be intended to suggest the wasteland of the Fisher King. The castle's status is uncertain: it shimmers and shines marvellously, seeming 'pared out of papure' (802), but is also a highly fashionable medieval barbican, complete with towers and turrets, ornamented and painted pinnacles, and chalk-white chimneys. […] [T]he presentation of the castle as god-sent seems intended to mislead. The narrative leaves the audience unsure whether the castle, which seems to appear miraculously but is realised in

[147] See Richard North, "Morgan le Fay and the Fairy Mound in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Airy Nothings: Imagining the Otherworld of Faerie from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason: Essays in Honour of Alasdair A. MacDonald*, ed. Karin Olsen and Jan R. Veenstra, (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 75-98.
[148] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 715-8.
[149] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 726-8.
[150] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 753-6.

> such extravagantly material terms, is otherworldly, or a demonic manifestation, or perhaps linked to the divine providence that seems to have Gawain in view.[151]

That the poet refuses to make explicit the true nature of the castle is perhaps the point. As Spyra argues, doing away with its ambiguity would afford Bertilak's castle less of a menacing connotation, and would provide an ill-suited environment for the individuals who reside within its walls.

> Hautdesert is not a mirage, but it is not a real castle either, and to proclaim, as a way of choosing between the two, that it is a fairy castle would be to offer no resolution at all, because fairies lie precisely halfway between mirage and reality. Hautdesert lacks the radical alterity of the fairy world in *Sir Orfeo* and resembles a regular medieval castle lost in some faraway woods, but the uncertainty of its nature, experienced by both Gawain and the text's readers, positions it as a liminal space.[152]

Even cartographically, Hautdesert's location plays to a feeling of uncertainty, as it seems to be lodged at the seam between England and Wales. Therefore, if, as Michel Foucault has claimed, "space is fundamental in any exercise of power,"[153] then Hautdesert's location is one of conspicuous, syncretic liminality. It is situated, after all, between Camelot in the human-led realm and the Green Chapel in the wildness of Wirral, whose description "invited interpretation […] as a pagan place of demonic magic, by mentioning the presence of a 'balȝ berȝ' […], a barrow or pagan burial mound."[154] Geographically placed between Arthurian conventions and pagan beliefs, no space would seem better suited to house and support a rival and refracted

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[151] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, 195.
[152] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies*, 75.
[153] Michel Foucault, *Power-Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 144.
[154] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, 196.

supernatural court to Arthur's centralised Camelot.

The ambiguity of Hautdesert's alterity to Camelot is only further expounded in how the poet has court culture within Bertilak's castle copy Arthur's. Mimicry in *Sir Gawain* is used as an act of subterfuge, as parallels are explicitly drawn not between siblings—that is, between Arthur and Morgan—but between Arthur and Bertilak, as well as Morgan and Guinevere. Throughout the poem, the *Gawain*-poet deliberately maintains a conceit that Bertilak, as the Green Knight and as sovereign of Hautdesert, is responsible for the trials that Gawain faces. Comparisons are drawn between Arthur and Bertilak, according to Patricia Ingham, as early in the poem as the Green Knight's entry into Arthur's court, where both men are measured and Arthur made to seem inferior on the basis of aesthetic appearances. Ingham argues that "the poet foregrounds the visitor's [the Green Knight's] majesty in ways which, as some readers have suggested, critique Arthur's sovereignty as ineffectual, even childish. In contrast to the prodigious majesty of the exotic Green Man, Arthur and his fellows seem, as the Knight himself taunts, "bot berdlez chylder" (l.280)"[155] This "prodigious majesty" is not contained to the Green Knight alter ego, however. To Gawain and to the poem's readers, Bertilak seems to have an innate and visible regality that makes his position as lord of Hautdesert unquestionable. Upon meeting him formally, "Gawayn gly3t on þe gome þat godly hym gret / And þu3t hit a bolde burne þat þe bur3 a3te / A hoge haþel for þe nonez and of hyghe eldee,"[156] and such was his appreciation for Bertilak's appearance that "wel hym [Gawain] semed for soþe as þe segge þu3t / to lede a lortschyp in lee of leudez ful gode."[157]

[155] Patricia Clare Ingham, "In Contrayez Straunge: Sovereign Rivals, Fantasies of Gender, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Sovereign fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001): 123.
[156] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 842-4.
[157] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 848-9.

Bertilak plays the role of sovereign convincingly. When Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, it is once again the Christmas-Yuletide season, and in much the same fashion as Arthur, Bertilak organizes both sumptuous feasts for his household and guests to enjoy for the whole period[158] and Christmas games for the general entertainment of all.[159] So strong is Bertilak's presence as lord of the household that Morgan's few appearances seem accessorial to Lady Bertilak's beauty rather than instrumental to the fundamental dynamics of the events at Camelot, Hautdesert, and eventually, the Green Chapel:

> An oþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honed
> Þat watz alder þen ho an auncian hit semed
> And heȝly honowred with haþelez aboute
> Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were
> For if þe ȝonge watz ȝep ȝolȝe watz þat oþer
> Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere
> Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled.[160]

Much like Bertilak and his display of hospitality, however, Morgan's partly concealed character is attuned to the idea of mimicry as subterfuge. Her portrayal within the poem is deliberately fashioned to maintain the conceit of Bertilak's responsibility for Gawain's ordeal and redirect Gawain's and the audience's gaze to Lady Bertilak. By contrasting her old age to the lady's beauty, which is meant to be superior to Guinevere's own in Gawain's opinion,[161] Morgan is mottled—that is, part of the environment, and yet distinct—within Hautdesert's court and the

[158] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 884-900.
[159] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1020-3.
[160] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l 947-53.
[161] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 943-5. "Ho watz þe fairest in felle of flesche and of lyre / And of compas and colour and costes of alle oþer / And wener þen Wenore as þe wyȝe þoȝt"

many nameless individuals that circulate within it. Yet, in addition to simply being an aesthetic comparison point for the promotion of Lady Bertilak's beauty, Morgan extends the conceit by mimicking Guinevere's textual presence as a dismissible character. In the few occasions where the poet includes them (Morgan appears four times and Guinevere, two), Morgan adopts the silent role of companion or chaperon for the Lady, while Guinevere, equally unspeaking, acts as a decorative figurehead during the New Year's celebration at Camelot.[162]

Morgan's minimized role is fully reinstated as the original mastermind of Gawain's ordeal, however, when the Green Knight makes his second appearance. He and Gawain have their destined meeting, Bertilak (as the Green Knight) breaks the conceit, the illusion fades, and the foundation of Gawain's ordeal shifts. Bertilak admits that it was Morgan,

> Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
> For to assay þe surquidre 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
> With gopnyng of þat ilke gomen þat gostlych speked
> With his hede in his honed before þe hyȝe table
> Þat is ho þat is at auncian lady.[163]

Albert Friedman famously claimed, along with G. L. Kittredge, that such an avowal is insufficient to make Morgan an impactful character. "For though the poet, speaking through

[162] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 74-81 "When Guenore ful gay grayþed in þe myddes / Dressed on þe dere des dubbed al aboute / Small sendal bisides a selure hir ouer / Of tryed tolouse and tars tapites innoghe / Þat were enbrawded and beten wyth þe best gemmes / Þat myȝt be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye / in day / Þe comlokest to discry."
[163] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2456-63.

Bercilak, would clearly like us to think of Morgan as the 'only begetter' of Gawain's adventure," Friedman explains, "effectually she is not."[164] Friedman and Kittredge have been rebuked for their perspectives in recent years, but it bears stressing that denying Morgan's pivotal role erases the poem's intricate institutional complexity and the cultural syncretism caused by her presence. By making Morgan the only begetter of Gawain's adventure, the context of Gawain's ordeal and the socio-cultural meaning of Hautdesert as a location change. Bertilak's court is made out to be as patriarchal a court as Arthur's own, but by deferring to Morgan, housing her within his home, responding to and enacting her plans, as well as acknowledging her as a goddess to the point of becoming her priest,[165] Bertilak reveals Morgan to be Arthur's true, rival sovereign. Hautdesert consequently becomes a feminized, otherworldly court.

Combined with her test for the Round Table, Morgan's central role in Hautdesert's court brings the antagonistic relationship she has with Guinevere to the fore. For Sheila Fisher, accentuating female agency and its ability to shake the chivalric foundations of Arthur's court relates *Sir Gawain* to other Arthurian tales that speak to the fall of the Arthurian Age. Such an association combined with Morgan's and Guinevere's seemingly peripheral presence has prompted Fisher to claim that "Morgan and her marginalization are the means to the poem's end, because women are centrally implicated in the collapse of the Round Table and the end of the Arthurian Age. If women could be placed on the periphery, as Morgan appears to be in this poem, then the Round Table might not have fallen."[166] As Larissa Tracy correctly points out, however, "*women* in general are not 'centrally implicated' in the fall of the Round Table, only

[164] Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum,* V. 35, no. 2 (Apr. 1960): 274.
[165] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 2452.
[166] Sheila Fisher, "Leaving Women Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Arthurian Women* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 78.

Guinevere is."[167] Whether Morgan is benevolent or malevolent towards her brother's court is hard to ascertain, but her antagonism towards Guinevere suggests two things: first, that Morgan recognizes Guinevere as a threat that must be eliminated, and second, that the Round Table knights fail to see their queen in the same regard. In fact, Arthur's court does not seem to make much of their queen at all, as Arthur fails to recognize and easily dismisses the marvel specifically tailored to frighten her to death: "Dere dame to day demay yow neuer / Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse."[168] It is impossible to determine if Guinevere is a point of moral inconsistency within Arthur's court, as Fisher argues, with the information given in the poem. Nevertheless, if Morgan and Lady Bertilak prove anything in *Sir Gawain*, it is that when left to their own devices, women of power act in the shadows of court and make for the most cunning of plotters. As queen of Camelot, Guinevere arguably has the same cunning potential as her counterparts at Hautdesert. However, the possibility of Guinevere's latent ability to disrupt is as likely to apply to this poem as Morgan's murderous plan stemming from the literary history of her jealousy towards Arthur's queen: this possibility must necessarily remain speculative. Instead, what is more certain is that a patriarchal society like Arthur's would not be able to recognize such danger, as women with sovereign power are made seemingly inconsequential. To the audience, therefore, Guinevere is an unattended threat; what or whom she threatens is left a mystery, since only in a feminized Arthurian court can the true powers and dangers of an unattended queen be revealed. What the *Gawain*-poet thus achieves by creating a liminal and refracted version of Arthur's court led by Morgan is a courtly entity not only capable of

[167] Larissa Tracy, "A Knight of God or the Goddess?: Rethinking Religious Syncretism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* vol. 17 (2007): 43.
[168] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 470-1.

questioning the moral consistency of its chivalric agents,[169] but one that also highlights the danger of making key women peripheral to the functioning of courtly systems. Mimicking Arthur's court bestows upon Morgan, Bertilak and his court the ability to conceal themselves from suspicion, exploit the inconsistencies in Gawain and in Camelot, and carry out Gawain's ordeal. Unhindered, Morgan and her companions are free to enact their individual and collective challenges.

Guinevere's antagonistic relationship with a politically powerful, supernatural woman sees another iteration in *Sir Launfal*. Here, Chestre showcases mimicry in the central dilemma of the poem, the economy of gift-giving and the individuals with the means to participate within that economy. *Sir Launfal,* as well as its predecessor *Lanval* by Marie de France, stand somewhat apart from the traditional expectations of an English romance, as the driving force behind the plot of the poem is not the ethos of adventure, where "the principal vocation of the knight [is] to seek out the unknown and embrace such tests,"[170] but the maintenance of chivalric identity as a direct consequence of a woman's generosity. The similarities between Guinevere and Tryamour are numerous and inform Tryamour's mimicry. Both are daughters of kings from the Celtic cradle,[171] both have power over a retinue of maids at their disposal,[172] and both have a legendary beauty that tempt the hearts of knights—to the point, in Guinevere's case, of arrogance and

[169] See Tracy "A Knight of God or the Goddess?" 44. The poet "Morgan tries to halt the fall before it begins by testing Arthur's best knight. The continued veneration of Morgan as a goddess who, by her art, challenges the chivalry and virtues of these knights is not an anomaly in medieval lore, and her role fits within earlier tradition that may have inspired the *Gawain*-poet."
[170] James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 74.
[171] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 40-2. The speaker comments how Arthur should go "To Kyng Ryon of Irlond, right / And fette hym ther a lady bright, / Gwennere, hys doughtyr hende." Likewise, for Tryamour, "Her fadyr was Kyng of Fayrye, / Of Occient, fer and nyghe, / A man of mochell myghte" (280-2). See McLoone for discussion of 'Occient' as a rare Middle English word for 'the West'.
[172] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 862-4 and 884 for Tryamour's envoy of twenty maidens, whereas Guinevere is said to have "tok wyth her a companye, / The fayrest that sche myghte aspye - / Syxty ladyes and fyf - / And wente hem doun anoon ryghtes, / Ham to pley among the knyghtes" (l. 655-9).

adultery. More importantly, however, both Guinevere and Tryamour have a vested interest in taking Launfal as an amorous—or, at the very least, sexual—partner and occupy the role of financial dispenser amid a context of contractual love. In Guinevere's case, she "yaf yftes for the nones / Gold and selver and precious stonys / Her curtasye to kythe"[173] after her marriage to Arthur, while Tryamour gives endless wealth and the aesthetic accoutrements of proper *bellatores*—"the armored, mounted warriors who fought for the king"[174]—before imposing an injunction:

> But of o thing, Syr Knyght, I warne the,
> That thou make no bost of me
> For no kennes mede!
> And yf thou doost, I warny the before,
> All my love thou hast forlore.[175]

The intentions of both women are the same—to enter into a dependent relationship in which Guinevere and Tryamour hold the means for knights to put their chivalric identity forward. As D. Vance Smith points out, when Tryamour lifts Launfal out of poverty, her "magical plenitude remakes Launfal as a chivalric figure; he is given a horse, a squire, and, more strangely, Tryamour's own signifying assets: 'of my armes oo pensel / Wyth þre ermyns, ypeynted well" (328-29)."[176] Comparatively, Guinevere's deprivation leads to his unmaking. It may at first seem unintentional that Guinevere overlooks Launfal in her gift-giving and in response, his subsequent departure seems an exaggerated reaction. The speaker, however, redresses this assumption first when, upon Sir Jon's and Sir Hue's return to Kardevyle, "said the Quene Gwenore, that was fel /

[173] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 67-9.
[174] James T. Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the Knight in Need," *Arthuriana* vol. 25 (2015): 111.
[175] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 361-5.
[176] Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession,* 180-1.

'How faryth the prowde knight Launfal? / May he hys armes welde?'"[177] Then later, when he compares the reaction to the news of Launfal's good standing:

> Glad was Artour the king
>
> That Launfal was yn good lykyng –
>
> The Quene hyt rew well sore,
>
> For sche wold wyth all her might
>
> That he hadde be both day and nyght
>
> In paynys mor and more.[178]

Though she only expresses a desire for him later in the poem, the tone of her emotions is clearly malevolent and her questioning has the ring of a laid scheme. Guinevere is, therefore, cognisant of the effects of her actions at her wedding and is aware of what a financially-lacking knight might endure in an economy that depends on her generosity. Hence, her deprivation is intentionally harmful to his ability to bear arms as well as detrimental to his being a successful knight.

Tryamour mimics the same kind of economy and role as Guinevere in Arthur's court, but her enactment is distorted by the inclusion of a different cultural variant. From the gowns worn by her maidens that "wer of Indesandel,"[179] to the "joly moyles of Spayne, / Wyth sadell and brydell of Champayne,"[180] Tryamour's display of wealth is made not only mesmerizing by its opulence, but disconcerting by its worldliness—and none more so than her tent. When Launfal accepts Tryamour's invitation and meets her at her pavilion for the first time, the speaker describes her tent with a measure of awe, as he notes

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[177] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 157-9.
[178] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 175-80.
[179] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 232.
[180] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 886-7.

The pavyloun was wrought, forsothe, ywys
All of werk of Sasynys,
The pomelles of crystall;
Upon the toppe an ern ther stod
Of bournede golde, ryche and good,
Yloryshed wyth rych amall.
Hys eyn wer cabonkeles bright –
As the mone they schon anyght,
That spreteth out ovyr all.
Alysaundre the conquerour,
Ne Kyng Artour yn hys most honour,
Ne hadde noon scwych jeuell![181]

The luxury of this description is meant to attract interest—both from Launfal and the audience—but it is also meant to disturb the audience by delineating Tryamour and her community as external not only to humans, but to England as a whole. As Vance Smith explains, "In *Launfal*, […] the tent's extravagance is literal, originating not from the logic of exchange but from its fabrication beyond Christendom itself, the 'werk of Sarsynys' (266). Like the cup found in Richard Lyons's counting room in 1377 that is 'florez de figure de Sarsenye,' it is virtually the only object described with any specificity, but its distinctiveness derives from its detachment from a familiar context, from local economies and households."[182] Were emphasis on lands and peoples outside of England confined to objects, Tryamour's distortion of the economy within the poem would be restricted to her power to procure extravagant goods. In this sense, it would seem

[181] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 265-76.
[182] D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession,* 178.

adequate to believe that "Tryamour's beauty, the luxury of her pavilion, and the extravagance of the feast respond to Launfal's privation, and the exotic otherworld reverses the harshness of Arthur's court and Karleon."[183]

Tryamour's genealogy, however, indicates otherwise. Katherine McLoone makes the convincing argument that although Chestre attends to the gift-giving economy as a central theme of his poem, he also includes cultural tensions of the fourteenth century. As McLoone explains,

> the emphasis on place-names and the provenance of objects underscores the polysemia of Tryamour's own provenance. *Occient* is either Old French for a Saracen land or a rare Middle English word meaning 'the West'—and what's west of England is, of course, Wales, Cornwall, Ireland: the Celtic colonial holdings of the fourteenth-century English Empire. Yet 'the king of Olyroun' (as Tryamour's father is described) refers not to Avalon, as the source material would seem to imply, but the Ile d'Oleron near Brittany, to the south east. Tryamour and her father are, indeed, *fere and nyie*; they are far and near, but never here: they are always from somewhere else.[184]

McLoone later argues that this inclusion of international spaces is one of the ways Chestre highlights a growing fear of miscegenation, specifically between British and Saracen, as well as British and Irish/Welsh bloodlines.[185] But while her comment on the eugenic stance of England is appealing, Chestre's construction of the otherworld reaches further in its implications. The land of 'Fayrye' in *Sir Launfal* does not relate to its literary antecedents in a way that squarely situates it on the island of Avalon or, alternatively, relate it to the more typical lands of Ireland,

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[183] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, 186.
[184] Katherine McLoone, "Strange Bedfellows: Politics, Miscegenation, and *Translatio* in Two Lays of Lanval," *Arthuriana* vol. 21 (Winter 2011): 7.
[185] McLoone, "Strange Bedfellow," 9. "In the Middle English *Launfal*, and to a lesser degree in Marie, there is an obvious threat of the combination of British with eastern blood in the underlying suspense of this scene, but there is also a threat, in both lays, of mixing British with western, that is Welsh and Irish, blood."

Cornwall, Wales, and Brittany.[186] It would also be erroneous to confine its meaning to merely "a place of material wish-fulfilment,"[187] or as a land formulated to respond to a growing gentry class with bourgeois connotations,[188] because of Tryamour's ability to produce endless wealth. To do so reduces the international quality of her supernatural realm. Chestre's "Fayrye" is not so much an otherworld as a World of Others, where all lands that are not England are repatriated. The poet, in this way, makes both his fairy characters as well as his otherworld adoxic, that is, as "existing outside the traditional categories of orthodox and unorthodox" Middle English romance.[189] Rather than conforming to generic conventions, Tryamour (and her extended community) can mimic "the governing paradox of an economy that idealizes giving" as well as her Arthurian counterparts, [190] while still presenting herself beyond the geographical and literary boundaries of Arthurian England. Such mobility between the local and the international reconfigures the power dynamics within the poem. For, with the events of the poem operating on the local scale, Tryamour's supernatural internationalism and her ability to move within Arthur's court ostensibly dwarfs Arthur's institutional authority and questions his court's supremacy.

In all three works, therefore, supernatural communities present complex, hierarchical societies that are both similar to and distinct from their chivalric counterparts. Mimicry of human court customs and conventions creates an uncanny resemblance, one that often misleads readers and characters alike to believe that supernatural creatures operate under the same mores, contexts, and codes of conduct as humans. This assumption proves false, as supernatural

[186] McLoone's comment implies that l'Île d'Oléron was part of Breton territory during the Middle Ages, but the island was under Guyenne, Poitou, and Anjou jurisdiction before being annexed by King Louis through the Treaty of Paris in 1259.
[187] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, 186.
[188] See Michael Johnston, "Gentry Romances," in *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 49-89.
[189] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romances*, 74.
[190] D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession*, 180.

mimicry combines with a cultural syncretism that distorts and reconfigures the mimicked. In their refracted portrayal of human courts, supernatural creatures instill a sense of their power and mastery over the limits of courtly convention that enables them to undermine courtly institutions and demand that heroes prove their own consistency. Such a demand takes on a predatory connotation, however, as the method that otherworldly beings use to challenge their human targets is to trap them in binding contracts.

Chapter 3: Contracts with the Supernatural

In every encounter between the supernatural and humans in *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Sir Launfal*, the interaction between the two parties is carried out as a formal agreement, that is, on the basis of a contract with the supernatural. Often, and especially in encounters with fairies, these contracts take the form of a *geas*.[191] The term has held many definitions,[192] but for the purpose of this study, *geas* is understood as "a solemn injunction,

[191] Applying the term *geas* (Old Irish *geis*) to Middle English romances may seem idiosyncratic. The study of *geas* is mostly confined to Irish literature studies, and with reason. It is also all the more probable that the poets of the three works studied here may not have been aware of the *geas* motif. Yet the line that divides Irish literature conventions from Welsh and Breton literary conventions is a fine one and as Middle English romances have inherited from, been influenced by, or simply appropriated motifs from all three literary genres, divisive lines that would see conventions like the *geas* exclusively applied to one genre are even harder to draw. Chapter One of this study has already attested to some of the cultural syncretism and literary history found in these works, and John Revell Reinhard succinctly explains the survival of *geas* in romance further: "Brython and Gael shared a common culture, and when Romance plundered the stores of the one, who can say it took nothing from the other? There was something Irish even in the *mabinogion*. Romance reworked its loot and transmogrified it, with the result that the Welshman and Breton had scarcely anything left which he could call his own. The *mabinogion* again bear testimony on the one hand, and Marie's *lais* on the other" (John Revell Reinhard, *The Survival of Geis in Medieval Romance*, Halle a.S. M. Niemeyer, 1933, vi.). The choice of using the term *geas* in this study, therefore, is one made to attest to this intertextual history, while also acknowledging the possible modifications brought to the *geas* convention through its adaptation in Breton, Welsh, or Middle English iterations.

[192] See *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, s.v. "Geas," https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/geis, "Taboo, prohibition;" Robert Atkinson, *The Book of Leinster, Sometime Called the Book of of Glendalough: A Collection of Pieces (Prose and Verse) in the Irish Language*, (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1880), 27, the "geis was a rule of prohibition under penalty of ill luck for its infractions;" Reinhard, *The Survival of Geis*, 5, "In translation the word will appear as 'custom,' 'obligation,' 'injunction,' 'interdiction,' 'prohibition,' 'tabu,' 'spell,' 'vow,' 'bond,' and the like;" Rev. Patrick S. Dinneen, *An Irish-English Dictionary*, s.v. "geis," 358, "a bond, a spell, a prohibition ; a taboo, a magical injunction, the violation of which led to misfortune and death;" among others.

prohibition, or taboo."[193] Though a *geas* is not exclusively used by the supernatural, it is a favored tool. Spyra uses the term "fairy taboo" over *geas* in his own research, but his definition nevertheless encapsulates some of the convention's subtleties when in the hands of supernatural beings: "any prohibition imposed on a human being by fairies, usually as part of a deal whereby the mortal side is obliged to keep a secret about the gifts they receive or refrain from taking a certain course of action on pain of forfeiting the fairies' favour."[194] Supernatural contracts, however, are not always tied to the idea of wish-fulfilment or the benefits of a fairy's favour, "for the otherworld is also associated with violence, shape-shifting and unease, with danger as well as delight."[195] Every brush with the otherworldly has the promise of danger and formulating interactions with humans as contracts binds humans in a predatory relationship in which human vulnerability is exploited. These contracts impose a strict adherence to conscripted behaviour and emphasize potential losses and risks that hint at or explicitly outline possible, grave repercussions when expectations are not fully met. A set of conditions is thus clearly stated by the supernatural agent, agreed upon (willingly or not) by the human, and typically sealed as an agreement made in earnest, or as part of each agent's 'troth.'[196] The wording of the stated

[193] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Geas," https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77336?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=rq2alm&.

[194] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies*, 90. Spyra also identifies a secondary definition of fairy taboos, which he refers to as "an array of invariable behavioural templates that may or may not be explicitly verbalized in particular works of literature or folkloric material but which determine the course of action whenever one comes to interact with fairies." (90-1) This secondary meaning, however, has more to do with implicit prohibitions, such as the notion of never eating otherworldly substances when in an otherworld, a common motif across most folklores and mythologies.

[195] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, 206.

[196] Richard Firth Green has outlined the definition of the term "troth" along four main areas of meaning: the legal senses, the ethical senses, the theological senses, and the intellectual senses. For the purpose of this study, "troth" holds a legal sense as "a promise, a pledge of loyalty, a covenant," (Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 9), and an ethical sense as "honor, integrity; adherence to one's plighted word; also, nobility of character, knightly honor, adherence to the chivalric ideal; also used metonymically for a person of honor." (*Middle English Compendium*, s.v. "Troth," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED47016/track?counter=1&search_id=5833576).

conditions is made verbally and, crucially, is to be taken literally. According to Patrick Schwiterman, the literality of a supernatural contract is a common motif in fairy lore. "Fairies are usually represented [in both medieval and modern folklore] as possessing an obsessive, even legalistic concern for truth-telling," he explains. "Though typically manipulative of humans and quite willing to mislead them, fairies almost always have a high regard for their own word, and they also value the same quality in humans."[197] Though not necessarily fairy in nature,[198] contracts with the supernatural in the three romances analyzed in this study bear the same markers. Complete adherence to contracts gives what seems to be an overwhelming power to otherworldly beings, but this unyielding obedience to contractual language creates the one loophole in their predatory behaviour. They, too, are bound by the same contract, after all. If a human manages to finagle a supernatural creature into a contract that benefits the human party rather than the supernatural party, therefore, the supernatural creature will have no choice but to abide by its rules.

The fickleness of the knight figures in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*, and *Sir Launfal*, however, sees most of these contracts broken. Though much is made out of a knight's honor and the chivalric idea of committing to one's duty, time and again, knights break their 'troth,' whether inadvertently, intentionally, or due to unfortunate circumstances. It is no wonder, then, that for

[197] Patrick Schwiterman, "Fairies, Kingship, and the British Past in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* and *Sir Orfeo*." Diss. UC Berkeley, 2010, 155.

[198] As noted in Chapter 2, the fairy nature of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is disputed. Morgan's literary history is one that traces an evolution of her character at the hands of many authors. Some academics source her origin in the Irish goddess Morrigan; Geoffrey of Monmouth defined her as a virgin healer in his *Vita Merlini*; Etienne de Rouen saw her as an otherworldly nymph in his *Draco Normanicus*; Chrétien de Troyes was the first to identify her as a fairy when he named her Morgain la Fée in *Érec et Énide*; she is Arthur's human sister with a gift for prophecy in the Italian tale *Tavola Ritonda*; and so on. Morgan has had many roles and natures, and considering the lengths taken by the *Gawain*-poet to make her nature ambiguous (characterizing her as both an otherworldly "enchantress" taught by Merlin and a "goddess"), it would be disingenuous to deem her a fairy based on her name and selective textual precedents. The contract Gawain makes with her through the Green Knight is thus one made with the supernatural, but not necessarily with a fairy.

Spyra, the insistent contrast between human fickleness and fairy literality evokes humankind's fallibility or, in Christian ethical terms, the world's postlapsarian condition.[199] However, as representatives of their court, the knight's failure to uphold his 'troth' reaches further; it introduces "a contrast of a higher order, that of morality versus amorality, intentionality versus the blind logic of ritual action or free choice versus the iterability of pure structure."[200] Kings and knights, after all, are charged with showing a level of discretion and mercy in their actions, as courtesy and human morality would dictate. Yet at times, such accommodations hinder their ability to commit not only to their 'troth' and the contracts they agree upon, but to the greater standards of their chivalric ideals. Otherworldly creatures, by comparison, hold no such discernment in their judgements. As beings who exist "outside of the established [chivalric] order of traditional customs, practices, and power relations,"[201] according to James Wade, supernatural beings have the jurisdiction and the obligation to enact their contract with a blindness to any mitigation. Much like their obsession over truth-telling, otherworldly entities in the three works examined in this study demand this same kind of adherence in their contract partners. The last component of a supernatural contract, therefore, operates to ensure the indivisible responsibility of the contract's fulfillment. Through the stipulations of the agreement, supernatural creatures have the means to isolate their human counterpart from their community so as to make external intervention impossible. Hence, engaging in a supernatural contract is a high-risk gamble. Short of tricking the fairy into a contract that benefits the human agent exclusively, the latter falls into a well-laid trap with liminal connotations. Supernatural contracts push humans to be not quite part of the human community, not quite part of the fairy community,

[199] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 193.
[200] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 193.
[201] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romances,* 15.

but to dwell dangerously between the two with their identity as knights (or humans more broadly) at risk. Should they fail in their commitments, humans become "trapped in a perpetual state of alienation, in which any sense of self-control is lost."[202]

Sir Orfeo is an example of a Middle English romance in which supernatural contracts are not typical iterations of the *geas* or human wish-fulfilment. Rather, fairy contracts take the form of a *geas* without a benefit during Heurodis' capture, and a wish-fulfilment contract without a condition during her release. As mentioned in chapter 1 of this study, Heurodis' only verbal interaction with the fairy king is one where, in a dream vision, she is forcibly taken to meet him (despite having expressed her desire not to do so), shown his lands and palace, and forced to commit to a land-locked, fairy contract in which she accepts her abduction under pain of dismemberment. Violent predation is paramount in the tone employed by the fairy king when he promises to capture her if she tries to escape him: "And yif thou makes ous y-let / What thou be, thou worst y-fet / And totore thine limes al."[203] But violence is not the only element that would cause Heurodis to despair and accept her fate. Alienation lies at the very core of the fairy king's threats, as he warns Heurodis how external help would be futile: "That nothing help the no schal; / And thei thous best so totorn, / Yete thou worst with ous y-born."[204] The king's warning proves true, as it is made clear that Orfeo and his army are incapable of protecting their queen by their ineffectualness during her capture. Most revealing of all, Heurodis never asked for Orfeo's aid in the first place, [205] and thus her fairy contract succeeds in isolating then alienating her from her own community.

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[202] Cartridge, "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld," 208.
[203] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 169-71.
[204] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 172-4.
[205] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 125-6. Even before recounting the events of her dream encounter with the fairy king, Heurodis knows she will be leaving without fail, as she tells Orfeo, "Ac now we mot delen ato; / Do thi best, for y mot go."

When Orfeo has his first and only audience with the fairy king, however, the roles are neatly reversed. It is Orfeo who infringes upon the supernatural world, stating that it was his task to go "to seche mani a lords hous - / Thei we nought welcome no be."[206] If the fairy king's ability to reach Heurodis can be considered exceptional for his capacity to circumvent all manner of human defenses, Orfeo is equally impressive for having crossed to Faery in the first place. Humans generally do not come to Faery unless summoned or taken ("What man artow, / That art hider y-comen now? / Ich, no non that is with me, / No sent after the."[207]), and Orfeo's presence thus stuns even the king: "Sethen that ich here regni gan, / Y no fond never so folehardi man / That hider to ous durst wende / Bot that ic him wald ofsende."[208] Orfeo's purpose, too, is similar to the king's, in that they both seek to take Heurodis into their possession, and both achieve their ends by way of a fairy contract. Whereas the fairy king's intent is to separate and capture, however, Orfeo's endeavour is to recuperate and reintegrate. More importantly, while Heurodis' contract was agreed upon under duress, the contract the fairy king offers Orfeo is a kind of boon, a gesture made in good will for the entertainment he provided: "Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle. / Now aske of me what it be, / Largelich ichil the pay; / Now speke, and tow might asay."[209] Giving *carte blanche* to Orfeo proves a complicated mistake, of course, as Orfeo asks to recover Heurodis. But swayed by Orfeo's illusionary identity as minstrel, the fairy king traps himself into a contractual conundrum.

Orfeo's demand reveals a contractual issue on two fronts: the first contract the fairy king imposed upon Heurodis, and the king's protest that Heurodis and Orfeo are a visually ill-matched couple. In the first instance, the fairy king finds himself in a bind because, when he

[206] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 431-2
[207] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 421-4
[208] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 425-8.
[209] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 449-52.

outlines the conditions of Heurodis's abduction, he expressly states the permanence of her residence within Faery: "Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow be / Right here under this ympe-tre, / And than thou shalt with ous go / And live with *ous evermo.*"[210] The *Orfeo*-poet, along with his contemporaries the *Gawain*-poet and Thomas Chestre, inscribes "not only the importance of rules in the various games, but the special regard that otherworld residents have for rules and verbal utterances in the form of a troth" in their work,[211] making the king's promise to Heurodis as binding a contract as the one he offers Orfeo. Orfeo's boon, however, would see the king's promise to Heurodis overturned and unfulfilled, voiding the authority of the king's word, and committing the transgression of lying. Yet not fulfilling Orfeo's wish would equally produce the same transgressive result—and to be sure, it is a transgression. Orfeo, after all, is able to argue for his demand not out of the king's sense of honour or obligation, but out of the fairy king's fear of telling a lie:

> 'O sir!' he [Orfeo] seyd, 'gentil king,
> Yete were it a were fouler thing
> To here a lesing of this mouthe!
> So, sir, as ye seyd nouthe,
> What ich wold aski, have y schold,
> And nedes thou most this world hold.[212]

For a being like the fairy king, besmirching his honesty—and publicly doing so in his own court—is too foul a stain for him to endure, and so he acquiesces.

Orfeo and Heurodis, newly reunited, leave Faery behind as quickly as humans can, but

[210] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 165-8, emphasis mine.
[211] Lisa Spangenberg, *The Games Fairies Play: Otherworld Intruders in Medieval Literary Narratives*, Diss. University of California, 2008, 239-40.
[212] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 463-8.

their departure would also appear to signal a breach of contract in the first arrangement the fairy king made with Heurodis—that is, it would be if the woman the fairy king returned to Orfeo was the same woman he took from the human realm. Heurodis in Faery is not quite the same woman as Heurodis in Orfeo's kingdom. Orfeo sees Heurodis for the first time in ten years in the wild forest, and his recognition is immediate: "To a levedi he was y-come / Biheld, and hath wele undernome / And seth bi al thing that it is / His owhen quen, Dam Heurodis."[213] In the fairy palace, however, his recognition is comparatively delayed; it is not made by beholding Heurodis and recognizing 'bi al thing' who she is. Rather, the only element that indicates her identity is her clothing: "Ther he seighe his owhen wiif, / Dame Heurodis, his lef liif, / Slepe under an ympte-tre - / Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he."[214] The *Orfeo*-poet offers no indication that Orfeo's power of observation has somehow dimmed as he travelled between realms or is otherwise impaired so that he is only able to recognize 'his lef liif' by her external dress. Implied is a fundamental and visible difference between the Heurodis who sleeps beneath the ympe-tree in Faery and the one who takes part in the fairy host. What connects both iterations of Heurodis is an aesthetic object—her clothing—who seemingly bears no alterations since her abduction.[215] When Orfeo declares his desire to have Heurodis back, therefore, the fairy king tries to dissuade him on the same basis, that of their visual difference:

> 'Nay!' quath the king, 'that nought nere!
> A sori couple of you it were,
> For thou art lene, rowe and blac,
> And sche is lovesum, withouten lac;

[213] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 318-22.
[214] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 405-8.
[215] Lewis J. Owen, "The Recognition Scene in 'Sir Orfeo'," *Medium Ævum* vol. 40 (1971): 249.

A lothlich thing it were, forthi

To sen hir in thi compayni.'[216]

Outwardly, Orfeo has changed, as his body reflects the time and conditions he endured in the wild forest. Heurodis is comparatively preserved in an unhuman-state when in the realm of Faery. In fact, Neil Cartridge argues that her sojourn in Faery has made her "unlike" herself. He believes that the Otherworld might best be understood as akin to Saint Augustine's depiction in his *Confessions* "of *this* world—the earth as opposed to heaven—as a "land of unlikeness" ("regio dissimilitudinis"), a place where we necessarily forfeit what is the essential part of our identity: that is, our innate likeness to God."[217] That Heurodis loses some of her identity is best demonstrated in the way Orfeo demands for her return. Orfeo does not demand his 'lef liif' or his 'wiif', nor does he even use Heurodis' name to identify her. Rather, he asks for "[t]hat ich levedi, bright on ble, / That slepeth under the ympe-tree,"[218] and inadvertently creates a loophole within the fairy king's first contract. If her identity is troubled by her sojourn and she is unlike the Heurodis with whom he has made a contract, then the one whom the fairy king returns to Orfeo is not the Heurodis of the first contract. Who the fairy king gives back is a nameless woman who sleeps beneath an ympe-tree within his courtyard, a liminal individual whose identity bears no name and is subsumed in the gallery of the dying. The preyed-upon Heurodis, the one whose face was scratched profusely, [219] and whose "bodi, that was so white y-core" and was "all to-tore,"[220] has in this sense been lost to Faery for eternity, while the "lovesum, withouten lac" Heurodis is the one who returns with Orfeo.[221] The first contract is thus unperturbed, the king's

[216] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 457-62.
[217] Cartridge, "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld," 208.
[218] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 455-6.
[219] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 80.
[220] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 105-6.
[221] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 460.

predation remains successful, but the breadth of his power and authority is shown to be bound by the same rules he uses to trap and prey upon humans. Faerykind is, in this way, not infallible, but their fallibility lies in their most steadfast trait: their literality. Orfeo's success hinged not on his ability to convince the king, but on the king's incapacity to renegue against his own contracts.

Most humans do not have the opportunity to use imposed contracts against their supernatural antagonists in romance narratives, however. While Orfeo may have ostensibly 'won' against the fairy king, Gawain falls into his aunt's trap, is isolated from his fellow knights, and returns with a blemished identity. Supernatural predation in *Sir Gawain* relies partly on the Green Knight's incursion into Arthur's court through its place-lore as discussed in the first chapter, and partly on Arthur's arrogance, his and his court's dependency on maintaining a reputable honour, and its fragile adherence to a chivalric code of morals and ethics. To capitalize on these weaknesses, therefore, the contract proposed by the Green Knight is fitted accordingly. Though he espouses his own fighting prowess,[222] the Green Knight, following Morgan le Fay's order, does not challenge Arthur and his court to a fight or a joust, nor does he accept Arthur's proposal for a fight.[223] Rather, Morgan's agent preys upon the idea of Arthur's and his court's own strength and ability, "for þe los of þe lede is lyft vp so hyȝe."[224] Their fallibility is their unquestioned faith in their own reputation, born out of their many adventures and encounters with marvels, and such success has failed to instill within them a sense of humility and, more broadly, a sense of their own mortality. Morgan takes advantage of this, though Gawain was not necessarily the intended target of her challenge. In fact, the Green Knight specifically words the

[222] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 267-70. "For had I founded in fere in feȝtyng wyse / I haue a hauberghe at home and a help boþe / A schelde and a sharp spere schinande bryȝt / And oþer weppenes to welde I wene wel as;" l. 281-2 "If I were hasped in armes on a heȝe stede / Here is no mon me to mach for myȝtez fo wayke."
[223] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 275-8. "Arthour con onsware / And sayd sir cortays knyȝt / If þou craue batayl bare / here faylez þou not to fyȝt."
[224] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 258.

contract as one that is open to every member, to "any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymseluen / Be so bolde in his blod brayn in hys hede / Þat dar stiffly strike a strok for an oþer,"[225] so as to begin to fracture the idea of a cohesive, tightly bound, and praiseworthy court. Any other knight could and should have risen to the call, as both Arthur and Gawain have, and all should have taken offense at the Green Knight's insults at their being "bot berdlez chylder."[226] Tellingly, none do. Instead, they gawk, as "[i]f he [the Green Knight] hem stowned vpon first stiller were þanne / Alle þe heredmen in halle þe hyȝ and þe loȝe."[227] As a collective, Arthur's court fails not only to meet the Green Knight's challenge on the basis of its own reputation, but also in its members' duty to preserve their king's honour. Though predating the *Gawain*-poet by about a century, Ramon Llull usefully outlined how "[t]hoffyce of a knight is to mayntene and deffende his lord worldly or terryen for a king ne no hyhe baron hath no power to mayntene ryȝtwysnes in his men without ayde & helpe."[228] In this way, the court's lack of action undermines the entire foundation of its community as one of fealty and service. It also reveals the cracks of its members' honour-bound relationship to their king—an affront that Arthur himself attempts to hide. As he rises to accept the challenge, Arthur openly tells a lie about his court's courage, "Ande sayde haþel by heuen þyn asking is nys / And as þou foly hatz frayst fynde þe behoues / I know no gome þat is gast of þy grete words."[229] Truthfully, Arthur knows plenty of such 'gomen' and Gawain's request to take his uncle's place in the beheading game becomes all the more important, since it allows the court to regain and retain some measure of integrity. Gawain's decision proves that there is at least one knight brave enough to take up the challenge in Arthur's court who is not the

[225] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 285-7.
[226] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 280.
[227] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 301-2.
[228] Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, trans. William Caxton, (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 29-30.
[229] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 323-5.

king. He may be Arthur's nephew, but Gawain is first and foremost a knight of the Round Table, and in this way, acts on behalf of the court more so than his uncle.

Though Gawain may represent a collective, the contract is made specifically to isolate him from his court geographically and temporally, as well as to mask his true contractual partner and the finer details of his supernatural confrontation with the Green Knight. The premise of their contract is, after all, what Robert Wilson calls a "godgame:"

> A godgame occurs in literature when one or more characters creates [sic] an illusion, a mazelike sequence of false accounts, that entraps another character. The entrapped character finds himself entangled in the threads of (from his point of view) an incomprehensible strategy plotted by another character who (thus) takes on the roles both of a game-maker, since he invents rules for the other character to follow, and of a god as well.[230]

Although much scholarship has dissected the begetting of Gawain's adventure, Morgan's position of power at Hautdesert,[231] and the different agencies that cooperated to enact Gawain's ordeal,[232] in the case of the beheading game, the game-maker is undoubtedly Morgan le Fay. As her identity and her intentions are only revealed after Gawain receives his return bout, and as the nature of her craft on Bertilak is not fully explained prior to his agreement, Gawain accepts the game and its contract blindly, believing only that his physical prowess is to be tested. Arthur, too, is of the same mind, as he tells him to "[k]epe þe cosyn […] þat þou on kyrf sette / And if

[230] Robert Wilson, "Godgames and Labyrinths," *Mosaic* vol. 15 (1982): 6-7. See also Tison Pugh, "Gawain and the Godgames," *Christianity and Literature* vol. 51 (Summer 2002): 525-551.
[231] See Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011).
[232] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 92. Williams emphasizes the possibility of a "separation and a collaboration of moral and magical agencies," as Bertilak and his wife are better suited at testing Gawain's moral limits, while Morgan undoubtedly creates the setting and psychological pressures where such testing can occur.

þou redez hym ryȝt redly I trow / Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after."[233] Were the contract between humans, Gawain's courage would never be tested; the Green Knight would have died without fail from his blow. It is only after performing the mortal blow that Gawain, Arthur, and the rest of the court come to the startling realization of their disadvantage: "the Green Knight's beheading and survival means that he can magically vanquish death even while displaying it."[234] Even at his very best, Gawain has no such ability; he is simply mortal.

Gawain's rash and ignorant acceptance of the contract allows for Morgan's predatory behaviour, through the instrument of the Green Knight, to take a more concrete shape in Gawain's isolation. The beheading game is, after all, a one-on-one game between individuals. Despite being surrounded by his peers, Gawain must face the Green Knight alone, a fact the Green Knight emphasizes by sheer repetition of the third-person pronoun when he states his terms:

> I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche
> Þis ax þat is heue innogh to hondele as hym lykes
> […] I quit clayme hit for euer kepe hit as his auen
> And I schal stonde hym a strok stif on þis flet
> Ellez þou wyl diȝt me þe dom to dele hym an oþer
> Barlay
> And ȝet gif hym respite
> A twelmonyth and a day.[235]

Though the court has already proven itself incapable of responding to the Green Knight in any

[233] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 372-4.
[234] Ingham, "In Contrayez Straunge," 124.
[235] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 288-9; 293-8.

decisive fashion, the ordeal is made even more isolating as the Green Knight adds a final condition before Gawain gives him his blow: "Saf þat þou schal siker me segge bi þi trawþe / Þat þou schal seche me þiself where so þou hopes / I may be funde vpon folde and foch þe such wages / As þou deles me to day bifore þis douþe ryche."[236] Not only must Gawain leave Camelot for an unknown destination, which the Green Knight refuses to name, but his search for the Green Knight's location must be carried out by his own person while facing the hazards of the land on his journey. The Green Knight's displacement of the challenge to twelve months and a day later, too, acts as means to isolate Gawain and add to his ordeal. For, while the rest of the court expressed their sorrow at Gawain's departure,[237] Gawain alone has to deal with what Tara Williams calls the Green Knight's spectre,[238] his proven ability to defy death, and the lurking belief that to receive one of his blows would mean his end. Gawain, of course, puts on a brave show, as he asks his fellow knights (rhetorically), "quat schuld I wonde / of destines derf and dere / what may mon do bot fonde?"[239] before departing on his journey to find the Green Knight, in accordance with the terms of their contract.

As Gawain's isolation mixes with fearful visions of mortal danger, however, Arthur's best knight faces the real, personal consequences of entering a supernatural contract with Morgan and the Green Knight. Williams argues that while "he [Gawain] passes this first test and thus protects the reputation of his community, […] the encounter with the Green Knight initiates a moral education that quickly becomes individual."[240] She espouses that Gawain ultimately learns of his own limits and a sense of mortality from his ordeal, but this education also corrupts his

[236] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 394-7.
[237] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 558-60. "Þere watz much derue doel driuen in þe sale / Þat so worþe as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde / to dryȝe a delful dynt and dele no more."
[238] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 86.
[239] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 563-5.
[240] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 85-6.

chivalric ideals—that is, the core of his identity as a knight of Arthur's court. It is his fear of dying that leads Gawain to accept Lady Bertilak's girdle. He arguably does not succumb to the temptation of the lady's advances, but to her promise of his safety, "for quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace / while he hit hade hemely halched aboute / þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt."[241] There is, however, no proof that the girdle is magical or that it provides any protection to the wearer[242]—nor would protection necessarily be required. After all, the Green Knight never claimed that he would be giving the same fatal blow to Gawain as the one received in Arthur's court. Rather, the contract only stipulates that Gawain need receive *a* blow, and not necessarily a fatal one ("ellez þou wyl diȝt me þe dom to dele hym an oþer"[243]). The idea that the return bout will lead to his demise is, ultimately, Gawain's: when the Green Knight asks him to repeat their agreement, it is Gawain who specifies, "at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe an oþer / wyth what weppen fo þou wylt and wyth no wyȝ ellez / on lyue."[244] As their second meeting draws nearer, the certainty that he will be slain by the Green Knight becomes fixed in Gawain's mind and he convinces himself that he needs a manner by which to survive. Thus, the girdle "were a juel for þe joparde þat hym iugged were / When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech / myȝ he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sleȝt were noble."[245] "In other words," Williams argues, "the girdle temptation depends on the frightening specter of the Green Knight"—a spectre created by Morgan's godgame—"[but] in the absence of that threat, the poem implies, Gawain could have resisted."[246] Morgan and the Green Knight's predatory behaviour proves too effective, as their contract with Gawain provokes successful psychological

[241] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1851-3.
[242] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 86.
[243] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 295.
[244] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 381-5.
[245] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1856-8.
[246] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 86-7.

warfare. Though Gawain had no way of knowing otherwise, his succumbing to temptation and the corruption of his identity are all the more damning since they are self-generated. Bertilak may laugh and justify Gawain's behaviour, but ultimately, even though his reaction is human and comprehensible, Gawain's own assessment of himself rings true:

> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me taȝt
> To acorde me with couetyse my kynde to forsake
> Þat is larges and lewte þat longez to knyȝtez
> Now am I fawty and falce and ferde haf ben euer
> Of trecherye and vntrawþe boþe bityde sorȝe."[247]

Though Gawain may have been successful in maintaining his court's reputation in the first Fitt, as an individual, he proves that he, too, is susceptible to the fear that first grasped his fellow court members, skewering in this way his projected identity as the court's most reputable and infallible knight,[248] and ultimately failing to uphold Aeneas's legacy of being "þe trewest on erþe."[249]

Gawain is not the only knight to lose himself in a deal with the otherworldly, but in comparison, the end result of Launfal's deal with Tryamour proves more nefarious.[250] Contracts with the supernatural that meddle with a knight's identity showcase a special ruthlessness when tied to the idea of wealth. As storied wealth sets the foundation of *Sir Launfal*'s internal folklore and the identity of a knight, contracts that would control the fluctuation of one's wealth can be

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[247] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 2379-83.
[248] Tracy, "A Knight of God or the Goddess?," 43. Tracy notably argues that the *Gawain*-poet chooses to "focus his story on the earlier tradition established by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Laȝamon, and perpetuated by Chrétien de Troyes, in which Gawain is the stalwart companion, the best of Arthur's knights."
[249] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 3-4.
[250] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 185. "Readers hoping for the kind of happy ending found in Marie's tale where the lady and the knight ride away into the sunset on one horse will be disappointed. The ambiguity of the final lines concerning the disappearance of Launfal and his alleged reappearances suggests that his fate is one of being trapped in fairyland rather than enjoying the fairy's true love."

ennobling or crippling. Mostly, however, such contracts leave the knight in a position of perpetual vulnerability, as the recognition of their person is made subject to another's whim. Both Tryamour and Guinevere take advantage of Launfal in this way and use his wealth (or lack thereof) to prey upon him. Guinevere denies Launfal gifts in the hopes of making him unable to bear arms, while Tryamour gives him an endless, if conditional, wealth, effectively remaking him as a knight.

If Guinevere's crippling slight against Launfal is made through the social custom of gift-giving, however, Tryamour relies on a contract in the form of a traditional *geas* to prey upon, isolate, and manipulate Launfal. The fairy princess sees to the fulfillment of more than one contract, [251] but the one most crucial to the plot of the poem is the contract she makes with Launfal as her lover. Tryamour's agreement with Launfal is made in two iterations. The first specifically outlines the exchange of wealth for loyalty:

> Syr Knyght, gentyl and hende
> I wot thy stat, ord and ende;
> Be naught aschamed of me!
> Yf thou wylt truly to me take
> And alle wemen for me forsake,
> Ryche I wyll make the.[252]

Tryamour then enumerates the many forms that this richness will take: the endless purse, the steed Blaunchard, the servant Gyfre, and a banner with her coat-of-arms—all elements, in other words, that are used to display one's social identity as a knight. Such gifts are, of course,

[251] Tryamour contrives two contracts in total. The first is with Launfal, and the second pertains to his trial, specifically to the rash promise made by Guinevere, which will be discussed in the fourth chapter.
[252] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 314-8.

strategic, since she claims to "wot [his] stat, ord and ende"[253] as an impoverished and neglected knight. Visually, therefore, she reinvigorates Launfal's knighthood and supports his central defining feature, that he was someone who "gaf gyftys largelyche."[254] But this reinstatement is conditional. She nuances this contract later by telling Launfal,

> But o thyng, Syr Knyght, I warne the,
> that thou make no bost of me
> For no kennes mede!
> And yf thou doost, I warny the before,
> All my love thou hast forlore![255]

While Tryamour's added condition is a hallmark of the Offended Fée motif,[256] Chestre complicates it by making Tryamour's two-part stipulated contract a predatory tool.

Since the contract operates both as an oath of silence and as a pledge of loyalty, their agreement works to isolate Launfal from Arthur and his court on different levels. First, Tryamour's demand for a pledge of loyalty and exclusivity borders on a demand for fealty. Laskaya and Salisbury have noted that the vocabulary in the expression "truly to me take / And alle wemen for me forsake" has the connotation of a wedding vow,[257] yet considering the list of gifts Tryamour grants Launfal, the nature of their exchange (exclusivity and silence for wealth that befits a knight) takes a more political tone. Ostensibly, Tryamour aims to isolate Launfal

[253] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 315.
[254] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 28.
[255] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 361-5.
[256] Tom Peete Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of 'Lanval' and 'Graelent'," *Mordern Philology* vol. 12 (April 1915): 635. "Though the fée's command and its subsequent disregard by her lover are constantly recurring features of the folk-tale of the Offended Fée, the events which furnish the motive for the catastrophe may be freely altered without disturbing the general development of the story."
[257] Laskaya and Salisbury, "Notes" in *Sir Launfal*, 249. "These words are close to contemporary betrothal vows. Vows spoken between two people, even when not witnessed, could constitute a valid marriage."

from Arthur himself. Since "it should be the king who distributes wealth among his people," [258] according to Spyra, Tryamour challenges Arthur's lordship over Launfal by remaking Launfal as a knight who carries her banner, by tying his wealth to her whimsy and generosity, and by making him pledge his loyalty to her. Arthur (and by extension, Guinevere) fails to provide for Launfal in a consistent manner, leaving Launfal destitute and without a proper liege lord to rely on—a role Tryamour claims for herself through their agreement. Launfal can now fulfill his role as the dispensing knight,[259] but it is not from a wealth tied to Arthur or Kardevyle. It is a wealth sourced in Faery. If, therefore, knights are subject to the "need to be recognized, to be *seen* as what one is in order to *be*,"[260] then by being visually refashioned into Tryamour's banner-wielding knight, Launfal's identity as a knight of the Round Table is implicitly fractured and his role as Arthur's steward is in name only. As Launfal parades in Karleon, participates in the tournament and eventually returns to Kardevyle with these visual markers of Tryamour's claim, Chestre signals that her authority is if not above, then at least on equal ground with Arthur's.

Through her contract, Tryamour's predation also aims to disconnect Launfal from his larger, human network. Launfal's pledge to keep silent about Tryamour works to create a boundary between Launfal, Arthur, and the court, as it hides his divided loyalties and the source of his newly made identity. Moreover, his "obligation to keep the secret of his love and of the source of his wealth are the opposite of both the courtly obligation of giving and the narrative compulsion to make present."[261] It is this imposed silence that lies at the core of Launfal's full alienation from Arthur and his court, as the inability to speak of Tryamour hinders his attempts

[258] Spyra *The Liminality of Fairies*, 82.
[259] Scholars have argued that Launfal's dispensation of wealth characterizes him as a Christ-like figure. See David Carlson, "The Middle English *Lanval*, The Corporal Works of Mercy, And Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv. Acq. Fr. 1104," *Neophilologus* vol. 72 (Jan 1988): 97-106.
[260] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 205.
[261] Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession*, 157.

to escape Guinevere's advances. Eventually, he inadvertently blurts out Tryamour's identity in a fit of anger and boasts of her beauty, thus breaking the *geas,* causing the loss of his wealth, and making it impossible to bring her forth in his trial by his own volition.

Yet even before the events that lead to the trial, this imposed silence on Tryamour's identity hides the alterity within Launfal's knighthood, and it positions him as a liminal knight. For though he is a member of the Round Table, he is unable to fully participate within its network because of his secrets and what James Stewart calls reciprocal service.[262] As Launfal re-enters society as an affluent knight, who he relies on and the manner in which he does so begins to shift. Stewart points out that,

> even while the poem praises the qualities of a single idealized knight, *Sir Launfal* seems to define its hero through his place in a network of dependent relationships. In typical romance fashion, the knight serves his king as a faithful steward, keeps a promise to his fairy lover for years, gives graciously to his servants and friends, and defeats a fearsome foe in a tournament. However, for all his conventional knightly prowess, Sir Launfal also relies on companions at several crucial points in the poem.[263]

Beyond relying on Tryamour, Launfal also relies on Gyfre during his battle in the tournament, as well as his newly acquired steed, Blaunchard. Indirectly, he also relies on Tryamour's maids during his trial in the way that they allow for her to enter the Arthurian court, ultimately saving him from losing his head. Notably, however, Launfal does not and cannot rely on Arthur and his court. Guinevere plots against him, Sir Jon and Sir Hue leave him in poverty, Arthur demands he be put on trial, and the other knights of the Round Table can only offer small words of comfort during the year Launfal spends trying to find Tryamour for his trial. Stewart proclaims that

[262] Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's 'Sir Launfal' and the Knight in Need," 112.
[263] Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's 'Sir Launfal' and the Knight in Need," 112.

"reliance on others throughout the poem signals not that the protagonist is unheroic, but that nobility and heroism in Chestre's view involve mutual assistance that departs from modern scholars' understanding of self-reliant heroism."[264] Launfal's inability to rely on Arthur and his fellow knights, therefore, suggests a corruption in this system and a broken network of support within Arthur's court. If Launfal's heroism is meant to be understood through his feats in the tournament and his "largesse" to the common people, then the Arthurian court proves itself detrimental if not blatantly hostile to such acts of heroism. On the other hand, Tryamour's contract creates a network where support and tools are provided so that he may act and fulfill his duty as a heroic knight. Taken together, Launfal's isolation in the human world is at its sharpest. Launfal may still abide by the expectations of Arthur's court and the conventions of chivalry in his actions, but his attachment to such mores has been hollowed of meaning. Ostracized as he is in both his identity as knight of the Round Table and his human network, Launfal no longer truly belongs to Arthur's court. His alienation is made complete when Tryamour whisks him away to Faery at the end of the trial.

By making interactions with the supernatural contractual, the poets of *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*, and *Sir Launfal* impose a high-risk situation whose results speak to a knight or king figure's consistency in honouring his commitments. As befitting the legalistically literal code of conduct espoused by the otherworldly, humans in these contracts have few options: they can adhere to the contract's stipulated conditions and prove the earnestness of their troth; they can break their oath and suffer the grave consequences; or, rarely, they can make a second contract that works in their favour.

[264] Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's 'Sir Launfal' and the Knight in Need," 123.

Chapter 4: Challenges to the Court

Contracts with the otherworldly are intricately designed to isolate a knight or sovereign figure so as to challenge them individually, but as this next section shows, actions taken under these contracts implicate a greater collective. As a representative of its court, a supernatural being is symbolic of its community just as the figure of a sovereign or knight represents his or her courtly community. Contracts made by otherworldly beings in *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and *Sir Launfal* may be studied with a focus on their repercussion against an individual,[265] but they cannot be seen as fully disconnected from larger institutions. During their individual ordeal, the actions of the hero, in other words, become the actions of his collective, with successes and failures reflecting on the community's standing in public reputation. Such a metonymic relationship explains why Piotr Spyra, for instance, claims that "intrusions of a supernatural nature also characteristically work both on the level of the individual and on that of the community, initiating the hero's quest and at the same time providing an incentive for reform within the court at large."[266] By focusing on the supernatural, however, the aim of the otherworldly predation in these texts is not to be understood exclusively as instrumental to courtly reform, as reform would necessarily suggest that human courts learn from their failures. Instead, it would be more accurate to argue that otherworldly creatures and their communities hold these courts accountable to their institutional obligations in much the same way as they do a knight's personal, troth-pledged commitment. To enforce accountability, supernatural beings disrupt the internal structure of human court and usher in a moral or institutional dilemma that demands a collective response, one that will prove whether or not the court's obligation is

[265] See Chapter 3.
[266] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 87.

fulfilled.

Otherworldly beings are well-placed to administer such a test. Having the political structure of a court allows supernatural beings to participate in the mores of courtly behaviour;[267] as otherworldly creatures, however, they lack the pretense of chivalric ideals, and can thus judge a chivalric court on its most boastful claim: its institutional supremacy. Rather than being pushed into an isolating contract, however, courts are judged on how they react to the challenged knight or king figure and the choices he has made. Specifically, otherworldly beings set a stage where court reactions and assessment of their chivalric or royal figures' interaction with the supernatural reveal the faulty integrity of their institutions, such as the monarchy in Orfeo's kingdom for instance. This orchestrated challenge, in other words, is a test of the court's self-awareness and whether Orfeo's, Gawain's, and Launfal's courtly communities have the ability to recognize the gaps between their enacted and reputed behaviours.

Contrary to the contracts, however, these tests are not meant to be contained in the private sphere, as the validation or marring of these human agents and their respective institutions is made for public appraisal. Having public demonstrations is a fairly common motif in otherworldly events, or what Tara Williams defines as marvels,[268] since displays like Launfal's trial, for example, provide an opportunity to provoke moral reflection within both the internal and external audience of the text. "An emphasis on the response elicited is characteristic of marvels," Williams argues, since "it can describe a reaction as well as an object of occurrence, and the latter usages retain a focus on the impact: a marvel is something that inspires wonder. In

[267] See Chapter 2.
[268] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 2. "The term *marvel* encompasses the technological, natural, and supernatural wonders that were important contexts for understanding the Middle English marvels at the centre of this study, and suggests a relationship between secular marvels and their religious complements. That relationship is partly predicated on similar ties to the visual, which *marvel* also implies."

the Middle Ages, wonder often has a moral valence."[269] This moral connotation derives from the medieval understanding of 'wonder,' or *admiratio,* which Caroline Walker Bynum holds as having a different meaning to contemporary definitions. She sees the act as "cognitive, perspectival, non-appropriative, and deeply respectful of the specificity of the world."[270] Evoking wonder in the audience would thus enable an unfiltered recognition of what the marvel—or, in this case, the spectacle created by a marvellous being[271]—exposes. Allowing for judgement of the court's integrity thus becomes "the primary mode for supernatural spectacles [to] present urgent questions about what constitutes virtuous behavior or which reaction constitutes the right choice."[272] Whether they are publicly shamed or ennobled, courts bear the mark of this assessment of their integrity visibly for all to see and remember.

The test in *Sir Orfeo* pertains to the institution of the monarchy, or the integrity of Orfeo's sovereign power as a king. It is significant that, unlike most lays that focus on knight figures within a courtly setting, the *Orfeo*-poet chooses to make Orfeo not a member of the court, but its head and symbol of power.[273] The full effects of constructing Orfeo as a political figure can be felt during and in the aftermath of Heurodis' abduction. The spectacle of her kidnapping is visually disturbing, as it invokes a sense of royal inadequacy: beneath the ympe-tree, ten hundred knights surround both the king and queen, only for Heurodis to disappear, "oway y-twight, / With fairi forth y-nome."[274] With Heurodis removed, the test fully begins. The

[269] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 4.
[270] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *American Historical Review* vol. 102 (1997), 24.
[271] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 3-4. "The marvels that test courtly love and chivalric virtues are often significantly visual, a feature that the Middle English marvels amplify […]. Such marvels are spectacles in the sense that they include unusual or surprising aspects that contribute to their visual impact."
[272] Williams, *Middle English Marvels,* 6.
[273] Jeff Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification, and *Sir Orfeo*," *Papers on Language and Literature* vol. 24 (Fall 1988), 358. Rider notes that it is possible the *Orfeo*-poet relied on Alfred's translation of Boethius as a source for his lay, as Boethius also makes Orpheus a king.
[274] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 192-3.

responsibility for the failure to protect and keep Heurodis within the human realm is typically attributed to Orfeo alone, as he holds sovereign power. Yet the court is also partly to blame, or at the very least, it shares in Orfeo's powerlessness. Not one of Orfeo's thousand knights was able to muster a way to protect his queen: when "he [Orfeo] asked conseil at ich man, / […] no man him help no can."[275] Powerlessness seems to be a theme, in fact, as the court is equally powerless to stop Orfeo from forsaking his kingdom, handing control of his lands to his steward, and leaving his people behind to go live in the forest with nothing but "a sclavin" and his harp.[276] The court is, in a word, abandoned by the sovereign who is meant to embody their power, and in his departure, Orfeo highlights the fissures in his court's integrity and the morality of its monarchy. Orfeo, after all, does not leave his kingdom with a specific purpose, other than to dwell among wild beasts and in abstinence until he meets his death.[277] Unlike other lays that portray a king's or knight's shameful departure as the beginning of a redemptive adventure, Orfeo can only roam aimlessly. Jeff Rider suggests that

> the obscurity of the fairy king's motives in abducting Heurodis and his doing so without trace or clue also effectively undo the quest motif which we might otherwise expect: Orfeo cannot go in quest of her since he does not know where to look and has every reason to believe that she is inaccessible to him (he cannot, that is, find her through an internal quest, like a grail-seeking knight).[278]

Specifically, it is Orfeo's silence on the possibility or desire to find Heurodis that characterizes his departure as being unlike typical redemptive quests. Orfeo never even comments on the

[275] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 179-80.
[276] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 228.
[277] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 209-214. "For now ichave mi quen y-lore, / The fairest levedi that ever was bore, / Never eft y nil no woman se, / Into wilderness ichl te / And live there evermore / With wilde bestes in holtes hore."
[278] Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages," 358.

possibility of looking for his wife; instead, he commits to despair and self-exile. Moreover, ten years in between a knight's or king's departure and the beginning of a redemptive adventure is an atypical amount of time in medieval romances—to the extent that one might not speak of Orfeo's journey to Faery as a motivated undertaking so much as a coincidental occurrence.[279]

To be sure, Orfeo does eventually find a path that leads him to Heurodis, and he does manage to recover her through his cunning and (musical) prowess, but such was never his intent at the outset. Orfeo leaves in disgrace as a husband who cannot protect his wife and proves himself unwilling to pursue a quest unless it magically appears before him. Most importantly, however, Orfeo demonstrates the ineptitude of his reign. As Rider points out, "Orfeo's being a king in the lay may enable or encourage us to identify him with David or Christ, but it also puts him in a rather bad light: a king who puts private loss before public welfare."[280] Orfeo's disappearance creates a complicated vacuum of power, since he never abdicates the throne. He charges his steward "to kepe mi londes overal" in his stead, but pointedly he does not appoint him his successor. Rather, his court must wait until news of his demise: "when ye understond that y be spent, / Make you than a parlement, / And chese you a newe king."[281] The retainment of his kingship seems counterintuitive to his subsequent action, considering that he divests himself of all visual markers of his monarchical identity. If Orfeo is not visually a king outside of his court, then neither is his court a true monarchy for over ten years, since the internal seat of power remains empty. Though the steward ostensibly succeeds at the task of taking care of the kingdom, it is done as a means of making up for a *rex inutilis*, a useless king who pursues a

[279] It must be noted that ten years is a typical amount of time for religious penance in medieval romances, but it is equally difficult to claim that Orfeo's sojourn in the forest was meant as penitent behaviour. What motivates his departure is not the sentiment that he has somehow failed his kingdom, his wife, or to uphold his position as king, only that he has his "quen y-lore" (209) and he could no longer bear to be in human society without her.
[280] Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages," 358.
[281] *Sir Orfeo*, l. 215-7.

pointless exile rather than fulfil his duties as monarch.[282]

In one act, the fairy king's spectacular abduction of Heurodis has made Orfeo and his kingdom fall into political disarray, and rather than prove and assert the integrity of his sovereign power, Orfeo makes the situation an even bigger blunder with his departure. James Wade, however, sees in Orfeo's return with Heurodis the preservation of Orfeo's *dignitas,* as "a king who neglects his royal duties for all the right reasons, and who returns having fulfilled his quest to the delight of his kingdom."[283] Wade's assessment of Orfeo characterizes his exile as an uplifting tale in a time when "the prestige of the English monarchy had never sunk so low."[284] Such a perspective is debatable, however, specifically since Orfeo's dignity and authority as king does not appear self-generated. Orfeo's lack of commitment to his kingly duties and his court's powerlessness to aid in Heurodis' protection highlight the court's fragile equilibrium—one that hinges exclusively on the presence of Heurodis within the human court. Though Heurodis is not shown to have any active political power within court, her passive presence nevertheless acts as an allegory for Orfeo's consolidated power—what Ernst Kantarowicz identifies as the 'body politic' in a king's two bodies. In his study, Kantarowicz outlines how the medieval sovereign was presumed to have two bodies, one natural, "subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People,"[285] and the body politic, which "contains the Office,

[282] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance,* 97. See also Edward D. Kennedy, "Sir Orfeo as Rex Inutilis," *Annuale Mediævale* vol. 17 (1976): 88-110.
[283] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance,* 97.
[284] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance,* 97. Wade explains that Orfeo "has been equated with Edward II, a 'weak willed and frivolous king' who was widely unpopular during the majority of his reign, especially during the summer of 1321, when he was forced to give in to the baronial demand that he banish his two favorites, the Despensers." He goes on to argue that *Sir Orfeo* can be read as responding to this context with a cathartic perspective on a reformative king.
[285] Ernst Kantarowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology,* 2016 ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 7.

Government, and Majesty royal,"[286] as well as being immortal.[287] On a purely physical level, Heurodis' suspended form in Faery under the ympe-tre arguably suggests an immortalization of sovereign power, while Orfeo's body, by its aged and rough appearance after ten years in the forest, no longer holds an impervious quality and would, therefore, suggest the body natural. It is in their proximity, however, that Heurodis and Orfeo express themselves most as body politic and body natural respectively. Prior to Heurodis' abduction, Orfeo was described as a good king, as he was known as a "stalworth man and hardi bo; / Large and curteys he was also,"[288] and his music made his court a near paradisical space when he played. Crucially, however, both bodies are meant to inhabit a single sovereign or, in this case, a single space, until his death. Accordingly, when the fairy king takes Heurodis, all sense of governance and royal responsibility leaves with her—until, that is, Orfeo retrieves her. Orfeo then seeks to end his self-exile and reclaim what is his. To do so, he must undo the effects of the fairy king's marvellous spectacle and restore faith in his authority as king. Newly cleaned, shaved, and fully attired in proper royal garment, Orfeo creates a counter spectacle. He parades his reclaimed wife: "with gret processioun, / Thai brought the quen into the toun / With al maner menstraci."[289] With fanfare, the body politic has returned to Thrace. Such celebrations have led scholars to believe that "Orfeo's successful venture into the otherworld to reclaim his wife repositions him as a figure of authority and has the altogether positive and transformative effect of consolidating his kingship."[290] The ambiguous ending of the poem, however, rather indicates that his kingship is only consolidated in the immediate moment, as he has overall failed to prove the integrity of his

[286] Kantarowicz, *The King's Two Bodies,* 9.
[287] Kantarowicz, *The King's Two Bodies,* 13.
[288] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 41-2.
[289] *Sir Orfeo,* l. 587-9.
[290] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 87.

sovereign power. Orfeo's legacy, after all, ends with him. As Oren Falk points out, "Orfeo and Heurodis are indeed allowed to live happily, but not ever after. The prizes reclaimed from the Faerie King and from Orfeo's own steward return, respectively, to death and to the steward."[291] The poet makes a striking choice to end Orfeo's royal line—as well as the main narrative of the poem—with the crowning of an unnamed steward who is unrelated by blood. Given pressing concerns for royal progeny during the fourteenth century,[292] Orfeo's heir should have been his own child. But considering the attention given to the literary heritage of Orfeo's lineage, the poet emphasizes that the choice to crown the steward instead does not come lightly and is a direct result of Orfeo's inept kingship. Heurodis' supernatural abduction showcases the fragility of Orfeo's sovereign power as well as his dependency on his wife—a weakness in the monarchy that is perhaps too great for the court to bear. The poet, of course, never discloses any other reason why Orfeo makes the steward his successor other than as a reward for his good service. Nevertheless, reassigning the monarch's role to a man who has demonstrated a stable sovereign power for a decade fixes the institutional flaw that is highlighted by the fairy king's spectacle and ensures the preservation of the institution.

Efforts to preserve an institution and its reputation, however, can have an opposite effect than the results depicted in *Sir Orfeo*. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, chivalry makes for a difficult institution to maintain for Arthur and his court. Knights of the Round Table are meant to espouse the purest formulation of chivalric ideals, that is, unflinching courage, virtuous courtly behaviour, and a mind for daring adventures that allow for their prowess to shine. Above all, they must honor their troth. From the very first Fitt of *Sir Gawain*, however,

[291] Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* vol. 30 (Spring 200), 248.
[292] Falk, "The Son of Orfeo," 248.

these qualities are troubled, if not proven unsubstantiated, by the presence of the Green Knight. Morgan was never so myopic in her planning as to be contented with testing only one knight, even one so famous as her own nephew. Bertilak clearly tells Gawain that Morgan's target was always the court, specifically to test the pride and renown of the Round Table: "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay þe surquidre ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table / Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue."[293] Three challenges were thus issued to the court as a collective. The first was the Green Knight's entrance and his demand for a Christmas game, which the court failed to answer. As discussed in chapter 3, such lack of courage made Gawain's decision to take Arthur's place in the game a pivotal choice that enables the court to temporarily save face from their cowardly behaviour. The second challenge was the ordeal of the Green Chapel, in which Gawain, as their representative, failed to prove his courage, his courtesy, and his troth. The third is Gawain's return to Camelot, shamed and with proofs of his failure on full display: the nick on his neck and the green girdle.

The court's third challenge is an implicit one. Since Arthur's knights have thus far disproven their chivalric standards, the green girdle provides a last opportunity for the court to prove its reputation by demanding that Arthur and the Round Table judge their most noble knight's fall from grace. In fact, Gawain provides the very moral template and judgement that should be cast upon him by his lord and peers. After his return from Hautdesert, he immediately relates his adventures to Arthur and the rest of the court in a very public setting. Gawain makes a spectacle of his narrative, giving a dramatic retelling wherein "he groned for gref and grame." Then, in the final act of his story, "þe blod in his face con melle,"[294] and Gawain exposes the

[293] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2456-9.
[294] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2502-3.

nick on his neck "for his vnleute at þe leudes hondes."[295] He then proceeds to give a scathing assessment of his own moral character:

> Lo lorde quoþ þe leude and þe lace hondeled
>
> Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere 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.[296]

Gawain's judgement of his actions, though harsh, is nevertheless objectively accurate by chivalric standards. Bertilak (and most scholars) see Gawain's "vntrawþe" with empathy and compassion, as fear of death leaves few unshaken. Nevertheless, ordinarily, Gawain's failure to overcome this fear and maintain his chivalric ideals should come with reprisals. As is customary for a knight who fails to uphold his troth in medieval romances, Gawain should have faced a loss of status within his court, possibly even (self-)exile, until redemption is acquired through a set of trials. Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion* or *Érec et Énide* are common examples of this trope. In fact, the *Gawain*-poet seems to imply a dramatic ending by challenging readerly expectations and making Gawain fail his ordeals instead of prevailing over them. Gawain does not reach any sense of ennoblement during his time at Hautdesert, which leaves him and the audience to question the very essence of his chivalry. Bertilak's good-natured assessment of Gawain's concealment of the green girdle is allowed, since he and Morgan are the victors of his trials, but Arthur and the rest of Camelot should arguably not be so forgiving. As a metonymic representative of the court, Gawain was meant to be the exception, the redemptive figure of the

[295] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2499.
[296] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2505-10.

Round Table. His failure to fulfill that role skewers such a redemption, and his shame should be their compounded shame. Thus, the climax of the poem comes with the anxiety of a fallen knight's return to his court, awaiting judgement. Instead of facing repercussions for his failures, however, Gawain is met with an almost giddy nonchalance from Arthur and the members of court:

> Þe king comfortez þe kny3t and all þe court als
> La3en loude þerat and luflyly acorden
> Þat lords and ladis þat longed to þe table
> Vche burne of þe broþerhede a bauderyk schulde haue
> A bende abelef hym aboute of a bry3t grene
> And þat for sake of þat segge in swete to were
> For þat watz accorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table.[297]

Avril Henry argues that such an adoption sublimates the differences between Gawain and the court, suggesting that the girdle, in fact, becomes a symbol for a shared humanity: "Does Camelot adopt the girdle as if accepting a natural imperfection shared with Gawain, so that the personal, 'differencing' effect of a possibly shaming *bende* is obliterated? In this case he has been their representative in his very humanity."[298] But if "humanity" is here understood to be a sensible fear of death, then Gawain never needed to represent such a notion—the court had already showcased such a fear from the very first Fitt. Instead, it would be more accurate to suggest that the girdle's courtly adoption is made on similar grounds as Gawain's: a veil by which to conceal one's true nature.

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[297] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* l. 2513-9.
[298] Avril Henry, "Temptation and Hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Ævum* vol. 45 (January 1976): 196.

The reputation of the Round Table's knights is not an easy one to uphold as it depicts them as almost superhuman; Gawain, for example, is meant to be "so goud halden / Þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale."[299] Gawain, however, has demonstrated that he does, in fact, fear and flinch at the thought of his own death. He seeks the girdle for security and a means to counter his nature, only to have his treatment of the girdle reveal it instead. Similarly, the court's protruded reputation is one of excellence, internal cohesion, moral righteousness, and chivalric ideals. Arthur states that his and the court's adoption of the girdle is a show of their "broþerhede" and their joy that Gawain survived to tell the tale of his marvel. In the face of all their failed encounters with the supernatural and the fact that the girdle is named a "token of vntrawþe," such an explanation seems inadequate. Rather, Arthur and the court, much like Gawain, use the girdle as a means to conceal their flawed chivalric behaviour. They do not uphold the standards that would see them admonish Gawain's failures, and their repute for seeking adventures has been questionable since the poem's beginning. Their cohesion is held frailly behind the green girdle through a communal fear of death and not a genuine commitment to one another and their ideals. Williams argues that such a depiction of Gawain and the court invites affective participation from the audience: "By demonstrating that even heroic virtue can falter, and showing us what it takes to make that happen, the poem invites the readers to bring their moral sensibilities to bear."[300] Moral sensibilities may push the audience to feel sympathy for Gawain, but the court's reaction leaves a feeling of unease. Whereas Gawain physically wears the cost of his "vntrawþe" in the form of two tokens (the scar on his neck and the girdle) with genuine remorse, his ordeal is made into an accessory for the court, a marvellous narrative treated with the same nonchalance and interest seen in Arthur's narrative moment during the

[299] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2270-1.
[300] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, 89.

Christmas and Yuletide season. Gawain has a visibly different attachment to chivalry than his court, and the poet makes the difference all the more plain with a final contrasting image: the court laughs at Gawain's shame while Gawain himself moans over his past actions. Left with a court that does not seem to take its precepts seriously, Morgan's test proves effective to show "þat watz accorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table" is an inept application of chivalric behaviour.

If Gawain and his court grapple with their insufficiently chivalric behaviour in their collective test, then Launfal and his community contend with the integral faults of their judicial institution. From the very outset of his poem, Thomas Chestre declares the central theme of his work: "Be doughty Arthours dawes / That helde Engelond yn good lawes."[301] Legal justice and its application is at the core of the poem's climax, as Launfal's trial is the crossroads for Faery, the human realm, Guinevere's jealousy, Tryamour's love and contracts, and Launfal's failed commitments to his lover. As much as Arthur does wield judicial power over England, qualifying the dispensation of this power as 'good' is dubious. When Guinevere lies and tells him Launfal slandered and attempted to seduce her, Arthur immediately and unfairly seeks to deal him death as though Launfal were already convicted of high treason:[302]

> Kyng Artour was well wroth,
> And by God he swor hys oth
> That Launfal schuld be sclawe.
> He wente aftyr doughty knyghtes
> To brynge Launfal anoonryghtes

[301] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 1-2.
[302] See John Bellamy, *The Tudor Law of Treason*, (London: Routledge, 1979). In 1351, the Treason Act was passed and applied in England as of 1352. To be accused of high treason, a man had to undermine the king's authority, or in some way assault the king's status as sovereign, which included violating the king's wife. Punishment for this crime was typically made in public. Men were hung, drawn, and quartered, while women, for reasons of public prudishness of the female body, were drawn and burned.

To be hongeth and todrawe.[303]

It is only through the efforts of twelve knights who "knewe the maners of the Quene" that Arthur is convinced to stall his pre-conceived judgement and have a trial instead,[304] whereby

[y]f he [Launfal] myghte hys lemman brynge
That he made o swych yelpynge,
Other the maydenes were
Bryghtere than the Quene of hewe,
Launfal schuld be holde trewe
Of that, yn all manere;
And yf he myghte not brynge hys lef,
He schud be hongede as a thef.[305]

Arthur presumably agrees to their proposal, though he is not explicitly said to do so ("Alle yn fere they made proferynge / That Launfal schuld hys lemman brynge."[306]). It is noteworthy, however, that the twelve knights propose a better application of the law—that, is an approximation of due process—to deal with Guinevere's accusation than their king, while also committing to a lesser sentence: Launfal is promised hanging as a thief, that is, as a man who attempted to steal the king's wife rather than a knight attempting to dethrone his king. Though both sentences are fatal, one is significantly less torturous than the other, and the discrepancy contrasts Arthur's volatile temperament with the knights' calm demeanour. The difference in manner is deliberate, as it implies a difference in knowledge: Arthur is kept (willfully) ignorant of his queen's adulterous dealings in his court because of the knights' weighted silence on the

[303] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 721-6.
[304] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 788.
[305] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 796-803.
[306] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 805-6.

matter. Still, even the knights' compromise is a mishandling of the legal issues in the trial. Guinevere's accusation hinged on two aspects: that Launfal "besofte [her] of schame - / [Her] lemman for to be,"[307] and his accusation "that the lothlokest mayde that sche [Tryamour] hadde / Myght be a Quene above her [Guinevere]."[308] Fully knowing that the Queen had a reputation for taking lovers,[309] the knights conveniently forget to include the Queen's suspected adultery in the trial and instead redirect the court's attention to what is tantamount to a beauty contest. The trial becomes devoid of the criminal accusations that enable its occurrence in the first place and ultimately, makes a mockery of justice. Spyra points out that such a depiction is "a powerful critique not only of judicial institutions as they actually operate, contrasting the attitude of Arthur's court with the unwavering justice of the fairy world, but also of the very potential of human courts to administer justice and satisfy a sense of fairness in their ruling."[310] Doubt festers, because Arthur and his court fail to make justice a priority in Launfal's ordeal not once, but twice. Though Arthur's demand to draw and quarter Launfal immediately may be justified as an irrational, emotional reaction, the knights do not have such an excuse. When given the opportunity to re-establish justice as the core tenet of Launfal's trial, they falter.

Even with the knights' mitigation, however, Arthur is meant to judge more than Tryamour's beauty at Launfal's trial. As Launfal begins to give his pledge to bring Tryamour for Arthur's and the court's assessment, Guinevere interrupts: "Than seyde the Quene, without lesynge, / 'Yyf he bryngeth a fayrer thynge, / Put out my eeyn gray!"[311] Notably, Guinevere's promise does not figure in the original source material. Chestre's inclusion seems to be a small

[307] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 716-7.
[308] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 719.-20.
[309] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 787-92. "All they seyde ham between, / That knewe the maners of the Quene / And the queste toke, / The Quene bar los of swych a word / That sche lovede lemmannes without her lord - / Har never on hyt forsoke."
[310] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 184.
[311] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 808-10.

folkloric deviation, but the repercussions of this promise play into Tryamour's collective test at the end of the trial. More importantly, the fact that the poet emphasizes her promise is "without lesynge," is significant, since Guinevere has mostly lied throughout the poem, whether it be in her fidelity to Arthur or concerning Launfal's treatment of her, and it implies her troth. Such a gamble is reminiscent of the rash promise motif in folktales,[312] but Dinah Hazell suggests that such an insertion in Launfal's pledge legally implicates Guinevere in his oath:

> The stanza in which she [Guinevere] makes her oath is preceded by the judge's medial verdict on Launfal, and followed by the setting of the date on which he must make his wager. The queen interjects her oath between Launfal's pledge to produce his love or lose his head, and the finding of his guarantors; her oath is therefore bound to Launfal's *wajowr* (l. 811), which is agreed to by the court, and her "rash promise" is transformed into a legal agreement.[313]

Despite being so legally formalized, however, Guinevere's added oath—what might be considered a second clause to Launfal's proven innocence—seems trivialized by the human court. No mention is made of this added component until Tryamour's incursion, which is why Spyra believes that "had she [Tryamour] not made her appearance at the court, Gwenore's oath would have no legal effect and Launfal would have either met his end or narrowly escaped execution. But the imperative of fairies is precisely to make sure that no contract remains unfulfilled."[314]

More than leaving a contract unfulfilled, however, Tryamour executes Guinevere's promise because she bears the final judicial authority within Arthur's court. Chapter 1 explored

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[312] B.K. Martin, "'Sir Launfal' and the Folktale," *Medium Ævum* vol. 35 no. 3 (1966), 208.
[313] Dinah Hazell, "The Blinding of Guinevere: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic," *Arthurian Literature XX*, Ed. Keith Busby, (Cambridge: Brewer 2003), 124-5.
[314] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies*, 184.

how Tryamour was able to make the hall where the trial takes place a liminal space where Faery and the human realm overlap, thereby transforming Launfal's trial into a marvellous spectacle for internal and external audiences. Through this spatial manipulation, Tryamour solidifies her role as judge, jury, and executioner, and the trial is thus administered under her jurisdiction—but not before offering Arthur and his court an opportunity to redeem themselves and dispense proper justice. After she makes her dramatic entrance into Arthur's court, Tryamour addresses Arthur directly by reminding him of the real disputed matter of the trial: "That he [Launfal] never, yn no folye, / Besofte the quene of no drurye, / By days ne be nyght."[315] Emphasis in the trial, Tryamour intimates, must be placed on Guinevere's accusation of Launfal's soliciting an illicit love, and not on her greater beauty. She implores the king to use sense, as she tells him,

> Therfor, Syr Kyng, good kepe thou nyme!
> He bad naght her, but sche bad hym
> Here lemman for to be;
> And he answerede her and sayde
> That hys lemmannes lothlokes mayde
> Was fayryre than was sche.[316]

Arthur, however, fails to live up to his "nyme" that would see him keep "Engelond in good lawes," and as king of his court, showcases the failure of his judicial system. He remains wilfully ignorant of the testimony that would incriminate his wife, since all he recognizes in his judgement at the trial's end is Tryamour's beauty: "ech man may ysé that ys sothe, / Bryghtere that ye [Tryamour] be."[317] Arthur's judgement is thus found lacking, especially by Tryamour

[315] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,*, l. 994-6.
[316] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 997-1002.
[317] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 1004-5.

who, as a fairy, sees contracts as unwaveringly binding.[318] With her authority within the court, she takes charge in enacting all details of the trial's agreed-upon conditions. When Arthur gives his assessment of her beauty, therefore, "Dame Tryamour to the quene geth, / And blew on her swych a breth / That never eft might sche se."[319] Acting on what Spyra calls fairy-driven legalism, Tryamour fulfills all contracts that are encapsulated in the context of the trial, revealing the implicit faults in the human ability to apply a blind justice and instead preferring a compromised version. Spyra, however, argues that a fairy's blind justice is inadmissible to human society. "Always to insist on keeping one's word is justice," he states, "but it is a harsh and ultimately inhuman form of justice."[320] Calling justice enacted by fairies inhuman is perhaps too bold a claim, though; after all, it is the humans themselves that have outlined the judicial conditions of Launfal's trial. Tryamour's literal application of the law may seem merciless, but the alternative is perhaps more costly, since Arthur and his court would see themselves and their legal institutions crippled in their commitments because of emotional entanglements.

Institutional failings in *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain,* and *Sir Launfal* are thus publicly exposed for the audience's appraisal. The efforts of supernatural beings cause a spectacle of the inconsistencies between the reputed and applied institutional commitments that these courts have made. Though the ultimate judgment of these failings is left to audiences, the marring of these institutions is undeniable. Sovereign power in *Sir Orfeo*, chivalry in *Sir Gawain*, and the legal system in *Sir Launfal* are seen as integral features to their respective courts, and their execution is consequently meant to keep to a pristine standard. Supernatural intervention, however, proves that their foundations are easily shaken when pressured. Audiences of these poems are shown the

[318] See Chapter 3.
[319] Chestre, *Sir Launfal,* l. 1006-8.
[320] Spyra, *The Liminality of Fairies,* 184.

extent these courts are willing to go to uphold their institutional commitments, what motivates the courts' deviation, and whether, in the end, chivalric or royal figures in these tales merit the reputations that precede them.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this study to examine supernatural beings in *Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and *Sir Launfal* as the centralised point of analysis in these narratives. To do so, I have used models derived from folklore studies, such as place-lore, or more broadly, as a body of knowledge that deals with magic, superstitions, myths, famous narratives, and traditional rituals. When dislodging otherworldly creatures from an ancillary position in these romances, their roles and actions gain a larger purpose than a narrow focus on the hero's quest would allow. Otherworldly figures are more than a hero's adversary or asset. Instead, these creatures demonstrate an attentiveness to their settings, as they judiciously operate through the place-lore of a given encounter with their human counterparts. Supernatural beings also showcase an insight into the more detailed behaviours of court customs and conventions that, through their mimicry, leave the hegemony of human courts fractured. Highlighting the supernatural in these romances reveals the poets' intent to create discursive diversity in the fabric of their narratives, while also providing an opportunity to explore the specificity of otherworldly codes of conduct and their attachments to literalized commitments. It is through these codes of conduct that the otherworldly's antagonism towards humans becomes qualified by an agency and intentionality. Supernatural predatory behaviour seeks the concealed flaws of both the knight or king figure and their respective court. To trap their opponents, this predation takes on the form of a legally binding contract between both parties. These contracts are specifically tailored towards the flaws of a chivalric or royal figure and hence test the mettle of a court representative's troth and their

reputations rather than their brawn. As court representatives are left to grapple with a compromised commitment to their espoused ideals, the results of their individual challenges undermine the integrity of their institutions. In the end, Orfeo ends the monarchical reign of his mythologized ancestry in *Sir Orfeo*; Arthur, Gawain, and the rest of their court cannot uphold Brutus' legacy of being "þe trewest on erþe" in *Sir Gawain*;[321] and Launfal disappears into Faery after an unjust trial in *Sir Launfal*. Emphasizing the otherworldly in these tales exposes how these works attend to a narrative ingenuity that makes use of supernatural characters to the fullest. In turn, how we as an audience view the relationship between humans and supernatural beings transforms, as the turgid reputation of chivalric courts reconfigures itself as one that is sorely lacking in substance and hence, worthy of our criticism.

[321] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 3-4.

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