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Fairies and the Fairy World in Middle English Literature: the Orpheus Tradition from the Classical Era to the Middle Ages

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Foreword

Having grown up with Disney classics such as Cinderella and Pinocchio (and many others, of course), I have always imagined fairies to look like Fairy Godmother and Blue Fairy. One day, while flipping through Burrow's and Turville-Petre's *A Book of Middle English*, my attention was caught by a relatively short poem called *Sir Orfeo*. I read the introduction to it and thumbed through most of the poem, which made me realise that Disney fairies were likely to have nothing to do with those of that poem. I decided I wanted to know more about those "medieval fairies": were there other Middle English poems where I could find them? And how far in history were the origins of fairy creatures to be found? So, when I discovered that Middle English literature is such a reservoir of fairy world material, I decided to devote my master thesis to it. The aim of this dissertation is thus to analyse and try to understand what is the role of fairies in Middle English literature, by focusing in particular on the anonymous fourteenth-century poem *Sir Orfeo*. In order to do so, one chapter focusses on the classical side of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, whereas one other chapter focusses on the core of this thesis, *Sir Orfeo*, and on *Orpheus and Eurydice* by the Scottish poet Robert Henryson. Fairies and the fairy world in Middle English literature, however, are not limited to these two poems, which is why I do also take into consideration another three Middle English poems where fairy princesses, fairy queens and incubi come up.

The first chapter is devoted to a general overview about fairies: etymology, features and places where they could be found. I rely on Celtic and Irish stories as well as French ones, talking about Marie de France's *lais*, and especially about the *lai* of *Yonec*. Moreover, I provide parallels with *Sir Orfeo* and talk about the Other World as it is described in Irish legends and medieval romances. In order to prepare readers for the third chapter about the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*, I devote the second chapter to an overview of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, focusing in particular on three Latin authors who devoted part of their works to this legend. They are Virgil with

Georgics (*Georgica*), Ovid with the *Metamorphoses (Metamorphoseon libri XV),* and Boethius with *The Consolation of Philosophy* (*De consolatione philosophiae*). In the third chapter, I analyse the fairy world as is depicted in the anonymous fourteenth-century poem *Sir Orfeo*. I describe its mysterious French analogue – or, most likely, source – *lai d'Orphée*, its Welsh analogue *De Nugis Curialium* – written in Latin by the Welsh author Walter Map – and its Irish analogue *The Wooing of Étaín* (*Tochmarc Étaíne*), and eventually give an interpretation of the role of fairies in the anonymous Middle English poem. I then devote the last section of this third chapter to Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Given the subtitle of my thesis – *the Orpheus Tradition from the Classical Era to the Middle Ages* – one might think that I focus exclusively on *Sir Orfeo* and its analogues. That is not the case, because fairy creatures and fairy realms are to be found in many other Middle English poems. In order to offer further examples of the use of fairies in medieval literature, the fourth chapter is devoted to Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* (and its French source *Lanval* by Marie de France), the anonymous *Sir Degaré* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas.*

1. What is a fairy?

1.1 The etymology of the word fairy

James Wade devotes part of the introduction to his work to explain the derivation of the term *fairy*.[1] As we will see in a moment, we cannot be sure whether fairies were an absolutely distinct people from other supernatural creatures, since there was an overlap as to the names. In English literature, one of the first words which indicates an other-worldly being is *elf:* it became a Middle English term from the Anglo-Saxon *ælf,* mentioned, *inter alia*, in the Old English poem *Beowulf*.[2] There, the term *ælf* appears in a list which includes *untȳdras*, which means "misbegotten beings".[3] Such a translation is supported by the one in the Old English Dictionary, where *untȳdre (-es/-as)* is defined as "monster, an evil birth, evil progeny, monstrous birth".[4] Latin words which are presented as an equivalent to *elf* in later medieval scholarship are *lamia* and *eumenis*, as we find in *Catholicon Anglicum* (1483).[5] *Lamia* indicates "a witch who was said to suck children's blood, a sorceress, enchantress".[6] Between 1300 and 1325, the word *fairie* comes into Middle English vocabulary from the French word *fée,*[7] which in turn derives from the Latin *fata*. The word *fata* is the nominative plural of *fatum* and, in its plural form, means both "destiny, future" and "Parcae".[8] *Fairie* is the term we find in poems such as *Sir Orfeo,* written between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century.[9]

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1 Wade, James, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 4-5.
2 Wade, p. 4.
3 Hall, Alaric T. P., *The Meanings of Elf and Elves in Medieval England* (doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2004), p. 68.
4 <http://old-engli.sh/dictionary.php> [accessed 08 January 2016].
5 Lewis, C.S., *The Discarded Image: an Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 124.
6 <//http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=lamia&la=la&can=lamia0#lexicon> [accessed 12 November 2015]
7 Wade, p. 4.
8 Dizionario Latino Olivetti <http://www.dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?lemma=FATUM100> [accessed 12 November 2015]. The Parcae are the goddesses who decide men's destiny in Classical mythology (Harf-Lancner, Laurence, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine: la Naissance des Fées*, Paris: Champion, 1984, p. 17).
9 Burrow, J.A. & Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *A Book of Middle English*, Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 112.

It is noteworthy to remember that, in 1066, William the Conqueror invaded and conquered England, which at that point became a trilingual country: the ruling classes would speak French, the clergy would write in Latin and all the others would speak Middle English. Before the Norman conquest of England, English people spoke Old English. Therefore, one has to expect this overlap of Latin, French, Middle English and Old English terms I have previously described. We do not have to think, however, that no other languages were spoken in England at the time: Cornish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and even Old Norse kept on resisting and being spoken in spite of the Norman conquest.

Later, Chaucer made use of the words *fairy*, *elf* and *incubus* to denote the same kind of supernatural creature,[10] albeit, as we will see later, in a satirical way. Indeed, it is important to remember that *incubi*, *elves* and *fairies* were not perceived as distinct supernatural creatures: semantically speaking, these terms were closely related in meaning and differences were limited to few semantic traits. As Mackillop points out, the term *fairy* actually stands for a number of different beings we would find in Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Cornish, Breton, Manx and Welsh folklore, which makes us understand that there is not a unique category of fairies, but several, and including similar supernatural creatures.[11] As far as the *incubus* is concerned, Alessandra Petrina points out that, generally, it is "a demonic apparition, or even a devil *tout court*".[12] *Incubus* is a Latin term which means "a being lying on a sleeper": this being (which has also a feminine counterpart, the *succubus)* is a night monster and its meaning conveys a sense of oppression.[13] Petrina also says that there was overlap between the *incubus* and other supernatural beings – among which there were Celtic fairies – because of the medieval Christian tendency to group together pagan low deities.[14] The

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10 Wade, p. 4.
11 "Fairy" in Mackillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674-e-2065> [accessed 12 November 2015].
12 Petrina, Alessandra, "Incubi and Nightmares in Middle-English Literature," *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti,* 152 (1993-94), pp.391-422 (p.392).
13 Petrina, p. 393.
14 Petrina, p. 395.

equivalence between *incubus* and *nightmare* was common in the Middle Ages: the latter, however, comes from the Old English word *mære*, means "night monster" and, according to Petrina, is actually the consequence of the visit by an *incubus*.[15] I think the semantic range of *incubus* overlaps with the fairy creature we find in *Sir Degaré*: this creature, indeed, is a fairy knight who rapes the princess of "Litel Bretaygn" and impregnates her.[16] The princess sees him in the forest: he is a handsome man, wearing a red robe and with a well-shaped body. He speaks to her:

> "Iich am comen here a fairi knighte; […]
> Iich have iloved the mani a year,
> And now we beth us selve her
> Thou best mi lemman ar thou go,
> Wether the liketh wel or wo"
> Tho nothing ne coude do she
> But wep and criede and wolde fle;
> And he anon gan hire at holde,
> And dide his wille, what he wolde. [...]
> "Lemman" he seide, "gente and fre,
> Mid schilde I wot that thou schalt be"   (ll. 100, 105-12, 115-6)[17]

A close analysis of *Sir Degaré* will be undertaken in chapter four. However it seems that the term *fairi knyghte* has some of the semantic traits of an *incubus* (although we have seen that there is no actual difference between *incubus*, *fairy* and *elf*), since both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas maintain that *incubi* might sleep with human women and conceive children with them. In order to do so, the *incubus* is initially a *succubus*, who steals semen from men, turns herself into an *incubus* and then uses the sperm to impregnate women.[18] The word *incubus* is used, albeit only once, by Chaucer too, in his *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where it is partly synonymous with *elf* and used in a context of *fairie*. In any case, Chaucer is interested in other-worldly beings because they carry comic features,[19] as in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, which I am going to take into consideration in chapter four.

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15 Petrina, p. 392.
16 "Sir Degaré" in *Database of Middle English Romance* / University of York, 2012
  <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 28 October 2015].
17 All the excerpts from *Sir Degaré* are taken from Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degaré", in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare> [accessed 29 October 2015].
18 Petrina, p. 397.
19 Petrina, p. 404.

There are also some Latin words which indicate a *fairy*, that is to say *lamia* and *strix*, as we read in Horman's *Vulgaria* (which dates back to 1519).[20] A further Latin word related to our topic is *fata*, whereas the Welsh writer Walter Map (writing in Latin) employs the words *fatalita* and *a fatis*, the latter to indicate a bunch of fairies who are dancing together.[21] This is the passage in question, translated into Modern English by Montague R. James:

> a knight of Lesser Britain lost his wife and long after her death went on mourning for her. He found her at night in a great company of women in a valley in a wide tract of desert. He marvelled and was afraid, and when he saw her whom he had buried, alive again, he could not trust his eyes, and doubted what the fairies (fates) could be doing.[22]

As we will see in chapter three, this story is likely to be one of the analogues of the *Sir Orfeo* poem. C.S. Lewis, however, maintains that he does not like to use the word *fairies* because he thinks it conveys too much the idea of children's tales.[23] As a consequence, he prefers to refer to them as *Longaevi*, a term he tells us he borrowed from Martianus Capella, who with this word indicated all kinds of supernatural creatures, such as Pans, Fauns, Nymphs, Silvan and Satyrs.[24] He also provides us with an attempt at a categorization of these *Longaevi*. First, they might be a third species different from both men and angels. Secondly, *Longaevi* are likely to be fallen angels who, however, escaped damnation thanks to second thoughts. Thirdly, they might simply be dead people: in fact, we have just seen that, in *De Nugis Curialium*, the wife of the knight was dead when he saw her dancing with fairies, which might imply that they were dead too. Lastly, they could be devils *tout court*.[25] As for that, we can find evidence already, as Hall points out, in the Royal Prayerbook: it "is one of the four early Anglo-Saxon prayerbooks, each with some textual interrelationships, containing mainly Latin prayers".[26] In the prayerbook in question, we read "adiuto te satanae

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20 Quoted in Lewis, p. 124.
21 Wade, p. 5.
22 James, M.R., Brooke, C.N.L. and Mynors, R.A.B., eds, *Walter Map De Nugis Curialium Courtiers' Trifles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 345.
23 Lewis, p. 123.
24 Lewis, p. 122.
25 Lewis, pp. 134-7.
26 Hall, p. 79.

diabulus aelfae" ("I conjure you, devil of Satan, of (an) Ælf/*ælf*).[27] This association between Satan and *ælf* confirms Lewis' statement about *Longaevi* being devils tout court.[28]

1.2 Features of the fairies

From what we can infer by reading medieval poems and romances concerning the fairy world, fairies appear as supernatural creatures who, as Wade suggests, do not belong to humankind, since they do not have boundaries of time and space.[29] As for the concept of time, in many texts a little time in the fairy world is equivalent to many years in the world of humans.[30] For instance, in *Voyage of Bran*, an Irish legend probably dating back to the eighth century, Bran's stay on the fairy island lasted several years but, to him, it seemed "only a year".[31] However, besides these other-worldly features, fairies share with humans many characteristics: they are good-looking creatures who enjoy riding horses and hunting, even though they are not much willing to enter in contact with humans.[32] The following passage from *Sir Orfeo* exemplifies this concept:

> Þe king o fairy wiþ his rout
> Com to hunt him al about
> Wiþ dim cru & bloweing,
> & houndes also wiþ him berking; […]
> Wele atourned, ten hundred kniȝtes,
> Ich y-armed to his riȝtes,
> Of cuntenaunce stout & fers,
> Wiþ mani desplaid baners (ll. 283-6, 291-4)[33]

What happens here is that Orfeo, while wandering in the woods in despair for Heurodis' loss, witnesses a hunt of the fairy king, who is in the forest with his dogs and knights, apparently strong and fierce and carrying banners[34]. Given this description, a fairy hunt seems no different from an

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27 Hall, p. 79. The Modern English translation is Hall's.
28 It is also what Hall concludes from his research, pp. 79-81.
29 Wade, p. 1.
30 Saunders, Corinne, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. 181; "Fairy" in Mackillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology.*
31 Quoted in Patch, Howard Rollin, *The Other World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 58.
32 Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *Reading Middle English Literature*, Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 120.
33 All quotations from *Sir Orfeo* are taken from the Auchinleck manuscript text in Bliss, A.J. (ed.), *Sir Orfeo*, London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
34 I use Modern English terms provided by Bliss in his glossary.

ordinary hunt organised by human kings and their knights – I am thinking notably of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, or of the hunt of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and The Green Night*:

> The Greene Knight went on hunting […]
> The knight in the Forrest slew many a hind:
> Other venison he cold none find,
> But wild bores on the plaine,
> Plentye of does and wild swine,
> Foxes and other ravine
> As I hard true man tell. (ll. 360, 405-10)[35]

Therefore, what the fairy king and his knights are doing here is not something extraordinary or supernatural, but quite an ordinary activity for nobles during the Middle Ages. We have an early example of the fairy hunt legend in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*:[36] the British king Herla was invited to the marriage of a dwarf, who lived in a wonderful palace. To gain access to it, king Herla and his knights had to enter "into a cave in a high cliff"[37] in complete darkness, whereas the reign of the dwarf was full of light. After the feast, Herla and his knights were accompanied outside by the dwarf, who told them they must not get off their horses until the dog he showed them was in a man's arms. Nevertheless, one of Herla's knights got off his horse and immediately turned into dust. Thus, Herla warned all the others not to alight from their horses and the group started riding, waiting for the dog to leave the man's arms, but this never happened. As a consequence, they continued riding and were seen by many people.

As far as Irish literature is concerned, Kieckhefer tells us that fairies are immortal and free of any preoccupation: they live on the Fairy Hill and enjoy themselves by attending endless feasts and their relation with human beings is a crucial theme.[38] They are tricky creatures who can help or hinder human attempts to do something.[39] Typically, fairies can be found in the woods and they

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35 Thomas Hahn, ed., "The Greene Knight", in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-greene-knight> [accessed 12 November 2015].
36 The summary of the story is in Bliss, p. 38.
37 Bliss, p. xxxviii.
38 Kieckhefer, Richard, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 53.
39 Mackillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

usually stand near fountains.[40] There are further important features in common between Irish legends and the fairies in *Sir Orfeo*: the crystal wall (Patch talks about a "crystal fence") and the silver (instead of golden) pillar in the Fairy Land are in common with the *Voyage of Maeldúin*.[41] In *Sir Orfeo*:

> Al þe vt-mast wal
> Was clere & schine as cristal (ll. 357-8)

In both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Sickbed of Cú Chulainn*, the Fairy Land is made of stones which shine perpetually and give the impression of an everlasting daylight.[42] In *Sir Orfeo*:

> Al þat lond was euer liȝt,
> For when it schuld be þerk & niȝt
> Þe riche stones liȝt gonne
> As briȝt as doþ at none þe sonne. (ll. 369-72)

Lewis points out that the splendour of the Fairy Land as described in medieval poems was associated with "graciousness and courtesy",[43] so the fact that fairies were wealthy creatures did not lead to hatred towards them, but quite the contrary: it led to admiration.

1.3 Fairies in the French tradition

Old French romances are a very precious source as far as fairies are concerned. In the French tradition there are two kinds of fairies: the *fée marraine* (fairy godmother) and the *fée amante* (fairy lover).[44] The first category is associated to the classical Parcae – the goddesses who control men's destiny in Classical mythology – whereas the second one includes those fairies who fall in love with mortals, and it is from them that the erotic connotations of fairies in the Middle Ages come.[45] It is,

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40 Kieckhefer, p. 108.
41 Bliss, p. xxxix; Patch, Howard Rollin, *The Other World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 32.
42 Bliss, p. xxxix.
43 Lewis, p. 132.
44 Harf-Lancner, p. 17.
45 Harf-Lancner, p. 17.

however, important to remember that *fées marraines* and *fées amantes* are frequently not distinguished in medieval literature.[46]

As far as the *fées marraines* are concerned, Old French literature abounds with examples. In *Escanor*, written by Gérard d'Amiens at the end of the thirteenth century, the protagonist, Gauvain, is given the gift of *prouesse* (bravery) et *courtoisie* (courtesy, the courtly love value) by some fairy godmothers.[47] In *Merveilles de Rigomer*, Gauvain, Lancelot and other knights leave for Ireland in order to free the country from some enchantments.[48] During their mission, the life of one of the knights is spared thanks to the intervention of "quatre fees" ("four fairies"), who are in this case fairy godmothers – whereas Gauvain, who is a mortal knight, falls in love with a fairy lover, the *fée Lorie*.[49] The last example I am going to provide is that of *Le Roman d'Aubéron*, where fairy godmothers play a crucial part. In a way that recalls what happens in Perrault's (and Disney's) *Sleeping Beauty*, four fairies are invited to celebrate the birth of Brunehaut – the future grandmother of Aubéron, king of fairies.[50] The first fairy guarantees her beauty and wisdom; the second one assures she will live for three hundred years; the third one gives her power over the land of fairies and promises her she will not get old after the age of thirty.[51] However, the fourth fairy reveals herself to be evil (*fee courcie*) and says that Brunehaut will leave for the land of fairies at the age of seven:

> "Puis que ainsi va,
> Je li souhait que del mont partira,
> Dusc'a . VII . ans en faerie ira".[52]

The other category of fairies, as we have mentioned before, is the one of the fairy lovers (*fées amantes*). As Laurence Harf-Lancner explains, they are other-worldly women who can be found

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46 Harf-Lancner, p. 42.
47 Harf-Lancner, p. 29.
48 Harf-Lancner, p. 30.
49 Harf-Lancner, pp. 30-1.
50 Harf-Lancner, p. 32.
51 Harf-Lancner, p. 32.
52 Quoted in Harf-Lancner, p. 32.

both in this world and in the Other World and who are stunningly beautiful.[53] One of the most

renowned *fées amantes* is the one we find in Marie de France's *Lanval*, which I will discuss at

length in the next chapters. A further great example of fairy lover comes from the two tales of

Mélusine, written at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Jean d'Arras.[54] It is noteworthy that

the fact that Mélusine is a fairy is mentioned only twice in the tales: in the prologue and in the

epilogue.[55] The legacy of the tales of Mélusine is to be found in the so-called *contes mélusiniens*

("Mélusine-style" tales). This kind of tales follows a specific pattern. First of all, we have the

encounter between a mortal and a fairy, which usually happens in a forest.[56] The forest represents

the place where the two look for some adventure, far away from their homes.[57] A very important

feature, together with the sylvan surroundings, is water, be it in the form of a river, sea or source.[58]

We will see that water is a crucial element in Irish legends too. Usually, the man is hunting alone

when he sees a beautiful maiden sumptuously clothed, whose name is never revealed.[59] The

encounter is followed by the pact: the two lovers usually get married but the mortal man has to

commit himself to the lady's will: if he violates their agreement, their life together ends.[60] When the

promise is broken, the fairy disappears and the hero is defeated.[61] Indeed, this is more or less what

happens in *Sir Launfal*: he and Tryamour, the fairy princess, meet in a forest. They spend the night

together and the following day she tells him not to tell anybody what happened, or he will never see

her again. Being pressured by Guinevere, he reveales the existence of Tryamour, who in the end,

however, will forgive him.[62] Thus, two things distinguish *Sir Launfal* from the "Mélusine-style"

tales: the fairy's name is immediately revealed and the fairy eventually forgives her lover.

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53 Harf-Lancner, p. 34.
54 Harf-Lancner, p. 41.
55 Harf-Lancner, p. 41.
56 Harf-Lancner, pp. 85, 87.
57 Harf-Lancner, p. 87.
58 Harf-Lancner, p. 87.
59 Harf-Lancner, p. 89, 91.
60 Harf-Lancner, p. 113.
61 Harf-Lancner, p. 113.
62 "Sir Launfal" in *Database of Middle English* Romance / University of York, 2012
    <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 14 November 2015].

1.3.1 Marie de France's lais: the fairy creature in the lai of Yonec

Marie de France lived during the late twelfth century. Little is known of her life, except that she wrote twelve *lais* in Anglo-Norman – a variety of Old French – that have influenced medieval literature. They are *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc*.[63] Marie de France wrote in Old French (more precisely, Anglo-Norman), was French, probably lived in England, wrote for the English court and claimed to use Breton sources. This mixture of languages and cultures is to be expected given the cultural status of England in the Middle Ages – about which I have talked previously in this chapter. In this subsection, and for the purpose of this thesis, I consider only one *lai* which has to do with supernatural beings: the *lai* of *Yonec.* Of course, the *lai* of *Lanval* has to do with fairy material too, but I devote an entire subsection to it in chapter four.

Marie de France maintained that she had translated *lais* written in Breton. Nowadays, scholars refer to these *lais* as *Breton lais*: they "may refer to any of the poems produced between approximately 1150 and 1450 which claim to be literary versions of lays sung by ancient Bretons to the accompaniment of the harp".[64] In her *Prologue* to her *lais*, Marie de France writes:

> Des lais pensai k'oïz aveie.
> Ne dutai pas, bien le savaie,
> Que pur remembrance les firent
> Des aventures qu'il oïrent
> Cil ki primes les comencierent
> E ki avant les enveierent.[65]

At the beginning of the *lai Equitan*, Marie tells us about the Bretons and their *lais*:

> Mut unt este noble barun
> Cil de Bretaine, li Bretun.

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63 Burgess, Glyn S., *The Lais of Marie de France*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.
64 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-general-introduction> [accessed 15 November 2015].
65 <http://jacques.prevost.free.fr/moyen_age/MariedeFrance_lais.htm> [accessed 11 January 2016]. "I thought I had lais in front of me. Doubtlessly, I knew that these *lais* had been written by those who first had heard about some adventures and then wrote about them so that they would not be forgotten" (my translation).

Jadis suleient par prüesce,
        Par curteisie e par noblesce
        Des aventures que oïent,
        Ki a plusurngent avenient,
        Fere les lais pur remembrance
        Que [hum] nes meïst en ubliance.[66]

        The Bretons, who lived in Brittany,
        were fine and noble men.
        In days gone by these valiant,
        courtly and noble individuals
        composed lays for posterity,
        based on adventures they had heard
        and which had befallen many a person;
        their intention was to preserve these
        stories from oblivion.[67]

The Bretons spoke Breton[68] and "they descended from the inhabitants of Britain who had emigrated after the invasion of the Angles and Saxons during the fifth century".[69] They continued to talk Breton and being interested in Celtic stories, as were those peoples who had moved to Wales, Cornwall, Scotland and Ireland.[70] The Bretons, furthermore, "performed their lays to the courts of France and further afield".[71] Before continuing, I think it is useful to explain what I mean from now on by "Celtic" and "Irish". From a linguistic point of view, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Breton and Cornish are all Celtic languages, although Irish and Scottish Gaelic are labelled "Goidelic", while Welsh, Breton and Cornish are known as "Brittonic". Culturally and anthropologically speaking, the Celts in the British Isles were indeed separated into two groups: the Gaels and the Britons.[72] A study of these differences is not the purpose of this thesis: it is helpful, however, to mention that the term *Celts* comes from the Greek word *keltoi* (Κελτοί) and from the Latin word *Celtae.* These two words were mentioned by late eighteenth-century Romantic scholars, who found these terms in Ancient Greek and Roman writings. From now on, in order to be as clear as possible,

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66 Burgess, p. 13.
67 This Modern English translation is provided by Burgess, p. 13.
68 Breton, together with Welsh and Cornish, belongs to the group of the Brittonic languages, which, in turn, belong to Celtic languages. I provide a more exhaustive explanation in this same subsection.
69 Turville-Petre, p. 116.
70 Turville-Petre, p. 116.
71 Turville-Petre, p. 116.
72 Squire, Charles, *The Mythology of the British Islands: an Introduction to Celtic Myth, Legend, Poetry and Romance*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p. 29.

I will use the adjective "Irish" to refer to what is to do with Ireland only, and "Celtic" to refer to literature written in all the other Celtic languages. Where possible, I will use the name of the given Celtic language to which I make reference (e.g. Welsh, Scottish, Cornish etc.). As for the Bretons, it is important to underline that they did not think of themselves as Celtic speakers – nor did the Welsh, the Cornish, the Scottish and the Irish peoples– but, from a linguistic point of view, they actually were. To sum up, since the Breton *lais* had been written by the Bretons, who were Celtic speakers, the Breton *lais* belong to the Celtic tradition, as Cross points out too.[73]

Marie de France's *lai* which deals with an other-worldly being is the *lai* of *Yonec*.[74] It is about a man who hides his bride in a tower because of jealousy. He orders an old woman to guard her. One day, a great hawk enters the window of the tower and, in front of the wife, turns itself into a beautiful knight, Muldumarec. The two become lovers but he warns her that, should their love be discovered, he would die. One day, the old woman sees them and reports everything to the husband, who wounds the knight. Before departing, Muldumarec tells his lover that she will bear his son, whose name will be Yonec. After the knight's disappearance, she jumps from the window of the tower and manages to enter a hill, emerging in a meadow. She finds her dying lover in a palace, where he gives her a ring that will make her husband forget what happened and a sword which is to be handed to their son. When the child is a man, she will go with him and her husband to a feast, where her son will get the sword. During their journey to the feast, the three see a castle and Muldumarec's tomb. At that point, the lady tells Yonec the truth about his father and gives him the sword. She dies on her lovers' tomb and Yonec kills her mother's husband. In the end, he becomes king of his father's reign.

In this brief summary we can identify the Mélusinian motif of the promise which, if broken, would cause the separation of the lovers. Moreover, we are told that the lady, passing through a hill,

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73 Cross, Tom Peete, "The Celtic Origin of the Lay of Yonec", *Studies in Philology*, 11 (1913), pp. 26-60 (p. 27).
74 I rely on the summary provided by Cross, pp. 26-27.

arrives "en un mult bel pre"[75], which is likely to be the Fairy Land – or Other World – of which I talk in the following subsection.

What is extremely interesting in this *lai* is that, as Cross notices, there are many events in common with Celtic analogues.[76] First of all, the theme of the fairy lover who meets a mortal woman is recurrent among the Celts.[77] The motif of an offspring born from a fairy creature and a mortal woman can be found also in the Irish poem *The Birth of Mongán*: Fiachna, king of the province of Ulster, went to war leaving his wife the queen at home. A man pays her a visit and tells her:

> your spouse is in great peril. A frightful hero has been brought against him who cannot be slain [?]. And [your husband] will die by him. If you and I engage in love making, you will bear a son from it. That son will be remarkable. Moreover, he will be Fiachna's. I shall go to the battle that will be fought tomorrow at the third hour after sunrise in order to save him. […] And I [shall] tell to your spouse what we have done and that it is yourself who have sent me to aid him. So it was done.[78]

This excerpt is much older than Marie de France's *lais*,[79] but it is likely that oral tradition circulating at the time is reflected in both texts.

We saw that Muldumarec turns himself into a hawk when visiting the lady. In fact, among Gaels and Britons, the fairy lover did usually transform himself into a bird.[80] Humans turning into birds can also be found in Welsh tradition, as in *Kulhwch and Olwen*, where Menw turns himself into a bird "in order to reach the wonderful Twrch Trwyth".[81] In the Irish legend *The Wooing of Étain*, Midir transforms himself and Étain into swans in order to flee away from the palace of king Eochaid, Étain's husband:

> [Midir] put his weapons in his left hand, and took [Étain] under his right arm, and carried her off through the skylight of the house. The hosts rose up around the king after this shame had been put upon them. They saw two swans circling Tara.[82]

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75 <http://jacques.prevost.free.fr/moyen_age/MariedeFrance_lai_yonec.htm> [accessed 11 January 2016].
76 Cross, p. 28.
77 Cross, p. 29.
78 Koch, John T. in collaboration with Carey, John (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales,* Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003, p. 217.
79 Cross, p. 31.
80 Cross, p. 33.
81 Cross, p. 35.
82 Koch, p. 161 translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.

In another Irish poem, *The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel*, the daughter of Cormac, king of Ulster, is secluded in a house with just one window to protect her from her stepmother, who wants to kill her. One day, the princess sees a bird which tells her that she will bear his son:

> she saw a bird on the skylight coming to her, and he leaves his bird skin on the floor of the house, and went to her and captured her and said: "[...] you will be pregnant by me, and bear a son – and the son must not kill birds. And "Conaire, son of Mess Buachalla" will be his name".[83]

Similarly to what happens in the *lai* of *Yonec*, an imprisoned woman receives the visit of a bird, who is actually an other-worldly lover.[84] When the bird-lover is discovered, as in *Yonec*, he disappears and goes back to his world. This is a typical feature of Celtic legends where there appear other-worldly creatures.[85] The lady and Muldumarec's offspring is, thus, semi-supernatural:[86] half-human and half-fairy. Analogues of *Yonec* are, among many others, *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Gowther*, and I will focus on the former in chapter four.

1.4 The Other World in Celtic mythology and medieval romances

In Irish legends, the Other world is parallel to the human one, and the two are usually separated by a river or a cave.[87] In *Sir Orfeo*, specifically, the protagonist reaches the land of fairies by passing through a rock:

> In at a roche þe leuedis rideþ,
> & he after, & nouȝt abideþ,
> When þre mile, oþer mo,
> He com in-to a fair country,
> As briȝt so sonne in somers day,
> Smoþe & plain & al grene   (ll. 347-53)

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83 Koch, p. 168.
84 Cross, p. 39.
85 Cross, p. 52.
86 Cross, p. 55.
87 Saunders, p. 181.

In most Irish stories, however, the most important motif is the voyage to distant islands.[88] As we are about to see, the topic of the apple tree is recurrent in Irish legends. In *Voyage of Bran*, one of the most ancient of these stories, the protagonist obtains from a woman – probably a fairy – a branch from the "apple tree"[89] of Emain, a far-away land . A "fairy mistress" provides him with that branch to allow him to go to the Other World.[90] In the Irish story *Voyage of Maeldúin*, the protagonist lands on "an island with trees bearing golden apples" while looking for his father.[91] In his *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey of Monmouth describes Avalon as an "insula pomorum" (Island of Apples) and clearly tries to evoke the scenario of the Garden of Eden, with its perpetual spring, the presence of every species of flowers and fruits and of "beautiful maidens".[92] From these examples we have an account of the prominent role of "a magic apple as a passport".[93] In *Sir Orfeo* we find the theme of the tree, though we are not sure if it is an apple tree. Heurodis is abducted while she is lying under a tree:

> Orfeo […]
> & wele ten hundred kniȝtes wiþ him, […]
> & wiþ þe quen wenten he
> Riȝt vnto þat ympe-tre. […]
> þe quen was oway y-tviȝt,
> Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome   (ll. 182-3, 185-6, 192-3)

The exact translation of *ympe-tree*, however, is still being discussed: someone proposed "grafted tree", others "orchard tree" and others "apple tree".[94] What is more, Heurodis sits under an *ympe-tre* even when Orfeo reaches the land of Faerie and sees her:

> Þer he seiȝe his owhen wiif,
> Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,
> Slepe under an ympe-tre   (ll. 405-7)

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88 Patch, pp. 28-30.
89 Patch, p. 30.
90 Patch, p. 31.
91 Patch, p. 32.
92 Patch, pp. 286-7.
93 Bliss, p. xxxvi.
94 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Orfeo" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-orfeo> [accessed 29 October 2015].

In *Sir Degaré*, the princess' damsels fall asleep under a "chastein tre":

> Hii leien hem doun upon a grene,
> Under a chastein tre, ich wene,
> And fillen aslepe everichone
> Bote the damaisele alone. (ll. 73-6)

Apart from the islands as homes of the fairies and the repeated theme of the apple tree, another type of Irish Other World is the so-called "*síd* Elysium or fairy mound",[95] that is to say beautiful valleys inhabited by fairies and characterised by enchanting "underground palaces"[96] full of bizarre things. Humans may go there and stay for a while or perpetually. Normally, the *síd* can be accessed through a lake, a well or the mist. There are, however, other kinds of barriers, such as mountains, rivers with bridges and wild beasts.[97] The term *síd* is found in the Irish legend *The Wooing of Étaín*: after Étaín is kidnapped by Midir, Eochaid, king of Ireland and her husband, orders that "every *síd* in Ireland should be dug up until his wife came to him thence".[98] In Irish legends, there are more fairy women than fairy men and often there are islands inhabited only by female fairies[99] (which is not the case in *Sir Orfeo*, since there the fairy realm has a king).

As for romances, the greatest and most mentioned Other World is Avalon. Legends about this land developed orally and the first written account of it is found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* (1138):[100]

> And even the renowned king Arthur himself was mortally wounded; and being carried thence to the isle of Avallon to be cured of his wounds, he gave up the crown of Britain to his kinsman Constantine, the son of Cador, duke of Cornwall, in the five hundred and forty-second year of our Lord's incarnation.[101]

Fairies are not mentioned in this passage (nor in the entire work). However, the fact that Arthur is brought to Avalon for his injuries "to be cured" (*sananda* in the original Latin) suggests a

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95 Patch, p. 46.
96 Patch, p. 46.
97 Patch, pp. 47-50.
98 Koch, p. 161, translated from OI by John Carey.
99 Patch, p. 58.
100 Wade, p. 39.
101 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Aaron Thompson, with revisions by J.A. Giles, Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses, 1999, p. 193 <http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/> [accessed 31 October 2015].

supernatural involvement.[102] Though the Arthurian legends are not among the topics I am going to consider in this thesis, I think some aspects are worthy of consideration. In *Historia Regum Britannie*, book VII, Merlin makes three prophecies. In the first one, he speaks about

> a boar of Cornwall [who] shall give his assistance, and trample [foreigners'] necks under his feet. The islands of the ocean shall be subject to his power, and he shall possess the forests of Gaul. The house of Romulus shall dread his courage, and his end shall be doubtful.[103]

The boar is Arthur and, from these words, we infer that Arthur might be alive after having been mortally wounded.[104] However, this "Arthur-will-return" theme was already circulating in Britain years before Monmouth's account.[105] Wade illustrates this point by mentioning Herman of Laon's *De Miraculis St. Mariae Laudenensis*.[106] It is a story about nine canons who travel in northern France and southern England to raise money, performing miracles thanks to some relics. When they reach Cornwall and Devon, they "[are] shown Arthur's chair and oven"[107] and are told about a quarrel between two men upon whether Arthur is dead or alive. From what we have seen up to now, we can surely maintain that, as Bliss confirms, the Celtic Other World was the land of living people, and even the mortals who entered it were always alive, as is the case for both Orfeo and Heurodis.[108] It is not the case, however, for the wife of the knight of "Lesser Britain", since he explains to us that "he saw her whom he had buried, alive again".[109] Thus, she is actually dead and that is probably due to the fact that some features of the Latin legend had already influenced the Celtic one.[110]

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102 Wade, p. 40.
103 Geoffrey of Monmouth, p. 113.
104 Wade, p. 41.
105 Wade, p. 43.
106 Wade, p. 43.
107 Wade, p. 43.
108 Bliss, p. 33.
109 Hartland, p. 187-8.
110 Bliss, p. xxxiii.

We have already seen that Orfeo enters the Fairy realm through a rock. In *Sir Launfal*, the protagonist is approached by two fairies who come to him on behalf of the fairy princess Tryamour and he is led by them to a pavilion:[111]

> And when they come in the forest an hygh,
> A pavyloun yteld he sygh,
> With merthe and mochell honour.
> The pavyloun was wrouth, forsothe, ywys,
> All of werk of Sarsynys,
> The pomelles of crystall;
> Upon the toppe an ern ther stod
> Of bournede golde, ryche and good,
> Yloryshed with ryche amall.   (ll. 262-70)[112]

At the end of the poem, we come across the island motif that, as we have seen, is such a pivotal feature in fairy world literature:

> The lady rod thorth Cardevyle,
> Fer ynto a jolyf ile,
> Olyroun that hyghte. […]
> Thus Launfal, wythouthen fable,
> That noble knyght of the Rounde Table,
> Was take ynto Fayrye.   (ll. 1021-3, 1033-5)

I think it is noteworthy, and not a coincidence at all, that "Olyroun" is similar in spelling and sound to "Avalon": both names have three syllables, have an almost identical ending ("oun/on") and the lateral consonant *l* is present in both words. Though I could not find any confirmation in my primary and secondary sources, there seems to be a link between the two names.

To sum up, I began this thesis by discussing the etymology of the word *fairy*. We have seen that, though the terms related to it are numerous, they all convey the same idea – apart from some nuances of meaning (i.e. *incubus*, *lamia, longaevi*) – of an other-worldly creature who is neither utterly evil nor completely good. This ambiguity pervades Celtic legends concerning fairies. A more definite boundary between good and evil fairies is to be found in French literature, where the

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111 "Sir Launfal" in *Database of Middle English* Romance / University of York
<http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 04 November 2015].
112 All the excerpts from *Sir Launfal* are taken from Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 04 November 2015].

fairy who curses Brunehaut is undoubtedly cruel. French literature also left us a legacy of "Mélusine-style" tales, which would have an influence on later poems about the fairy world. We have discovered that in Celtic legends and in *Sir Orfeo* there are recurrent themes such as, for instance, the one of the fairy hunt. Together with the ways of access to the Other World and its features, which are closely related both in Irish and in Middle English literature, the similarity in names between "Olyroun" and "Avalon" I have pointed out before is a further proof of the interplay of the various medieval poems concerning the fairy world. As far as the Breton *lais* are concerned, they are part of the Celtic tradition, as we have already seen. The concept of Breton *lai* and its appartenance to the Celtic folklore are so important because it is common opinion that *Sir Orfeo* is the English version of a former French Breton *lai*, the *Lay d'Orphée*,[113] which means that the anonymous fourteenth-century poem has undeniable Celtic roots, as many scholars agree. That being said, I aim at describing and giving a meaning to the role of and the reason for the presence of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* in chapter three, not before having devoted the second chapter to the classical sources of the anonymous poem.

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113 Spearing, A.C., "*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender", in Gilbert, Jane & Putter, Ad, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Harlow: Longman, 2000, p. 260.

2. Towards Sir Orfeo: classical sources of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

Middle English literature borrows a number of elements from classical culture and merges them together with indigenous lore. This is the process which has given us poems such as *Sir Orfeo*, where the protagonist comes from the Greek tradition and runs into fairies from the Celtic lore. In this chapter I focus on the classical origins of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, whose roots are to be found in Greek mythology and whose peregrinations are told by three Latin authors.

2.1 Latin analogues: Virgil, Ovid and Boethius

In the following subsections I look at three masterpieces of Latin literature where the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is told. Virgil, Ovid and Boethius wrote about this legend in different ways, either adding characters to it or turning it into a moral. The roots of this myth are Greek and the following summary is taken from Petrina.[114] Orpheus is the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope. His father gives him a lyre, which he manages to play in such an impressive way that even wild beasts, trees and rocks are enchanted with it. When Orpheus and Eurydice get married, Hymen is invited to the wedding but does not promise the bridegroom and bride a happy marital life. One day Eurydice is seen by Aristaeus, a bee-keeper, who begins to woo her. Fleeing from him, Eurydice falls, is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus, grieving for the loss of his beloved wife, decides to look for her in the underworld. He presents himself to Pluto and Proserpina – king and queen of the kingdom of the dead – and starts playing his lyre, begging for Eurydice to be brought to life. The gods call Eurydice and allow Orpheus to take her away with him, provided that he will not turn to see whether she is following him until they reach the upper world. Orpheus, however, turns around to be sure Eurydice is actually behind him. She disappears immediately, and Orpheus deprives

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114 Petrina Alessandra, "Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Its Sources", *Fifteenth-century Studies,* 33 (2008), pp. 198-217 (pp. 198-99).

himself of food and sleep for seven days, and is finally killed by Thracian maidens for having rejected them. Once back in the underworld, he finds Eurydice and embraces her.

2.1.1 Virgil's Georgics

Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC- 19 BC) was a Latin poet of the Augustan period. He is well-known for three great works of Latin literature: the *Bucolics* (*Eclogae*), the *Georgics* (*Georgica*) and especially the epic poem *Aeneid* (*Æneis*). The relevant work to this thesis is the *Georgics*, specifically book IV, where Virgil narrates his version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is noteworthy that Virgil is the only one amongst the three Latin poets I am concerned with who reintroduced the character of Aristaeus in this myth.[115] Book IV is almost entirely dedicated to the care of bees, and Aristeus himself is a bee-keeper. As Petrina points out, the fact that a pleasant bee-keeper causes the death of a nymph is rather bizarre,[116] and probably Virgil used Aristeus as a pretext to introduce the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice after having written about bees. Aristeus is accused by Proteus of having caused Eurydice's death – and Orpheus's grief – because of his attraction for her: while she is fleeing from him, she is bitten by a snake:

> Illa quidem, dum te fugeret per flumina praeceps,
> immanem ante pedes hydrum moritura puella
> servantem ripas alta non vidit in herba (ll. 457-59)[117]

In despair, Orpheus with his harp goes down to the underworld and manages to regain Eurydice, but turns back to see her when they have almost reached the upper air, thus not respecting Proserpine' s will.

> Ibi omnis
> effusus labor atque immitis rupta tyranni
> foedera, terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernis.
> Illa "quis et me" inquit "miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,

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115 Petrina, pp. 200-01.
116 Petrina, p. 201.
117 Virgil, *Georgica*, edited with a commentary by R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990, p. xxxvii.
"It's true, in hasty flight from you, she failed to see – doomed as she was – hiding in tall grass and right in front of her, the seven-headed serpent, a sentry on the river bank." (Virgil, *Georgics*, translated by Peter Fallon, with an introduction and notes by Elaine Fantham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 90.)

> quis tantus furor? En iterum crudelia retro
> fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus,
> iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
> invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas."
> Dixit et ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras
> commixtus tenuis, fugit diversa. (ll. 491-500)[118]

Mad with grief, Orpheus wanders and cries for seven months, until he is killed by Ciconian women (on the south coast of Thrace), who are angry because he has rejected them. They literally tear him to pieces, but neveretheless Orpheus's head is still able to cry out his dead wife's name.

2.1.2 Ovid's Metamorphoses

Ovid (43 BC-17 AD) was a Latin poet. Amongst his best known writings are the *Heroides*, the *Ars amatoria* and the *Metamorphoses*. As far as my thesis is concerned, the piece of work I am interested in is the *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem about transformations (from which the Latin title comes), made up of fifteen books.[119] Of particular interest are book X and book XI: the former contains the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the latter an account of Orpheus' death.

As far as the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice is concerned, Ovid begins by telling about Hymen not bringing good omens at their wedding and the consequent death of Eurydice, bitten by an adder. Orpheus is increasingly desperate and decides to go to the underworld to ask Pluto and Proserpina, while playing his harp, whether they will let him bring Eurydice back to life. His words make the gods cry, so they agree to let Eurydice leave the underworld, but only if Orpheus does not turn back to be sure she is following him during their ascent to the upper earth.

> Eurydicenque vocant. Umbras erat illa recentes
> inter et incessit passu de vulnere tardo.
> Hanc simul et legem Rhodopeïus accipit Orpheus,
> ne flectat terto sua lumina, donec Avernas

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118 Virgil, p. lxxxix.
  "Like that, his efforts were undone, and the pacts he'd entered with that tyrant had dissolved. Three peals of thunder clapped across that paludal hell. 'What', she cried, 'what wretched luck has ruined me – and you, O Orpheus, what burning need? Look, cold-hearted fate is calling me again; sleep draws its curtain on my brimming eyes. And so, farewell, I'm carried off in night's immense embrace, and now reach out my hands to you in vain – for I am yours no more.' So she spoke, and suddenly, like wisps of smoke, she vanished in thin air." (Fallon, p. 92).
119 Martin, Charles, ed., *Metamorphoses: a New Translation, Contexts, Criticism,* New York; London: W.W. Norton, c2010, p. xxvii.

exierit valles; aut irrita dona futura. (ll. 48-52)[120]

Eager to make sure his wife is really behind him, he turns back, thus causing Eurydice's immediate return to the reign of the dead.

supremumque "vale", quod iam vix auribus ille
acciperet, dixit revolitaque rursus eodem est. (ll. 62-3)[121]

Orpheus tries to access the underworld a second time but he is prevented from doing that. He does not eat for seven days, being only capable to experience a painful feeling of sadness. He rejects many women and ends up dedicating his sexual attentions to young men.

The main feature we spot is the absence of Aristeus, whom Ovid obviously thought was not important for the story to unfold. Indeed, Eurydice's death here seems to be the result of Hymen's will, whereas Virgil clearly writes that the one to blame is Aristeus. Furthermore, Ovid explicitly writes that the underworld is an "unattractive kingdom" (l. 22, in Latin *inamoena regna*): such a negative description coincides in part with the one of the Celtic Other World – and, as a consequence, with the Fairy Land in *Sir Orfeo* – which is mainly described as a wonderful reign, but is also hideous and grotesque at the same time. The scene of Eurydice's second death is different from Virgil's account as well. As William S. Anderson underlines, Virgil lets Eurydice talk to Orpheus for five lines before departing forever, while Ovid only makes her say "Farewell" (l. 86, *Vale* in Latin).[122]

The death of Orpheus is retold in book XI. We are told that Orpheus "compelled the trees | and beasts to follow him with suchlike songs, | and made the very stones skip in his wake " (ll. 1-3). His songs are so powerful that the Thracian women who try to kill him fail every attempt. They manage to murder him only when his voice cannot be heard any longer.

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120 Hill, D.E., ed., *Ovid: Metamorphoses IX-XII*, Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1999, p. 46.
    "And they called Eurydice. She was among the recent shades and advanced at a slow pace because of her wound. Rhodopeian Orpheus accepted her and, at the same time, the condition that he should not turn his eyes back until he had left Avernus' valley; or the gift would be annulled." (Hill, p. 47).
121 Hill, p. 46.
    "And she spoke her last 'farewell' which now scarcely reached his ears, and turned back to the same place again." (Hill, p. 47).
122 Anderson, William S., ed., *Ovid's Metamorphoses, Books 6-10*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972, p. 476.

> Ac primum attonitas etiamnum voce canentis
> innumeras volucres anguesque agmenque ferarum
> Maenades Orphei titulum rapuere theatri;
> inde cruentatis vertuntur in Orphea dextris
> et coeunt, ut aves. (ll. 20-4)[123]

As we can infer from these excerpts, Ovid highlights very much the power of Orpheus's music on animals and inanimate objects, to the point that he underlines this concept a third time after his death:

> Te maestae volucres, Orpheu, te turba ferarum,
> te rigidi silices, tua carmina saepe secutae
> fleuerunt silvae, positis te frondibus arbor
> tonsa comas luxit. (ll. 44-7)[124]

Then, Ovid writes that Orpheus's head reaches the coasts of Lesbos, where it is about to be eaten by a snake. The animal is pushed away just in time and turned into stone by Phoebus – Orpheus's father. This particular scene is found only in Ovid's account of Orpheus's death.[125] In the end, Orpheus is reunited with Eurydice, "and now there is no longer any danger | when Orpheus looks on Eurydice" (ll. 93-4). Unlike what happens in Virgil, the two spouses finally meet again.

As for the enchantment of wild beasts, Orpheus' ability to do that comes up in *Sir Orfeo* too:

> He toke his harp to him wel riʒt
> & harped at his owhen wille.
> In-to alle þe wode þe soun gan schille,
> þat alle þe wilde bestes þat þer beþ
> For ioie abouten him þai teþ,
> & alle þe foules þat þer were
> Come & sete on ich a brere,
> To here his harping a-fine(ll. 270-77)

One essential feature, however, differentiates the classical legends we have just taken into account from the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*: while in Virgil and Ovid (and even in Boethius) Orpheus and Eurydice both die – although in Ovid they meet again and stay together in the

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123 Hill, p. 74.
  "And first, countless birds, even now spell-bound by the singer's voice, and snakes and a column of wild beasts, Orpheus' glory and his audience, were sized by the Maenads; from them, they turned with their bloodied hands against Orpheus himself and came together, like birds." (Hill, p. 75).
124 Hill, pp. 74, 76.
  "For you, Orpheus, the grieving birds wept, for you the throng of wild beasts, for you the solid stones and the woods that had so often followed your songs, and the tree dropped its leaves and mourned for you with its hair shorn." (Hill, pp. 75, 77).
125 Martin, p. 290.

kingdom of the dead forever – Orfeo and Heurodis in the medieval legend remain alive and have a happy ending together.

2.1.3. Boethius' The Consolation of Philosophy

The third and last Latin analogue of *Sir Orfeo* is Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Born in Rome probably in 480, Boethius belonged to the Anician family, one of the most distinguished in the Roman Empire.[126] He is mainly known as a philosopher, but his interests ranged over a variety of topics, from music to astronomy, from mathematics to theology.[127] He wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* (in Latin *De consolatione philosophiae*) during his years as a prisoner, as a way to find relief from his poor condition and to explain rationally, with help from Lady Philosophy, the role of Fortune and God in men's life.[128] It is made up of five books, where prose alternates with verse.[129] The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is found at the end of book III. In Boethius' version, there is no description of Eurydice's death: Boethius begins by telling of Orpheus' mourning for the loss of his wife. This "plaintive strain" – as is described by Boethius – makes nature behave in an unnatural way, which emphasizes Orpheus' skills in music:[130]

> Quondam funera coniugis
> vates Threicius gemens
> postquam flebilibus modis
> silvas currere mobiles,
> amnes stare coegerat
> iunxitque intrepidum latus
> saevis cerva leonibus
> nec visum timuit lepus
> iam cantu placidum canem,
> cum flagranitor intima
> fervor pectoris ureret
> nec, qui cuncta subegerant,
> mulcerent dominum modi. (ll. 5-17)[131]

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126 Barrett, Helen Marjorie, *Boethius: Some Aspects of His Times and Work*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940, p. 33.
127 Barrett, p. 36.
128 Barrett, pp. 75-6.
129 Barrett, p. 76.
130 Petrina, p. 201.
131 Moreschini, C., ed., *Boethius: De Consolatione Philosophiae; Opuscula Theologica*, Monachii: Saur, 2000, p. 96. "The Thracian bard, 'tis said, | Mourned his dear consort dead; | To hear the plaintive strain | The woods moved in his train, | And the stream ceased to flow, | Held by so soft a woe; |The deer without dismay | Beside the lion lay;| The hound, by song subdued, | No more the hare pursued, | But the pang unassuaged | In his own bosom raged. | The

As in Virgil, Ovid and *Sir Orfeo*, the Thracian bard's music has magic-like powers on animals and inanimate objects. His harp also moves the gods and the creatures who live in the underworld, and Eurydice is given back to him under the usual condition:

> Tandem "vincimur" arbiter
> umbrarum miserans ait.
> "Donamus comitem viro
> emptam carmine coniugem;
> sed lex dona coerceat,
> ne dum Tartara liquerit
> fas sit lumina flectere". (ll. 40-6)[132]

Orpheus, though, turns back to see his bride before they reach the upper air, so that he loses Eurydice a second time. This moment is emphasized by the use of an asyndeton: "Orpheus Eurydicen suam | vidit, perdidit, occidit".[133] We have to remember that the *Consolation* is a philosophical work, so it is not surpising that this account of Orpheus and Eurydice's story carries a philosophical message with it at the end: never look at what you have left behind, if you want to move forward and find the truth:[134]

> Vos haec fabula respicit
> quicumque in superum diem
> mentem ducere quaeritis;
> nam qui Tartareum in specus
> victus lumina flexerit,
> quicquid praecipuum trahit
> perdit dum videt inferos. (ll 52-8)[135]

Eurydice, so, is seen by Boethius as the "spiritual darkness" from which Orpheus has to flee if he wants to elevate himself and move toward heaven.[136]

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music that could calm | All else brought him no balm." This English translation is from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm#Page_158> [accessed 22 February 2016].

132 Moreschini, p. 96.

"He hath prevailèd!" cried; | "We give him back his bride! | To him she shall belong, | As guerdon of his song. | One sole condition yet | Upon the boon is set: | Let him not turn his eyes | To view his hard-won prize, |Till they securely pass | The gates of Hell." This English translation is from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h.htm#Page_158> [accessed 22 February 2016].

133 Moreschini, p. 98.

134 Barrett, p. 92; Friedman, John Block, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Massachusets: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 180; Burrow & Turville-Petre, p. 112.

135 Moreschini, p. 98.

This story is for you, | Who seek to find a way | Unto the clearer day. | If on the darkness past |One backward look ye cast, | Your weak and wandering eyes | Have lost the matchless prize. This English translation is from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm#Page_158> [accessed 22 February 2016].

136 Friedman, John Block, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 95.

Unlike Virgil and Ovid, not only did Boethius write his version of the story of these two lovers, but he also gave his own interpetation of it "that we could hardly consider medieval attitudes toward Orpheus without reference to [Boethius' interpetation]".[137] Boethius' work is highly didactic – which justifies the admiration by Christian readers during the first centuries of the Middle Ages –[138] and his approach is moralistic, which explains the great fortune of this legend later in the Middle Ages.[139] By reading Boethius' version of the legend, one feels we are far away from the simple sequence of events narrated by Virgil and Ovid, and Boethius' successful effort to moralise this tale led to a number of commentaries throughout the Middle Ages.[140]

The importance of Virgil's, Ovid's and Boethius' works lies in the fact that *Sir Orfeo* undoubtedly underwent the influence of these three pieces of work, which were well-known in the Middle Ages.[141] As anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, the classical tradition and the local lore are equally dear to English authors, who do not necessarily keep them separate: the kingdom of fairies in *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, is highly recognisable as a reinterpretation of the pagan underworld.[142] As Baswell puts it, talking about *Sir Orfeo*, "the Middle English takes this famous story of the [classical] underworld and its eruption into mundane life, and reimagines it through the optic of a specifically English uncanny".[143] A fascinating synthesis of classical underworld and Celtic fairyland, as we have the chance to see later, is also found in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* and in Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, where the pagan gods Pluto and Proserpina are the king and queen of fairies.

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137 Friedman, p. 90.
138 Indeed, medieval people came to know the story of the Thracian king thanks to Boethius' Christian allegory, rather than through Virgil and Ovid (Barron, W.R.J., *English Medieval Romance*, London: Longman, 1987, p. 186).
139 Friedman, pp. 90-1.
140 Friedman, p. 97.
141 Baswell, Christopher, "England's Antiquities: Middle English Literature and the Classical Past", in Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture*, Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, pp. 231-46, (p. 239).
142 Baswell, p. 240.
143 Baswell, p. 239.

Now that we have taken the classical tradition into consideration, let us devote our attention to Breton, Welsh and Irish authors whose works are likely to have influenced the anonymous author of *Sir Orfeo*.

3. He come in-to a fair cuntray, as briȝt so sonne on somers day, smoþe & plain & al grene: an analysis of the anonymous fourteenth-century poem Sir Orfeo

In this third chapter I focus on the anonymous fourteenth-century poem *Sir Orfeo*. In order to make the most out of this fascinating poem involving fairies, I think some attention has to be devoted to some of its analogues. I begin with a brief overview of the Old French *lai d'Orphée*, of which we have not even the tiniest fragment, but which is clearly mentioned in three medieval Old French texts. The importance of this *lai* is due to the fact that *Sir Orfeo* is highly likely to be a translation of it. Secondly, I introduce an interesting analogue we find in *De Nugis Curialium*, written in Latin by the Welsh Walter Map. Third, I concentrate on an Old Irish analogue, *The Wooing of Étaín*, where similarities and differences with *Sir Orfeo* are extremely noteworthy. In the end, I devote my attention to *Sir Orfeo* itself and to Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

3.1 The Breton Lay d'Orphée: the lost oral source?

It is generally agreed by scholars that *Sir Orfeo* is the English version of a lost French *lai*, the *Lay d'Orphée*.[144] The existence of such a *lai* is confirmed by two other *lais – Floire et Blancheflor* and *Lai de l'Espine –* and by the prose Lancelot, all written in Old French.[145] In each of them, the phrase *lai d' Orphée* appears – although spelled in different ways in Old French.

As far as *Floire et Blancheflor* is concerned, Jean-Luc Leclanche says there is convincing evidence that it was written around 1150,[146] that is at least one century and a half before the composition of *Sir Orfeo*. We find the reference to a *lai d'Orphey* when the magician Barbarin calls up a being and makes it play this *lai*:

> Une ymage i avoit formee,

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144 Spearing, A.C., "*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender", in Gilbert, Jane & Putter, Ad, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Harlow: Longman, 2000, p. 260 .
145 Saunders, p. 200; Bliss, pp. 31-3.
146 Leclanche, Jean-Luc, ed., *Le Conte de Floire et Blancheflor*, Paris: Champion, 1980, p. 11.

d'or estoit, grant com un vilains.
　　　Une harpe tint en ses mains
　　　et harpe le lai d'Orphey;
　　　onques nus hom plus n'en oï
　　　et le montee et l'avalee;
　　　cil qui l'oent molt lor agree. (ll. 860-66)[147]

As for the *lai de l'Espine*, though Burgess does not count it among the *lais* of Marie de France,[148] other scholars think it could have been written by her: one Monsieur de Roquefort had no doubts about the authorship of the poem, while one Monsieur Gervais de la Rue ascribed the *lai* to Guillaume-le-Normand.[149] The problem is that these scholars are from the nineteenth century, thus their points of view, although allegedly highly authoritative at the time, are unlikely to be utterly reliable nowadays. Whoever the author is, a *lai d'Orphéy* is cited in the following passage:

　　　Le Lais escoutent d'Aielis,
　　　Que uns Yrois doucement note
　　　Mout le sonne ens sa rote.
　　　Apriès celi d'autre commenche,
　　　Nus d'iaus ni noise ne ni tenche.
　　　Le lai lor son d'Orphéy,
　　　Et qant icel Lai ot feni,
　　　Li Chevalier après parlèrent.[150]

Finally, a *lay dorfay* is also mentioned in *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, when the king is listening to a harper performing it:

　　　Si y fu li roys assis en vn faudestoef dyuoire qui moult estoit riches et deuant lui auoit. j . harpeour . qui   li notoit le lay dorfay si plaisoit tant le roy a escouter quil ni auoit . i . seul qui mot y osast dire.[151]

A.J. Bliss (the modern editor of *Sir Orfeo*) points out that *Sir Orfeo* might also be a translation of a former Old French *lai*, and evidence can be found in the anonymous poem itself.[152]

　　　Þis king soiournd in Traciens,
　　　Þat was a cité of noble defens
　　　(For Winchester was cleped þo

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147 Leclanche, p. 41.
148 Burgess, Glyn S., ed., *The Lais of Marie de France*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987. I mentioned that because I have already written about Marie de France's *lai* of *Yonec* in chapter one an because she will be a relevant topic in the fourth chapter of my thesis.
149 <http://jacques.prevost.free.fr/moyen_age/MariedeFrance_prologue.htm> [accessed 10 February 2016].
150 <http://jacques.prevost.free.fr/moyen_age/MariedeFrance_lai_lespine.htm> [accessed 10 February 2016].
151 Sommer, H. Oskar, ed., *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac Part II*, vol. 4 of *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances: Edited from Manuscripts in the British Museum*, Washington, Carnegie Institution, 1909-1916, p. 290.
152 Bliss, pp. xl-xli.

Traciens, wiþ-outen no.) (ll. 47-50)[153]

Bliss maintains that the form of the noun *Traciens* is the same as that of a masculine singular adjective in Old French, so it might be that the poet heavily relied on an original French source.[154] Another hint stems from the following passage:

> He þat hadde y-werd þe fowe & griis,
> & on bed þe purper biis   (ll. 241-42)

In this case, we can see *griis* and *biis* rhyme. According to Bliss, the intention of the translator/poet was to keep the rhyme and the only means to do that was to leave the adjective *griis*, instead of translating it into *grey*.[155] Further evidence for an Old French source lies in the use of the French phrase *en exile* (l. 493). Nevertheless, French phrases were not rare in Middle English literature, so *en exile* does not count as strong proof.[156] This linguistic evidence is considered to be not that significant by Bliss,[157] and I think the most convincing evidence of the existence of a French – or Breton – *lai d'Orphée* lies in the three citations from *Floire et Blancheflor*, *lai de l'Espine* and *Lancelot del Lac* I have previously reported.

3.2 Walter Map's De Nugis Curialium: a Welsh writer influenced by Celtic legends

Walter Map was a clerk of Welsh origins born in the 1130s.[158] He studied theology in Paris, was royal justice in England during the reign of king Henry II and became archdeacon of Oxford around 1196.[159] What I am most interested in for the purpose of this thesis is his *De Nugis Curialium*, which M.R. James, C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors define "a rough inventory of the mental furniture of a learned and witty 12th century clerk, a marvellous guide to a fascinating lumber-room".[160] We do not really know whether Map wrote other books and, as for *De Nugis Curialium*,

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153 All quotations from *Sir Orfeo* are from Bliss, 1954.
154 Bliss, p. xl.
155 Bliss, p. xl.
156 Bliss, p. xl.
157 Bliss, p. xl.
158 James et al., p.xiv.
159 James et al., pp. xiv-xvii.
160 James et al. p. xix.

only one manuscript has survived.[161] Scholars generally agree that it was composed in the early

1180s.[162] It is made up of five *distinctiones*, each containing several chapters, but the one I am

interested in is the fourth *distinctio*, chapter eight. It is an extremely short account where fairies are

involved and similarities with the story of *Sir Orfeo* are quite striking. As I have already pointed out

in chapter one of my thesis, this part of *De Nugis Curialium* tells of "a knight of Lesser Britain"

whose wife is dead. Notwithstanding the fact that she is dead, he sees her one night dancing with a

group of fairies (*a fatis*). At that point, the knight decides to take her back with him:

> Rapit eam […], et gauisus est eius per multos annos coniugio, tam iocunde, tam celebriter ut propri, et ex ipsa
> suscepit liberos, quorum hodie progenies magna est, et "Filii mortue" dicuntur.[163]

In *Sir Orfeo* too, Orfeo manages to bring Heurodis back to the world of humans, though one great

difference must be taken into account. In Map's story, the wife of the knight is really dead, whereas

Heurodis is not. She is abducted and carried to the Other World while she is alive. Bliss maintains

that this story in *De Nugis Curialium* seems to be the source for the Celtic features in the Breton *lai*

d'Orphée. It is plausible, since the first Breton *lais* were composed starting from the second half of

the twelfth century.[164] Although we do not really know when the Breton *lai d'Orphée* was produced,

it is possible that the author took some elements – Celtic elements, according to Bliss – from Map's

De Nugis Curialium. Evidence for the circulation of *De Nugis Curialium*, however, is limited and it

is more likely that Celtic elements came to Map through oral tradition. Nevertheless, as Bliss

highlights too, the Celtic Other World is not at all a place for dead people – as we can see in *Sir*

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161 James et al., pp. xix-xx; "Map, Walter" in Birch, Dinah and Hooper, Katy, *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199608218.001.0001/acref-9780199608218-e-4856 > [accessed 19 May 2016].

162 James et al., p. xxv.

163 James et al. p. 344. "He […] seized her, and enjoyed a union with her for many years, as pleasant and as open to the day as the first had been, and had children by her, whose descendants are numerous at this day, and are called the sons of the dead mother." Translated from the Latin by M.R. James, p.345.

164 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-general-introduction> [accessed 16 February 2016].

Orfeo – while the wife of the knight is said to be dead and buried.[165] The episode narrated in *distinctio iv* is briefly anticipated in *distinctio ii*, chapter thirteen. There, Map underlines that the wife of the knight "was really dead" (in Latin *reuera mortuam*).[166] It is most likely that Map's account had been contaminated by the classical legend of Orpheus, where the protagonist leaves to look for his wife in the underworld and then, however, does not manage to bring her back. There is no happy ending in the classical myth, whereas in Map's *De Nugis Curialium* and *Sir Orfeo* husband and wife reunite and live a long and satisfying life. More specifically, Bliss writes that Map's story was probably a Celtic legend which had already been influenced by the classical one.[167] To sum up, the odds are that the classical myth has influenced Walter Map's story, which in its turn might have influenced the Breton *lai d'Orphée* and *Sir Orfeo*, although the nature of the Other World is not the same: it is the reign of the dead in Latin mythology and in Map, and a parallel reign of living people in the Breton *lai d'Orphée* and in its Middle English version *Sir Orfeo*. This difference in the people's conditions in the Other World might be due to the fact that legends concerning the Celtic Other World passed down orally rather than in writing, thus it is highly improbable that the author of the Breton *lai d'Orphée* had *De Nugis Curialium* in his hands.

3.3 The influence of Irish literature on Sir Orfeo

Although Bliss does not think of *The Wooing of Étaín* as a probable source of the French *lai d'Orphée* – and accordingly of *Sir Orfeo* – I think there are some elements worthy of note to compare the two texts. *Tochmarc Étaíne* – this is the original Old Irish title – can be found in its integrity in "The Yellow Book of Lecan", a miscellany of texts, both in prose and in verse, dating from the end of the fourteenth century.[168] In spite of its presence in a fourteenth-century manuscript,

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165 Bliss, p. xxxiii.
166 James et al. pp. 160-61.
167 Bliss, p. xxxiii.
168 <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T300012.html> [accessed 17 February 2016].

it is likely that *Tochmarc Étaíne* was composed during the eighth or ninth century.[169] *The Wooing of Étaín* is about an other-worldly man, Midir, who wants to marry Étaín, daughter of Ailill, king of Ulaid. The two marry but Midir is already married to Fuamnach. The latter, out of jealousy, turns Étaín into a purple butterfly, which is later swallowed by the wife of Étar: because of that, she gets pregnant and Étaín is reborn and renamed the same, one thousand and two years after her first birth. Later on, Eochaid Airem becomes king of Ireland and longs for a queen. He ends up marrying Étaín, with whom Ailill – Eochaid's brother – falls in love too. At this point, Midir disguises himself as Ailill in order to speak with Étaín. On that occasion, he tells her he is Midir, the man she had married many centuries before. She refuses, however, to leave with him, unless her husband allows her to. Midir and Eochaid – the former dressed up as a warrior – meet more than once to play board games (*fidchell*), and on one of these occasions Midir wins and demands to hug Étaín and to kiss her. Eochaid asks him to come back within a month. Midir is given the permission to hug Étaín, but at that point he disappears with her "through the skylight of the house".[170] Eochaid orders his men to dig up every *síd* in Ireland, and while they are working in the Brí Léith *síd*, Midir shows up and promises Étaín will come back "at the hour of terce tomorrow".[171] The following day, fifty women identical to Étaín go to Eochaid, who has to recognise his wife. He says he will find her out by making them pour some liquid in a vessel, since Étaín was extremely gifted in pouring. Eochaid manages to find her, but one day Midir comes back and reveals to him that the woman he thinks to be Étaín is actually Étaín's daughter, while the real one is still with him. Eochaid, unfortunately, has already impregnated his daughter and together they have had a baby girl, who is abandoned and raised by Findlán and his wife. Eochaid will then be killed by Midir's grandson, although the author tells us that historians have other ideas as for Eochaid's death.

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169 "Tochmar Étaíne" in Mackillop, James, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674-e-3661?rskey=KdEien&result=1> [accessed 19 February 2016].
170 Koch, p. 161, translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.
171 Koch, p. 162, translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.

As far as the characters are concerned, we can straightforwardly compare Eochaid to Orfeo, Étaín to Heurodis, Midir to the king of fairies and Fuamnach to the queen of fairies, though there are some behavioural discrepancies. As for the king of fairies, he does not present himself to Heurodis immediatly to tell her to leave with him – as Midir does – but sends two knights to carry out the task and joins them only later, when Heurodis refuses to go. Furthermore, in *Sir Orfeo* it is not clear why the king of fairies abducts Heurodis, whereas Midir explicitly wants to marry her. As for Orfeo, he leaves his kingdom to look for Heurodis on his own, while Eochaid is helped by his men in the search for his wife. As far as Heurodis is concerned, she does not experience all the misfortunes Étaín undergoes and, moreover, she reacts insanely and is really desperate after having had the vision of the Fairy Land. Lastly, the only thing in common between the queen of fairies and Fuamnach is the fact that they are both queens: the queen of fairies in *Sir Orfeo* lacks the desire for revenge, which in *The Wooing of Étaín* is the reason why Fuamnach turns Étaín into a butterfly.

Amongst the dialogues we find in this Irish legend, one is particularly interesting for its comparison with the description of the Fairy Land in *Sir Orfeo*. The passage I am going to analyse takes place one year before Eochaid and Midir start playing board games together. On that occasion, Midir tries to convince Étaín to elope with him by saying:

> "Bé Find [Étaín], will you go with me
> to a strange land where there is music?
> Hair there is like the primrose flower;
> on the smooth body there is the colour of snow.
>
> […] the colour of the foxglove is in every cheek.
> […] although the plain of Fál is fair to gaze upon,
> it is a wilderness after one has known the Great Plain.
>
> […] there, youth does not give place to age.
>
> Warm sweet streams across the land,
> the best of mead and wine;
> splendid folk there without flaw,
> conception without sin or fault.
>
> […] Woman, if you come to my mighty people,
> a crown of gold will be on your head;
> honey, wine, ale, new milk to drink

you will have from me there, Bé Find".[172]

At first sight, it might seem that the splendid Great Plain described by Midir is quite similar, if not

identical, to the beautiful Fairy Land in *Sir Orfeo*. If we pay more attention to every detail,

however, we realise that there are more differences than similarities. In the Great Plain, music can

be heard; bodily parts are associated with different kinds of flowers; people never get old and are

flawless; Midir promises Étaín she will be the queen. In the Fairy Land there is no music, apart

from the sound of Orfeo's harp, which he starts playing only when he has met the king and the

queen of fairies. Flowers are mentioned, but only by Heurodis when she talks about her dream: "&

schewed me castles & tours, | riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours" (ll. 159-60). When Orpheus enters the

Fairy Land, we are simply told it was "al grene" (l. 353), because the narrator focuses on the light,

the stones and the buildings:

> Amidde þe lond a castle he seiȝe,
> Riche & real & wonder heiȝe:
> Al þe vt-mast wal
> Was clere & schine as cristal;
> An hundred tours þer were about,
> Degiselich & bataild stout;
> þe butras com out of þe diche
> Of rede gold y-arched riche;
> þe vousour was auowed al
> Of ich maner diuers aumal.
> Wiþ-in þer wer wide wones,
> Al of precious stones;
> þe werst piler on to biholde
> Was al of burnist gold.
> Al þat lond was euer liȝt gonne
> Ad briȝt as doþ at none þe sonne. (ll. 355-72)

There is no mention of the perpetual youth of its dwellers, who are not even ever said to be perfect.

On the contrary, in the Fairy Land's castle people are kept in a condition halfway between death and

life, as brilliantly depicted in the famous passage characterized by the anaphora of "& sum" (ll. 391-

8). What is more, Heurodis has not been brought there to become the fairy queen, unlike Étaín. It is

also worth mentioning the fact that, in *The Wooing of Étaín*, we never really see the Great Plain and

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172 Koch, pp. 159-60, translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.

no part of the story is set there, whereas in *Sir Orfeo* the protagonist does enter the Fairy Land for real.

As Bliss points out as well, the only aspects in common between the two poems are the visit of the fairy being to the queen before her abduction and the men placed to protect her. As for the first point, in *Sir Orfeo* we read:

> As ich lay þis vnder-tide
> & slepe vnder our orchard-side
> þer come to me to fair kniȝtes,
> Wele y-armed al to riȝtes,
> & bad me comen an heiȝing
> & speke wiþ her lord þe kinge;
> And ich answerd at wordes bold,
> Y no durst nouȝt, no y nold. (ll. 133-40)

Like Étaín – though in her case there was only Midir asking her to follow him – Heurodis refuses to go with the two fairy creatures. As concerns the second feature in common, in *The Wooing of Étaín* we read:

> Eochaid summoned the best warriors in Ireland so that they were in Tara, and the best of the *fianna* of Ireland, ring surrounding ring around Tara, in the midst, outside, and inside, and the king and queen in the centre of the house, and the court closed and locked; for they knew that the man of great power would come.[173]

In *Sir Orfeo*:

> Amorwe þe vnder-tide is come
> & Orfeo haþ his armes y-nome,
> & wele ten hundred kniȝtes wiþ him,
> Ich y-armed, stout & grim;
> & wiþ þe quen wenten he
> Riȝt vnto þat ympe-tre.
> Þai made scheltrom in ich a side,
> & sayd þai wold þere abide
> &dye þer euerichon,
> Er þe quen schuld fram hem gone. (ll. 181-90)

After having seen and analysed similarities and differences in these two pieces of work, it could be argued that there is a link between them. Notwithstanding the differences I have pointed out, both texts are about two queens who are abducted by a fairy creature in a place they thought could not be safer: Heurodis is seized under a tree in her orchard, Midir in the royal palace where she lives. Their husbands are both kings who do everything which is in their powers to rescue them.

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173 Koch, pp. 160-61, translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.

The Wooing of Étaín shows some features which are typical of other Irish legends, such as the fact that the fairy folk never get old. Other parallels are discussed in chapter one: we saw the crystal wall and the silver pillar in the Fairy Land are found in the *Voyage of Maeldúin,*[174] and in both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Sickbed of Cú Chulainn* the Fairy Land abounds in stones which shine continuosly, so that it seems the sun never sets.[175] Medieval Irish literature is only one of the numerous sources for and analogues of *Sir Orfeo*, but it plays an extremely important role in that it provides the anonymous writer with those Celtic folklore elements – amongst which fairies stand out – which are essential for the story to take shape and unfold.

To sum up, multiple evidence converges towards the existence of an ancient *lai* about Orpheus and Eurydice, probably written in Old French. This lost *lai d'Orphée* is likely to have been influenced by Map's *De Nugis Curialium* (at least as concerns the Celtic features). Indeed, Map wrote during the last decades of the twelfth century, while Breton *lais* started being composed from the second half of the twelfth century, so there may have been some sort of influence. It is however more likely that orally circulating stories of fairy abductions had the most important impact on the Breton *lai d'Orphée*. As for the Celtic elements in the Welsh writer, the odds are that they were inspired by the richness of medieval Irish literature. Once again, though, it is unlikely that people in England read Irish manuscripts. What the Irish material shows is that vernacular stories of fairy abduction were circulating in the British Isles alongside, and not apparently influenced by, classical narratives. Map was also influenced by the classical legends of Virgil, Ovid and Boethius about the unfortunate couple. As for the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*, it seems thus to be the result of a number of traditons which have merged along the centuries and have led to a version of the legend where classical and Celtic features are fascinatingly synthesised, in line with the English tradition. Now that we have seen and discussed the many analogues of *Sir Orfeo*, it is time to take the

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174 Bliss, p. 39; Patch, Howard Rollin, *The Other World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 32.
175 Bliss, p. 39.

anonymous fourteenth-century poem itself into consideration.

3.4 The fairy realm in Sir Orfeo: the mores of another society

Sir Orfeo has come to us in three different manuscripts: the earliest copy is in the Auchinleck manuscript, dated between 1330 and 1340, whereas two other versions, not entirely reliable, are found in two manuscripts from the fifteenth century.[176] The version I rely on is the one in the Auchinleck manuscript. Curiously enough, there are a couple of adjustments made in the Auchinleck manuscript which we do not find in the two later versions: first of all, Orpheus is introduced as the king of England, and secondly he lives in Winchester and not in Thrace.[177]

> Orfeo was a kinge,
> In Jnglond an heiȝe lording
> […] þis king soiournd in Traciens,
> þat was a cité of noble defens
> (For Winchester was cleped þo
> Traciens, wiþ-outen no.) (ll. 39-40, 47-50)

According to Thorlac Turville-Petre, these changes aim at making a historical poem about England out of *Sir Orfeo*.[178] It is possible, since the poet claims that "Winchester was undoubtedly called Thrace".[179] It might be a homage to the belief that England has Trojan roots: according to the myth, London was founded by Bruto, a follower of Æneas, and is sometimes labelled New Troy.[180] The person who adapted *Sir Orfeo* for the Auchinleck manuscript is likely to have defined Winchester as Thrace for the same reason. Spearing maintains that it is likely that the author deliberately linked Winchester with Thrace to amuse those who knew it is not like that at all,[181] but I think that the reason lies in the desire to praise England's Trojan founders, which is not unusual in Middle English literature (e.g. *St Erkenwald*).

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176 Burrow & Turville-Petre, p. 112.
177 Turville-Petre, p. 120.
178 Turville-Petre, p. 120.
179 For translations into Modern English I rely on Bliss's glossary.
180 A reference to the fact that London was founded by Brutus can be found in the alliterative poem *St Erkenwald*, most likely composed in the 1390s- 1400s.
181 Spearing, p. 261.

The main characters of the poem are the king of Winchester, Sir Orfeo, and his wife Heurodis. The plot of the story revolves around the abduction of Heurodis by the king of fairies, and her rescue by Orfeo, who manages to convince the king of fairies to free her thanks to his commendable musical skills with the harp. The couple comes back to Winchester in disguise, and only when Orfeo is sure of his steward's loyalty and friendship, he reveals himself and makes him his heir. Minstrels of Britain write a lai in his honour and name it "Orfeo".

As far as the prologue is concerned, it is missing in the Auchinleck manuscript, and Bliss maintains that the author of *Sir Orfeo* and the author of *Lay le Freyne* – which we find in the Auchinleck manuscript too – are likely to have been the same person.[182] Such an assumption can be made because the prologue of *Lay le Freyne* is the same as the prologue to *Sir Orfeo* that we read in later copies.[183] The prologue to *Lay le Freyne*, however, has not come to us in its entirety, so Bliss reconstructed it from *Sir Orfeo*'s prologue version in the fifteenth-century Harley manuscript.[184] What is noteworthy about all this is that the Middle English *Lay le Freyne* is the translation of Marie de France's lai *Le Fresne*,[185] which reinforces the thesis according to which *Sir Orfeo* itself is the Middle English translation of a former Old French *lai* too. It might be a coincidence, but the fact that these two poems sharing the same prologue are found in the same manuscript suggests that they have been written – or better, translated – by the same person.[186] Let us now concentrate on the content of the prologue: it ends at line fifty-six and is in its turn made up of three sections.[187] First, the author provides the readers with the explanation of what Breton lays are:

> We redeþ oft & findeþ [y-write]
> & þis clerkes wele it wite,
> Layes þat ben in harping
> ben y-founde of ferli þing:
> Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,

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182 Bliss, pp. xlvi-xlvii.
183 Bliss, p. xlvi; Rumble, Thomas C., ed., *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965, p. 81.
184 Bliss, p. xlvii; Burrow & Turville-Petre, p. 114.
185 Hibbard, Laura A., *Medieval Romance in England, a Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-Cyclic Metrical Romances*, New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1924, p. 294.
186 Bliss, p. xlvii.
187 Bliss, p. xli.

& sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,
        & sum of trecherie & of gile,
        Of old auentours þat fel while,
        & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,
        & mani þer beþ of fairy;
        Of al þinges þat men seþ
        Mest o loue; for-soþe, þai beþ. (ll. 1-12)

They are compositions performed with the aid of a harp and devoted to "marvellous things": war, sorrow, joy, mirth, treachery, deceit, jests, ribaldry, fairyland and love. These elements are curiously disposed: three alternate lines contain negative and semantically-related nouns – *wer-wo* (l. 5), *trecherie-gile* (l. 7), *bourdes-ribaudy* (l. 9) – while the binomial *ioie-mirþe* (l. 6) alternates with "old events that happened formerly" (l. 8), the matter of *fairy* (l. 10) and of *loue* (l. 12). Of these last four lines I have considered, only line six and twelve are about positive emotions: joy, mirth and love. As for past events and fairyland, we cannot label them as positive or negative *tout court*, at least until we have reached the end of the poem and can make a judgment. The prologue goes on:

        In Breteyne þis layes were wrouȝt,
        [First y-founde & forþ y-brouȝt,
        Of auentours þat fel bi dayes,
        Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.]
        When kinges miȝt our y-here
        Of ani meruailes þat þer were,
        þai token an harp in gle & game
        & maked a lay & ȝaf it name (ll. 13-20)

In these lines, the author is basically telling us that the Breton lays are Breton material through and through: they were made in, found in and brought from Britain, talk about events that happened in Britain and were written by Bretons, who used to to perform them together with a harp and name them.

        Now, of þis auentours þat weren y-falle
        Y can tel sum, ac nouȝt alle:
        Ac herkneþ, lordinges, [þat beþ trewe,]
        Ichil ȝou telle [Sir Orfewe.

The anonymous author admits he cannot provide and account for all the "auentours þat fel bi dayes", so he invites the listeners/readers to pay attention to the adventure of Sir Orfeo. The following lines of the prologue have been inserted by Bliss, who took them from the Harley manuscript, and are part of the second section of the prologue. We are told how skillful Orfeo is in

playing the harp, to the point that whoever listens to his music thinks they are in Paradise:

> In al þe warld was no man bore
> þat ones Orfeo sat bifore
> (& miȝt of his harping here)
> Bot he schuld þenche þat he were
> In on of þe ioies of Paradis,
> Swiche melody in his harping is.] (ll. 33-8)

The third section of the prologue is about Orfeo's lineage, kingdom and wife, Heurodis. The adjectives used to describe him are all positive: he is loyal (*stalworþ*) and hardy (*hardi*), generous (*large*) and well-bred (*curteys*). He is the perfect king – in opposition, as we will see later, to the king of fairies. He is the son of two deities: his father descends from Pluto, whereas his mother from Juno (curiously enough, Pluto is also the king of fairies in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*).[188] We are then told, as I wrote previously, that he rules over *Traciens*, which is identified with Winchester by the Auchinleck scribe.[189] We finally meet Heurodis, who is portrayed as the most beautiful woman who has ever lived:

> þe king hadde a quen of priis
> þat was y-cleped Dame Heurodis,
> þe fairest leuedi, for þe nones,
> þat miȝt gon on bodi & bones,
> Ful of loue & of godenisse;
> Ac no man may telle hir fairnise. (ll. 51-6)

The poem proper opens with the time setting: it is the beginning of May, and five lines are used to describe this month: days are warm, it has not been raining for a while, and flowers bloom in abundance. In medieval literature there is a connection between the weather and the way characters behave and are depicted: this idyllic description of May matches perfectly the figure of Heurodis, "þe fairest leuedi", a queen who is deeply cherished by her husband. She and her maidens sit under a tree while admiring the flowers and listening to the singing of birds. Heurodis falls asleep and when she wakes up at midday

> Sche crid, & loþli bere gan make:

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188 Burrow & Turville-Petre, p. 115. A more detailed account of Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* is given in chapter four.

189 "(For Winchester was cleped þo | Traciens, wiþ-outen no.)" (ll. 49-50). This identification is not found in the other manuscripts, thus it is probably work of the reviser of the Auchinleck manuscript (Burrow & Turville-Petre, p. 115); Barron, p. 187.

> Sche froted hir honden & hir fet,
> & crached hir visage – it bled wete;
> Hir riche robe hye al to-rett,
> & was reueyd out of hir witt. (ll. 78-82)

Heurodis here behaves like a madwoman, as the poet clearly writes ("[sche] was reueyd out of hir witt", l. 82) and as her maidens immediatley realise ("her quen awede wold", l. 87). Madness in women is not a new theme introduced in medieval literature by the anonymous author of *Sir Orfeo*. Archetypal madwomen in the classical era are the Greek Maenads,[190] "women inspired to ritual frenzy by Dionysus". These women used to meet on the top of the mountains, where they would brutally kill animals and eat their raw meat. Such a frenzy was caused by the god Dyonisus.[191]

In her PhD thesis, Beatrice Mameli dedicates pages and pages to the theme of "wild madness" in Middle English literature, showing numerous examples of not only madwomen but also madmen, like Yvain, Tristan and Lancelot.[192] Heurodis is taken into account too and the same passage I quoted above is used by Mameli to illustrate her point, although she speaks of "despair, or rage", instead of madness proper.[193] Heurodis' act of tearing apart her clothes is compared to a knight's act of taking off his clothes, which means giving up his social status, which, in its turn, is a sign of madness.[194]

Although Spearing tends to consider Heurodis schizophrenic,[195] all these instances make me think that Heurodis might instead be considered a hysterical woman, an interperetation which Spearing considers plausible too.[196] Nonetheless, we have to acknowledge that Heurodis is driven mad by an outside force – the king of fairies – and the king of fairies' motivations, which are misteriously unscrutable, indicate that he is quite insane too. Anyway, the fact that Heurodis is

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190 The Maenads "turned with their bloodied hands against Orpheus himself and came together, like birds" (Hill, p. 75) in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

191 "Maenads" in Hornblower, Simon & Spawforth, Antony, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

192 Mameli, Beatrice, *Wylde and Wode, Wild Madness in Middle English Literature*, doctoral thesis, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2013.

193 Mameli, p. 55.

194 Mameli, p. 56.

195 Spearing, pp. 262-4.

196 Spearing, p. 268. Let us remember it is not by chance that the term *hysteria* comes from the Greek ὑστέρα (*hystera*), which means "uterus".

abducted and taken to a parallel world which cannot normally be entered – the king of fairies is quite angry when he discovers that Orfeo, a mortal man, has managed to enter the Fairy Land – supports the theory of Heurodis as a madwoman.[197] Her body and her psyche, furthermore, are under the control of an external force, so it would be better to specify that she is somehow a possessed woman. Whatever the nature of her madness, Orfeo might be considered the skilled doctor who manages to enter Heurodis' psyhce and take her back to normality, as happens in the end.[198]

A "chauvinistic" reading of the poem is supported also by the fact that Heurodis is tormented in the orchard, a place which is generally associated with females and which "symbolizes the delectable and vulnerable female body enclosed by man for his proper use and cultivation".[199] Nevertheless, if the poem might be labelled chauvinistic, Orfeo himself is not, in that he proves to be genuinely in love with Heurodis. When he is informed of what has happened to his wife, he immediately rushes to her and addresses her by the words "O lef liif" (l. 102), a wonderful example of alliteration meaning "Oh love of my life". Had he been a selfish and chauvinistic man, he would probably have sent his knights to look for Heurodis. Instead he leaves his kingdom and lives as a wild man for ten years in order to rescue his beloved wife. When he reaches her and sees in what a state she is, he underlines the contrast between how she was before going mad and how she is now: she was *stille* once, now she cries *schille*; her body was *white*, now it is *al-tore* by her nails; her face was *red*, now it is *wan* (pale). Her words to Orfeo sound utterly hopeless:

> Allas, mi lord Sir Orfeo!
> Seþþen we first to-gider were
> Ones wroþ neuer we nere,
> Bot euer ich haue y-loued þe
> As mi liif, & so þou me;
> Ac now we mot delen ato
> Do þi best, for y mot go. (ll. 120-6)

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197 Spearing, p. 263.
198 Spearing, p. 265.
199 Spearing, p. 268.

She is basically saying farewell, accepting her fate without showing resistance, incapable of opposing her future abductor. She surrenders and gives no hope to Orfeo. If we interpret her behaviour in the light of her madness, this weakness can be justifiable: she does not have a strong will, she is in the power of the fairy king, and we can forgive her being so forthright to her husband. If that were not the case, I would argue that she lacks trust in Orfeo, since she does not even attempt to ask him for help, but just tells him how things are. That "do þi best, for y mot go" sounds to me like a peremptory request, which Orfeo can do nothing but accept. Indeed, when he replies that he will go with her wherever she will be carried, she says to him it is impossible and describes the scenario of her temporary abduction, where we have a first glimpse of the world of fairies:

> [þe king] brouȝt me to his palays,
> Wele atird in ich ways,
> & schewed me castles & tours,
> Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours,
> & his riche stedes ichon (ll. 157-61)

Later, Heurodis reveals the fairy king has blackmailed her:

> Loke, dame, to-morwe þatow be
> Riȝt here vnder þis ympe-tre,
> & þan þou schalt wiþ ous go,
> & liue wiþous euer-mo;
> & ȝif þou makest ous y-let,
> What þou be, þou worst y-fet,
> & to-tore þine limes al,
> þat noþing help þe no schal;
> & þei þou best so to-torn,
> ȝete þou worst wiþ ous y-born. (ll. 165-74)

What I think is the most striking element in the fairy king's speech is the lack of a motivation for Heurodis' abduction. Indeed, in *Sir Orfeo* the reason why Heurodis is brought to the Fairy Land is never explained. Supernatural forces are motivated in *Sir Orfeo*'s analogues, and generally in the literature involving fairies: in the *contes mélusiniens*, a love interest exists between the fairy lady and the man, as happens also in Marie de France's *lai de Yonec*, where the woman voluntarily abandons her husband to follow her fairy lover. Similarly, in *The Wooing of Étaín* Midir is in love with Étaín and promises her she will be the queen of fairies if she agrees to go with him ("Woman,

if you come to my mighty people, a crown of gold will be on your head").[200] In Walter Map's story, though, there is no explanation for the knight's wife being among a group of dancing fairies, but we know she was dead before being brought back to life, so a comparison with Heurodis' case is not useful. In *Sir Orfeo*, fairies are inscrutable. We do not know why the king of fairies is so obsessed with Heurodis, why he appears to her "without explanation or apparent motivation".[201] Wade says the fairy king's unmotivated intervention in the couple's life is a sign of sovereignity, which has the power to upset the couple's ordinary life, forcing Heurodis – and Orfeo too – to obey the fairy "non-law".[202] The reader witnesses a lack of civility on the part of the fairy realm, whose king decides to abduct Heurodis apparently just for fun, maybe because of boredom.[203]

The king of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* is what in the classical legend – where Eurydice is really dead – is the god of the dead. Instead, the author of *Sir Orfeo* made another king, that is a peer of king Orfeo, as the enemy of the king of Thrace, thus allowing us to compare two different kinds of polities.[204] On one side, we have a wise and humble king who leaves his kingdom for the love of his wife. He does not abandon it, since he leaves his steward in charge of ruling and allows his people to choose another king should he never come back. On the other side, there is a king who deliberately chooses to seize a foreign queen without any justification. He does something illegal, something which could be justified only if, as Conrad-O'Briain underlines, the land of fairies and the reign of Thrace were at war.[205] As Conrad-O'Briain maintains, the central theme of *Sir Orfeo* is the relationship between the good king with its ordinary kingdom and the tyrannical and demon-like other king, the king of fairies.[206] To protect his wife from the fairies's attack,

> Orfeo haþ his armes y-nome,
> & wele ten hundred kniȝtes wiþ him,

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200 Koch, p. 160, translated from the Old Irish by John Carey.
201 Wade, p. 76.
202 Wade, p. 77.
203 Conrad-O'Briain, Helen, "Some Reflections on *Sir Orfeo*'s Poetic Mirror of Polity", in Anne Marie D'Arcy & Alan J. Fletcher, eds., *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005, pp. 76-90 (p. 87).
204 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 78.
205 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 82.
206 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 79.

> Ich y-armed, stout & grim;
> & wiþ þe quen wenten he
> Riȝt vnto þat ympe-tre. (ll. 182-6)

What is interesting to point out here is that Orfeo himself is among those who try to protect Heurodis. Such an involvment – even a physical one – on the part of a king is rather unusual and it is an anticipation of his solitary mission to rescue his wife. Of all the analogues I have mentioned, only the Latin ones portray an Orpheus wandering alone to save Eurydice. In *The Wooing of Étaín*, Eochaid is constantly helped by his knights, while in *De Nugis Curialium* the knight comes across his wife all alone but only by chance. One could say that even Orfeo meets his wife again by chance, but he left his kingdom with the intention and the hope of finding her, while the knight of Map's story thought his wife to be dead, thus he had no hope at all. Despite all the men placed around her, Heurodis is snatched away "wiþ fairi forþ y-nome | Men wist neuer wher sche was bicome" (ll. 193-4).

Orfeo's reaction might be described as effete:

> þe king into his chaumber is go,
> & oft swoned opon þe ston,
> & made swiche diol & swiche mon
> þat neiȝe his liif was y-spent
> þer was non amendement. (ll. 196-200)

In the whole poem, however, there is no reference to Orfeo as potentially homosexual or not masculine enough, thus I would argue that the intention of the author is once again simply to enhance how deep Orfeo's love for Heurodis is.

After this episode, Orfeo comes to a decision which makes his people sad: he leaves his steward to rule over the kingdom while he is away looking for his lost wife, and adds:

> "when ȝe vnder-stond þad y be spent,
> Make ȝou þan a parlement,
> & chese ȝou a newe king
> Now doþ ȝour best wiþ al mi þinge". (ll. 215-8)

He is thus willing to give up his crown if that means having a chance to rescue Heurodis, which is an admirable act of selflessness and marital love. Such a definitive choice, though, could also be taken into account for a counteranalysis of the chauvinistic reading I have previously made. Orfeo

indeed appears as a man who cannot go on without his wife on his side. In that he can be seen as weaker than Heurodis, who instead accepts her fate stoically. Orfeo cannot cope with his grief and leaves just wearing a *sclauin* (pilgrim's mantle) and carrying with him his harp: "He no hadde kirtel no hode, | Schert, [no] no noþer gode, | Bot his harp he toke algate | & dede him barfot out atte ȝate" (ll. 229-32). He thus leaves the town as a homeless, dressed in an extremely humble way and ready to give up all the luxuries, he who "hadde had castles & tours, | Riuers, forest, friþ wiþ flours" (ll. 245-6). It is noteworthy that the second line aforementioned is the exact same one Heurodis uttered to describe the Fairy Land as she saw it in her vision. This is proof that the two kingdoms are on the same level: both are two realms ruled by a king, only the kingdom of Winchester/Thrace is safe and reassuring, whilst the kingdom of fairies is amoral and corrupted, even though stunningly beautiful.[207] This realm-versus-realm opposition, however, is uneven, because the king of fairies clearly has a power that Orfeo does not possess, that is the ability to influence other people's lives without the threat of vengeance.[208]

How can Orfeo harm the king of fairies? He cannot do anything, yet in the end he will prove to be superior to him since the "weapon" that allows him to free Heurodis is his harmless harp. Orfeo thus is depicted as the humblest man ever, and his humility is also shown in a series of contrasts between his past life as a king and his present life as a wanderer. He used to be surrounded by knight and ladies, now he can only see worms; he used to eat and drink every kind of delicacy, now he eats only roots, grass and husks in winter and berries in summer. Orfeo's life in the forest is reminiscent of Yvain's in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*. After his public humiliation at the court of king Arthur for not having gone back to his wife Laudine as promised, Yvain takes off his clothes, flees into the woods and begins living like an animal, remaining naked and eating raw meat.[209] Orfeo's and Yvain's stories develop in different contexts and unfold differently, but their wanderings in the

207 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 81.
208 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 81.
209 Duggan, Joseph J., *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2001, p. 159.

wilderness share the same reason: the loss of the woman they love. Yvain's conditions later improve thanks to human intervention,[210] which is not the case for Orfeo at all. He spends "ten ȝere & more" (l. 264) wandering in forests and playing his harp "at his owhen wille" (l. 271).

Orfeo's wanderings in the woods, like Yvain's, remind us of some practices of Christian ascetism. *Sir Orfeo*, indeed, has been seen as a Christian allegory of the journey of the soul to expiate for its sins.[211] Orfeo is a pilgrim who undergoes penitence, "his sufferings and humiliations become the central image of the story, which is about expiation through self-imposed suffering".[212] Indeed, he himself voluntarily decides to leave his kingdom. If we interpret other moments of the poem under a Christian light, interesting elements come up. The *ympe-tre* would be linked to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, the king of fairies would be Satan and Heurodis' madness may be read as demonic possession.[213] Furthermore, Heurodis being abducted at noon is reminiscent of the biblical idea that the burning sun makes men weaker and thus demons stronger.[214] In light of these details, *Sir Orfeo*'s aim was probably both to please and entertain people and to teach a moral message to the monks who read it.[215]

As for his harp, Orfeo plays it with such wonderful mastery

> þat alle þe wilde bestes þat þer beþ
> For ioie abouten him þai teþ,
> & alle þe foules þat þer were
> Come & sete on ich a brere,
> To here his harping a-fine. (ll. 273-7)

His ability to tame wild animals with the sound of his harp – a skill that we find in Ovid and Boethius as well – might seem divine, but that is not the case: it is just an instrument which is the product of civilisation and, as chance would have it, it is the only thing Orfeo brings with him from

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210 Duggan, p. 160.
211 Grimaldi, pp. 155-6.
212 Grimaldi, p. 155.
213 Grimaldi, pp. 155-6.
214 Block Friedman, p. 188.
215 Charles Allyn Williams, "Oriental Affinities of the Legend of the Hairy Anchorite", *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 11, no. 4 (1926), p. 57, cited in Grimaldi, p. 156.

his kingdom,[216] the kindgom of civilisation, opposed to the barbaric kingdom of fairies.

While wandering in the woods, Orfeo happens to see the king of fairies and his suite who are hunting, often during hot mornings. He never manages to understand from where they come and where they end up going. Sometimes

> Kniʒtes & leuedis com daunceing
> In queynt atire, gisely,
> Queynt pas & softly;
> Tabours & trunpes ʒede hem bi,
> & al maner menstraci. (ll. 289-302)

One day he witnesses a fairy hunt with falcons and happily remembers when he used to participate to such shows too, when he was still at court. He leaves the place and, while walking away, sees a lady whom he immediately recognises:

> & seþ bi al þing þat it is
> His owhen wuen, Dam Heurodis.
> Ʒern he biheld hir, & sche him eke,
> Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke
> For messais þat sche on him seiʒe,
> þat had ben so riche & so heiʒe. (ll. 321-6)

They have not seen each other for ten years now, which I think is the other reason why they do not talk. As for what the author says, she looks miserable when she sees her beloved husband in such a wretched state, and for the same reason he does not dare say a word. Emotions prevail and Heurodis begins to cry, so the fairy ladies who are with her take her away. This absence of dialogue and the following disappearance of Heurodis make Orfeo fall into despair again:

> "Allas!" quaþ he, "Now me is wo!
> Whi nil deþ now me slo?
> Allas, wroche! – þat y no miʒt
> Dye now after þis siʒt!
> Allas! To long last mi liif,
> When y no dar nouʒt wiþ mi wiif
> (No hye to me) o word speke.
> Allas! Whi nil min hert breke?" (ll. 331-8)

This lament is full of pain and regret: it is permeated by the desire of death, nourished *in primis* by the two of them not having spoken to each other when they could have, which Orfeo painfully

216 Petrina, Alessandra, "Medieval Harps and Their Kingly Players", *Textus,* 18 (2005), pp. 249-66 (pp. 260-1).

regrets. He invokes death by using different periphrases: he begs death to kill him, he claims he has lived too much already, he wonders why his heart has not broken yet. Desperate to reunite with Heurodis, he immediately decides to follow those ladies. The author underlines that Orfeo "henge his harp opon his bac" (l. 344), the "weapon" which will be the veritable tool to grant Heurodis' freedom. Following the fairies, Orfeo goes "in at a roche" (l. 347) and

> When he was in þe roche y-go
> Wele þre mile, oþer mo,
> He com in-to a fair cuntray,
> As briȝt so sonne on somers day
> Smoþe & plain & grene
> Hille no dale nas þer non y-sene. (ll. 349-54)

The Fairy Land is thus accessible through a hole in a rock, and one has to walk for at least three miles to finally enter it. We have seen in chapter one that the human world and the fairy world are usually separated by a brook or a cave. Watery environments are generally preferred, so that in Irish legends we mostly find lakes as boundary, and in the *contes mélusiniens* water is always present, be it as a source, river or sea. There is no reference to brooks or water in general in *Sir Orfeo* – apart from the presence of rivers in the Fairy Land. The rock is what Pyotr Spira would call a "liminal space", that is a place not belonging to the human world but not even so far-off that it is difficult to be reached.[217] Indeed, Orfeo simply needed to follow some fairies to enter Fairy Land easily.

Spira expands the concept of liminality to people who meet fairies as well.[218] Orfeo himself, I think, is to be considered a liminal character. He is halfway between a king and a wanderer when he reaches the fairy court: he is still a king, though he has temporarily left the task of ruling his kingdom to his steward, but he has spent the latest ten years of his life as a homeless in the woods. We also have a liminal tool in this poem: the *ympe-tre*. It is under it that Heurodis is first given a glimpse of the Fairy Land and is warned by the fairy king, and it is always under a tree – although

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217 Spira, Pyotr, "The Terror of the Threshold: Liminality and the Fairies in *Sir Orfeo*", *Leeds Studies in English*, New Series XLVI (2015) pp. 57-73 (pp. 59-60).
218 Spira, p. 62.

we are not sure it is the same one – that Orfeo sees her once he enters the Fairy Land.[219] The *ympe-tre* being in Orfeo's garden and in the Fairy Land at the same time accounts for its magical nature,[220] and underlines the fact that the fairy kingdom is parallel to the human one.[221] Patrizia Grimaldi maintains that the double presence of the *ympe-tre* might suggest that Heurodis is a fairy too, a truth which can be supported by the fact that she does not seem to get old during the ten years spent in the Fairy Land.[222] Grimaldi's further proof for this idea lies in the similarity with Étaín's abduction by the fairy Midir.[223] I do not think, however, that this is a plausible interpretation. In *The Wooing of Étaín* we are told that Étaín was previously married to Midir, while in *Sir Orfeo* there is little doubt that Heurodis is and has always been only Orfeo's spouse, especially because the king of fairies does not seem sexually interested in Heurodis.

The following lines do nothing but describe the stunning beauty of the castle and of the houses in the Fairy Land. Adjectives abound: the castle is *riche* and *wonder heiȝe* (l. 356), its towers are *degisleich* and *bataild stout* (l. 360), whereas the *wide wones* (dwelling-places) (l. 365) are made of precious stones. The place is so beautiful and rich that "þe werst piler on to biholde | Was al of burnist gold" (ll. 367-8). The external richness and perfection of the Fairy Land is in contrast with its internal amorality and corruption. We have to remember that the king abducted Heurodis with no reason and keeps her prisoner, which does not place him in a good light. In fact, he is tricky and his reign lacks good qualities.[224] As observed earlier, we are facing here the "humane, homely kingdom of Thrace/Winchester" and "the gorgeous, immensely powerful and amoral realm of Faerie, where the power to act and to act with impunity has emasculated morality and courtesy".[225] The fairy realm is so impressively beautiful that

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219 Spira, pp. 63-4.
220 Grimaldi, Patrizia, "Sir Orfeo as Celtic Folk-Hero, Christian Pilgrim and Medieval King", in Morton W. Bloomfield, ed., *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 147-61 (p.151).
221 Block Friedman, p. 191.
222 Grimaldi, p. 152.
223 Grimaldi, p. 152.
224 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 77.
225 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 81.

> Bi al þing him þink þat it is
> þe proude court of Paradis. (ll. 375-6)

Indeed, in spite of the association between the king of fairies and the classic underworld, both Conrad O'Briain and Spearing prefer to compare the kingdom of fairies to the heaven-like Jerusalem.[226] There are actually some similarities between the description of the Fairy Land and heaven as described in the Apocalypse.[227] It seems, however, more like a parody of heaven, a "perverse limbo" whose king forces his imprisoned souls to stay in a fake status of death.[228] Such a condition is perfectly portrayed few lines later: after Orfeo introduces himself as a minstrel who came to entertain the king of fairies, he gains access to the castle, he sees people who who are "þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt" (l. 390), and more specifically

> Sum stode wiþ-outen hade,
> & sum non armes hade,
> & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,
> & sum lay wode, y-bounde,
> & sum armed on hors sete,
> & sum astrangled as þai ete;
> & sum were in water adreynt,
> & sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt. (ll. 391-8)

The idea of cruelty and of the pitiful state in which these people are is conveyed by the choice of adjectives, nouns and verbs used to describe them and strengthened by the anaphora "& sum" (ll. 391-8), which enhances the idea of a never-ending list of tortures. They are "prisoners on the brink of death […] living corpses, abjections surviving in some terrifying state of suspended existence".[229] They are after all liminal figures too, halfway between life and death. A separate set of lines is thus devoted to women:

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226 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 86; Spearing, p. 264.

227 Burrow and Turville-Petre, p. 125. Precious stones and walls are mentioned in Revelation 21.10-12, New International Version (NIV): "[10]And he carried me awayin the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.[11] It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper,clear as crystal.[12] It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel". This excerpt is taken from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21> [accessed 11 April 2016].

228 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 86.

229 Wade, p. 79.

> Wiues þer lay on childe-bedde
>
> Sum ded & sum awedde,
>
> & wonder fele þer lay bisides:
>
> Riȝt as þai slepe her under-tides
>
> Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome
>
> Wiþ fairi þider y-come. (ll. 399-404)

The topic of women and madness comes up once again, since we are told that "sum awedde" ("some become mad"). This time, though, Heurodis does not belong to the category of madwomen: she is sleeping under an *ympe-tre* and Orfeo recognizes her by her clothes. Determined to free his beloved Heurodis, he reaches the hall of the castle to meet the king and queen of fairies, whose crowns and clothes "schine so briȝt | þat vnneþe bihold he hem miȝt" (ll. 415-6). Orfeo's humility is so great he kneels in front of the fairy king and introduces himself as a minstrel

> "Lord" quaþ he, "Trowe ful wel,
>
> Y nam bot a mouer menstrel;
>
> &, Sir, it is þe maner of ous
>
> To seche mani a lordes hous:
>
> þei we nouȝt welcom no be,
>
> Ȝete we mot proferi forþ our gle" (ll. 429-34)

Orfeo then sits down and starts playing his harp and, in line with the classic tradition,

> al þat in þe palays were
>
> Com to him forto here,
>
> & liggeþ adoun to his fete,
>
> Hem þenkeþ his melody so swete. (ll. 439-42)

The enchanting power of the harp works in the Fairy Land too, the realm where human laws are not taken into consideration, even defied. As Conrad-O'Briain observes, the realm of king Orfeo and the Fairy Land "share […] a code of honour and pleasure in music, […] its overarching and inescapable power cannot be gainsaid".[230] Orfeo's music mesmerises both queen and king, the latter

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230 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 86.

getting from it *gode wille* (l. 444) and *gode bourde* (l. 445), feelings which are enhanced by the rhetorical device of chiasmus:

> To here his gle he haþ gode wille.
> Gode bourde he hadde of his gle. (ll. 444-5)

The pleasure the king gets from listening to Orfeo's music is so great that he is ready to grant him everything he desires. Orfeo's wish is obvious:

> "Sir", he seyd, "Ich biseche þe
> þatow woldest ȝiue me
> þat ich leuedi, briȝt on ble,
> þat slepeþ vnder þe ympe-tre." (ll. 453-6)

In the answer of the king, we find what seems to be, at least in part, the justification for Heurodis' abduction. Indeed, the king strongly refuses to give her back to her husband because, according to him, the two of them do not match each other physically: Orfeo is "lene, rowe & blac" (l. 459), while Heurodis is "louesum, wiþ-outen lac", and the two of them together are "a loþlich þing" (l. 461). In light of these words, both Wade's idea of the fairy king wanting to show his superiority[231] and Conrad-O'Briain's insistence on the lack of civilty on the part of the king of fairies[232] are acceptable. The fairy king is an arrogant creature who acts according to what he thinks is right: since he does not consider Orfeo and Heurodis a great couple, he intervenes by taking Heurodis away, not caring about the law at all. Orfeo's answer shows he has understood how arrogant the king is and appeals to the king's self-confidence and pride by undermining them:

> "O Sir!" he seyd, "Gentil King!
> Ȝete were it a wele fouler þing
> To here a lesing of þi mouþe:
> So, Sir, as ȝe seyd nouþe
> What ich wold aski haue y schold,
> & nedes þou most þi word hold." (ll. 463-8)

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231 Wade, p. 77.
232 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 87.

Orfeo openly defies the fairy king by maintaining that his idea about Heurodis and him is a *lesing* (a lie). By hearing that, the fairy king immediately allows Orfeo to take Heurodis with him and bring her back home. Such a sudden and peaceful surrender can be explained with two possible scenarios: either the king of fairies does not know how immoral he is and Orfeo's words make him realise that, or he is consciously immoral and cannot bear a stranger telling him the truth in such a frank way. In the first case, we would witness a sort of redemption on the part of the fairy king, whereas in the second scenario his pride would be the main feeling driving his choice. Whatever the reason is, Heurodis is finally free.

This makes us wonder whether the fairy king is actually utterly evil or not. As far as I am concerned, I consider him eerie rather than evil. He is arrogant and selfish, but in the end he lets Heurodis go. This behavioural ambiguity sets him significatively apart from, for example, king Midir from *The Wooing of Étaín*, whose interest in Étaín is so morbid that he never gives her back to her husband. The fairy king in *Sir Orfeo*, on the contrary, shows a glimmer of humanity in the end and allows Heurodis to reunite with her husband. Audiences might be surprised that Orfeo does not want to take his revenge on the fairy king. This does not happen simply because it is not in Orfeo's nature to be combative, which is a point in favour of a non chauvinistic reading of the poem. He just wants his wife back and this trait of his personality marks how human Orfeo is compared to the arrogant fairy king, since "ordinary human affections (and common sense) do not triumph over the vanity of pride, there simply is not a battle. It is the lack of vanity that must be emphasized. Orfeo's world is about substance rather than surface".[233] He hurries to take Heurodis out of the fairy country and

> Riȝt as he come þe wey he ȝede.
> So long he haþ þe way y-nome
> To Winchester he is y-come,

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233 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 85.

þat was his owhen cité;
Ac no man knewe it was he. (ll. 476-80)

Nobody recognises him: he has been away too many years. He asks a beggar for news and the latter tells the king that, in the last ten years, nobody has ever seen him. The following day, Orfeo wears the beggar's clothes and enters the city, carrying with him his own harp. As he wished, no one recognised him, not even his steward, to whom he asks for help ("Help me now in þis destresse" l. 514). The answer of the steward highlights how great his loyalty to king Orfeo is:

"Com wiþ me, come!
Of þat ichaue þou schalt haue some.
Euerich gode harpour is welcom me to
For mi lordes loue, Sir Orfeo". (ll. 515-8)

Once again, the presence of the harp is crucial. It has been essential during his stay in the forest to tame wild beasts; at the fairy court to free Heurodis; now to enter his own castle while dressed as a poor man. In the hall, he begins to play:

þe blissefulest notes he harped þere
þat euer ani man y-herd wiþ ere:
Ich man liked wele his gle. (ll. 527-9)

The only person who immediately recognises the harp is the steward, who begins asking Orfeo questions about where he found it. Orfeo lies and says he found the harp ten years before in a valley in a foreign country, and that the man who had it was torn into pieces by lions and wolves. The steward is overcome with grief:

"O!" quaþ þe steward, "Now me is wo!
þat was mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
Allas! Wreche, what schal y do
þat haue swiche a lord y-lore?
A, way! þat ich was y-bore,
þat him was so hard grace y-ȝarked

67

& so vile deþ y-marked!" (ll. 542-8)

Orfeo's aim in telling a lie is to make sure of his steward's loyalty. Having had proof of that – the steward does even faint thinking about his dead king – Orfeo reveals himself, though still speaking by hypotheses for nineteen lines (556-74) ("ʒif ich were Orfeo þe king […] ʒif þou of mi deþ hadestr ben bliþe"). The faithful steward is overwhelmed by happiness: he kneels down, and so do all the lords who are in the hall. After ten years spent as a homeless and in disguise, although always a king, Orfeo is finally a king to all intents and purposes again:

> To chaumber þai ladde him als biliue
> & baþed him, & schaued his berd,
> & tired him as a king apert. (ll. 584-6)

Heurodis is welcomed back with great delight too and some people do even cry for the joy of having them both back. They are crowned king and queen again and the author tells us they lived for a long time and that king Orfeo's successor would be his steward ("& seþþen was king þe steward", l. 596). The last lines of the poem are about the resonance of Orfeo's and Heurodis' adventures:

> Harpours in Bretaine after þan
> Herd hou þis meruaile bigan,
> & made her-of a lay of gode likeing,
> & nempned it after þe king.
> Þat lay "Orfeo" is y-hote:
> Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note. (ll. 597-602)

These lines are a metatext, in that the author of *Sir Orfeo* refers to a Breton *lai* about Orfeo's adventures. We are thus facing a fourth piece of evidence of the existence of a Breton *lai* about Orfeo's peregrinations, besides the references we find in *Floire et Blancheflor*, *Lai de l'Espine* and the prose Lancelot.

To sum up, the anonymous writer of *Sir Orfeo* – and thus previously the author of the Breton *Lay d'Orphée* – seem to have drawn upon multiple texts of different traditions, which are likely to have come to the ears of these authors through orality. It is likely that Map's *De Nugis Curialium* is the main source of Celtic elements, together with the Irish prose *The Wooing of Étaín*: fairy customs such as dances and hunts and features of the Fairy Land are strinkingly similar to those in *Sir Orfeo*. *The Wooing of Étaín* does also seem to have been the source – or at least part of an oral tradition about fairies which spread from Ireland to England – on which characters in *Sir Orfeo* have been modelled: Eochaid resembles Orfeo, Étaín can be related to Heurodis, Fuamnach to the queen of fairies and Midir to their king. Its similarity with *The Wooing of Étaín* results thus far more marked than Bliss thinks. As far as the harp is concerned, the main sources are the works of Virgil, Ovid and Boethius, where Orpheus take advantage of his harp in the same way Orfeo does: to tame wild beasts and to liberate Heurodis from the king's clutches, be it the fairy king or the classical god of the underworld. What is more, the most evident difference between the three classic sources and the texts influenced by Celtic folklore lies in the ending: a sad ending is found in Virgil's, Ovid's and Boethius' accounts – although in the *Metamorphoses* the two spouses reunite in the underworld – while in Map's story and in *Sir Orfeo* Heurodis is rescued and goes back home to live happily with her husband for a long time. We have seen that a chauvinistic reading of *Sir Orfeo* might be plausible, though male characters have their eerie and rather insane sides too. Surely Heurodis' mental health can be questioned, and offers interesting points of analysis – as Spearing has brilliantly shown – but we have come up with evidence of how Orfeo himself and the king of fairies too can be judged problematic.

In conclusion, *Sir Orfeo* turns out to be the product of a mixture of Greek, Latin and Celtic (mainly Welsh and Irish) traditions. Some features go back to classic analogues (e.g. the harp), whilst others have their roots in Celtic legends (e.g. the fairies). The end result is a fascinating

Middle English poem which would be retold by Robert Henryson more than one century later in his *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

3.4.1 Robert Henryson's contribution to the myth: Orpheus and Eurydice

Little is known about Robert Henryson's life. We are rather sure that he was a schoolmaster and a notary public in Dunfermline (Scotland), and we know that on 10 September 1462 one Robert Henryson became a member of the University of Glasgow.[234] He was probably born around 1425 and died around 1505.[235]

His *Orpheus and Eurydice* is the climax of the medieval tradition of the myth of Orpheus.[236] The story of this character finds its roots in classical literature, with the accounts from Ovid, Virgil and Boethius we have previously discussed, and then passes through the hands of the anonymous author of *Sir Orfeo* (late 13th – early 14th century). Throughout the Middle Ages, two were the approaches to the figure of Orpheus. The "textual tradition" saw Orpheus as the man who is not able to let earthly passions go (Eurydice),[237] becoming thus "an ominous warning to man of the dangers of passion and pride".[238] On the other hand, the "minstrel" tradition saw Orpheus as one of the greatest examples of minstrel, whose value in medieval societies was extremely high.[239] In this light, Orpheus was often compared to David and Christ.[240] With *Sir Orfeo*, the figure of Orpheus becomes more humanised: he is a grieving husband who has lost his wife and a loyal, humble king, "fully acclimated to the world of courtly love and romance".[241] Henryson was quite clearly influenced by both the "popular" tradition and the "allegorical" tradition.[242] Indeed, Henryson is

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234 Fox, Denton, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, pp. xiii-xvi.
235 Fox, pp. xix-xxi.
236 Gros Louis, Kenneth R.R., "Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages", *Speculum*, 41 (1966), pp. 643-55 (p. 463).
237 Gros Louis, p. 643.
238 Gros Louis, p. 646.
239 Gros Louis, p. 644.
240 Gros Louis, p. 644.
241 Gros Louis, p. 645.
242 Gros Louis, p. 646.

likely to have read and appreciated *Sir Orfeo* – where Orfeo is a romance hero – since some behavioural traits are in common between Orfeo and Orpheus, yet the textual tradition becomes clearer in the *Moralitas*, where we are told that men should always avoid earthly pleasures and keep on gazing heavenward, towards the true joy.

According to Gros Louis, Henryson's display of his knowledge of music, planets and the Muses makes a "fully medievalized classical myth" where "the magic Celtic elements are gone" out of *Orpheus and Eurydice*.[243] The status of utterly medieval poem comes from the fact that it was – and it is[244] – typical of British authors to mingle together elements from different traditions – classical and indigenous – without explicitly recognising their different origins. While Ovid, Virgil and Boethius rely on the classical tradition – how could they have done differently? – and the anonymous author of *Sir Orfeo* heavily draws upon Celtic elements, Henryson manages to reach a compromise between these two traditions.[245]

Henryson begins his poem by underlining the importance of respecting and emulating one's ancestors' lives in order to pursue virtue. Indeed,

> It is contrari the lawis of nature
> A gentill man tobe degenerate,
> Noucht folowing of his progenitoure
> The worthy reule and the lordly estate (ll. 8-11)[246]

It is possible that these lines represent a paradox, in that Henryson is basically saying that Orpheus, the "gentill man", did actually degenerate, while he should not have, by falling in love with Eurydice, a mortal woman.[247]

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243 Gros Louis, p. 646.
244 For example, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels are peopled bith with characters from the classical world – centaurs, chimaeras – and from the English autochthonous tradition – leprechauns, fairies, banshees.
245 I disagree with Gros Louis when he says that no Celtic features are to be found in *Orpheus and Eurydice*, since Proserpina is immediately introduced as the queen of fairies.
246 All excerpts from *Orpheus and Eurydice* are taken from Fox, Denton, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.
247 Petrina, Alessandra, "Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Its Sources", *Fifteenth-century Studies,* 33 (2008), pp. 198-217 (p. 204).

The following lines (15-63) contain words full of praise for noble people in ancient Greece and focus on the enumeration of the Muses. The fourth Muse Henryson mentions is "Caliope, […] moder to the king, sir Orpheus" (ll.43-5). Henryson clearly loves digressions, which allow him to show his knowledge of classical conventions, as we can infer from future digressions about planetary gods and music. Henryson, though, wants to appear humble to his readers: before writing about Orpheus' ancestors, he warns us that "first his gentill generation | I sall reherse, with youre correction" (ll. 27-8). Such a "humility trope" is a device all medieval rhetoriticians used to know.[248]

Orpheus' father is "mychti god Phebus" (l. 62). Since Orpheus is the son of two gods,

No wonder is thocht he was fair and wyse,
Gentill and full of liberalite. (ll.64-5)

We are then explicitly told that Eurydice herself chooses Orpheus to be her husband after hearing of his beauty and fame. Unlike Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, then, Euryice is introduced as an active character. Eurydice is surely going to be the dead wife who needs to be rescued by her husband, but in the beginning she is "the mychti quene of Trace, | Excellent fair, haboundand in riches" (ll. 74-5).[249] At least in the earlier stanzas of the poem, she is the one who has the power and who acts unashamedly ("Hir erand to propone scho thocht no schame", l. 80).

What happens afterwards is highly reminiscent of what happens to Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*. Indeed, Eurydice

walkit furth in till a Maii mornyng,
 Bot with a maidin, in a medowe grene,
 To tak the dewe and se the flouris spring" (ll. 93-5)

Similarly, in *Sir Orfeo*,

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248 Kindrick, Robert L., ed., "Orpheus and Eurydice" in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/kindrick-the-poems-of-robert-henryson> [accessed 03 August 2016].
249 Henryson's wish to give a voice to women is even more obvious in *The Testament of Cresseid*, where the author cares about giving to Cresseid's life a decent conclusion and makes a round character out of her, unlike Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

> Bifel so in þe comessing of May
>
> […] þis ich quen, Dame Heurodis,
>
> Tok to maidens of priis,
>
> & went in an vndrentide
>
> To play bi an orchard-side,
>
> To se þe floures sprede & spring,
>
> & to here þe foules sing. (ll. 57, 63-8)

In the meantime, a herdsman called "Arystyus" (l. 97) sees Eurydice, is aroused by that vision and tries to rape her. This episode has an analogue in Virgil's account of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but not in Ovid's and Boethius'. While fleeing away from him, Eurydice gets bitten by a snake and

> In pecis small this quenis hart couth ryf,
>
> And scho anone fell in a dedly swoun.
>
> Seand this cais, Proserpyne maid hir bovne,
>
> Quhilk clepit is the goddes infernall,
>
> And till hir court this gentill quene couth call. (ll. 108-12)

Eurydice dies (she is not simply abducted) as in Virgil's, Ovid's and Boethius' versions and like the wife of the knight of Little Britain in Map's *De Nugis Curialium*. She is then taken to the underworld by Proserpina, who here is defined as the goddes of hell ("the goddes infernall", l. 111).[250] Should we exclusively take this episode into account, we would think we are facing an utterly classical version of the myth. Actually, it is not completely true, since not all Celtic features have disappeared in Henryson's version of the story.[251] Eurydice's maiden, indeed, reaches Orpheus and cries:

> Allace, Erudices ȝour quene,
>
> Is with the fary tane befor myne ene!
>
> […] Scho trampit on a serpent wennomus
>
> And fell in swoun – with that the quene of fary
>
> Claucht hir wp sone and furth with hir can cary. (ll. 118-9, 124-6)

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250 Pluto and Proserpina are mentioned in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* too.

251 According to Gros Louis (p. 646), with whom I do not agree, *Orpheus and Eurydice* is devoid of Celtic elements.

Proserpina is thus not only a fairy but the very queen of fairies, and it is not an isolated case in Middle English literature. As we will have the chance to see later, Chaucer makes Pluto and Proserpina king and queen of fairies in *The Merchant's Tale*.

Mad with grief, Orpheus takes his harp and flees through the woods "half out of mynd" (l. 129). The narrative is much faster than the one in *Sir Orfeo*, where other things happen before Orfeo can leave his kingdom. Henryson does not write of Orpheus leaving the power to his steward or giving instructions as to what to do should he never come back. Orpheus' lament begins straight away and the recurring line "Quhar art thow gane, my luf Erudices?" (ll.143, 153, 163) is found at the end of three consecutive stanzas, thus creating an epistrophe. The three stanzas themselves, furthermore, show us a great mastery of the rhetorical figure of alliteration: "mirth and musik in murnyng" (l. 135), "subtell sangis sweit" (l. 136), "gule and greit" (l. 139), "steid and streit" (l. 142). Alliteration is sometimes accompanied by anaphora: ""Fair weill, my place; fair weile, plesance and play" (l. 154). Alliteration of "w" can be spotted in lines 155-6:

> And welcome , woddis wyld and wilsome way,
> My wikit werd in wilderness to wair!

Alliteration of "r" can be seen in

> My rob ryall and all my riche array
> Changit sallbe in rude russat of gray (ll. 157-8)

Alliterations of "b" and "s" are evident in:

> My bed sall be with bever, broke, and bair,
> In buskis bene, with mony bustuos bes,
> Withoutin sang, sayng with siching sair (ll. 160-2)

Even in the following stanza, where Orpheus invokes his father Phoebus and asks him for help and guidance on finding his beloved Eurydice, alliterations are not missing: "my fair fader Phebus"

(l. 164), "my plant, panefull and petuous" (l. 167), "to fynd the fair in fame that neuer was fyld" (l. 172). Such a long and detailed lament can be found only in Henryson, who clearly cared about showing off his writing abilities. Orpheus' lament ends with an invocation to Jupiter, his grandfather, to whom he asks to "mend [his] murnyng and [his] drery mone" (l. 176) and to "put [his] hert in pes" (l. 181). The invocation to the gods is missing both in the classical accounts of the myth and in *Sir Orfeo*. Orpheus here is "elicit[ing] a gift of grace from the gods"[252] by praying his father and grandfather. It is possible, anyway, that Henryson simply makes explicit what in *Sir Orfeo* is implicit, that is, the aid from the gods.[253]

I think Henryson resorted to the request of divine aid also to anticipate the following digression about the seven planetary gods. They are, in order of appearance: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Phoebus, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon.[254] So, after his lament, Orpheus begins to look for Eurydice by passing through the aforementioned planets, "as sais the fable"[255] (l. 186). First, he reaches the sphere of Saturn, "quhilk fader is of all thir stormis cald" (l. 190), where there is no trace of Eurydice. Then Orpheus reaches Jupiter, which lets its grandson "his spere be soucht fra end to end" (l. 194), although without success. The following planetary god is Mars, the "god of bataill and of stryf" (l. 196), where, once again, there is no trace of the queen of Thrace. Orpheus then reaches Phoebus, "god of the son, wyth bemes brycht and clere" (l. 199) which "changit all his chere" (l. 201) after seeing its son so sad, and lets him look for Eurydice "bot all in wayn, that lady come noucht thare" (l. 203). Orpheus then moves towards Venus, the goddes of love, as enhanced by Orpheus himself:

> Wate ye noucht wele I am your avin trewe knycht?
> In lufe nane lelare than sir Orpheus,
> And ye of lufe goddesse, and most of mycht:

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252 Gros Louis, p. 648.
253 Gros Louis, p. 649.
254 We find the same digression on the seven planetary gods in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*.
255 This reminds me of "ane uther quair" in *The Testament of Cresseid*. We may think that, in both cases, Henryson alludes to presumed external sources for his poems.

Off my lady help me to get a sicht! (ll. 206-9)

Nevertheless, Venus' answer is rather concise, since she tells him to look lower down. Mercury, the god of eloquence, is of no further help, and on the last planetary god, the Moon, Orpheus does not even stop,

Thus fra the hevyn he went doun to the erde,
Yit by the way sum melody he lerde. (ll. 217-8)[256]

This digression about the planetary gods is considered as one proof of the "mediaevalization" of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice,[257] and Henryson took advantage of it also to show off his knowledge of music (ll. 219-239). The use of extremely technical terms notwithstanding, Henryson defines himself a humble man by saying

Off sik musik to wryte I do bot dote,
Thar-for at this mater a stra I lay,
For in my lyf I coud newir syng a note (ll. 240-2)

Orpheus with "his harp allane" (l. 246) leaves to search for his wife. He spends twenty days looking for her, "fer and full fer and ferther than I can tell" (l. 248), until he reaches the doors of hell. Henryson fills this environment with creatures and characters from Greek mythology and manages to overcome all of them thanks to the power of his harp. We have already seen in *Sir Orfeo* that the harp is the tool through which Orfeo tames wild beasts and manages to convince the king and the queen of fairies to free Heurodis. Quite a strong connection between the harp and monsters can be found in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, where the harp acts as a means of bringing "harmony and civilization" when monsters threaten them.[258] In the light of that, we do expect Orfeo/Orpheus to tame wild beasts and creatures of the underworld, but how do we explain the

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256 Such a digression was at least useful to Orpheus, who when "fra the hevyn he went doun to the erde, | Yit by the way sum melody he lerde." (ll. 217-8).
257 Gros Louis, p. 646.
258 Petrina, Alessandra, "Medieval Harps and Their Kingly Players", *Textus,* 18 (2005), pp. 249-66 (pp. 252-3).

effect of the harp on fairies? Could it possibly mean that fairies too are to be considered monsters *tout court*, "fallen angels ; in other words, devils",[259] as C.S. Lewis suggests?

Back to Orpheus in hell, with his harp he puts the three-headed dog Cerberus[260] and the three Furies – Alecto, Megera and Thesiphone[261] – to sleep; he allows Tantalus to finally drink some water from the river; he stops the vulture which is eating Ticius's entrails. Orpheus behaves gracefully with Tantalus[262] and Ticius[263], which is reminiscent of the peaceful and selfless Orfeo in *Sir Orfeo* rather than the classical Orpheus, whose only and constant thought is for Eurydice exclusively.

After dealing with the aforementioned creatures, Orpheus comes to a

> […] ferefull strete,
> Myrik as the nycht, to pas rycht dangerus –
> For slydernes scant mycht he hald his fete –
> In quhilk thare was a stynk rycht odiouse (ll. 302-6)

Such a description contrasts sharply with the one of the Fairy Land in *Sir Orfeo*, where eveything shines and the sun seems never to set. The underworld over which Pluto and Proserpina reign is a

> […] dolly place [wyth] grondles depe dungeon,
> Furnes of fyre wyth stynk intollerable,
> Pit of despair wyth-out remission;
> […] Quhat creature cummys to duell in the
> Is ay deyand, and newir more may dee. (ll. 310-2, 315-6)

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259 Lewis, p. 137.
260 It was the guardian of the entrance to the underworld.
261 They are the Furies, or Erinyes, female deities of vengeance.
262 Zeus's son, he was condemned to suffer from everlasting hunger and thirst in Tartarus, the deepest part of the underworld, for having offered is son's flesh as a meal to the gods.
263 Son of Zeus and Elara, he was a giant. He attempted to rape Leto and was condemned to be tortured by vultures in Tartarus.

What follows is a detailed list of people who are trapped in hell, among whom we find Hector of Troy and Priam, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Herod, Nero, popes and cardinals and many others (ll. 321-44). Such an enumeration is reminiscent of the dead-like people we find in the Fairy Realm in *Sir Orfeo*, brilliantly introduced by the anaphora "& sum" (ll. 391-98).

Then Orpheus moves towards Pluto and Proserpina, playing his harp,

> Till at the last Erudices he knewe,
> Lene and dedelike, pitouse and pale of hewe,
> Rycht warsch and wan and walowit as the wede,
> Hir lily lyre was lyke vnto the lede. (ll. 348-51)

Mad with grief, Orpheus asks her:

> Quhare is thy rude as rose wyth chekis quhite,
> Thy cristall eyne with blenkis amorouse,
> Thi lippis rede to kis diliciouse? (ll. 354-6)

These excerpts are highly reminiscent of the description of Heurodis after her dream-like vision in *Sir Orfeo*: her "bodi, þat was so white y-core, | Wiþ þine nailes is al to-tore" (ll. 105-6); her face is described as "wan, as þou were ded" (l. 108); her "louesom eyӡen to | Lokeþ so man doþ on his fo!" (ll. 111-2).

Pluto intervenes and somehow reassures Orpheus by telling him that Eurydice's miserable aspect, which makes her look like "ane elf"[264] (l. 359) is due to "langour", since "were scho at hame in hir contree of Trace, | Scho wald refete full sone in fax and face" (ll. 364-5). Orpheus then begins to play his harp which such great mastery ("With base tonys in ypodorica, | With gemilling in ypolerica, ll. 369-70) that

> […] at the last, for reuth and grete pitee,
> [Pluto and Proserpyne] wepit sore that coud hym here and see. (ll. 371-2)

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264 Kindrick translates *elf* into "apparition", i.e. "a ghost or an image of a person who is dead" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). I suspect that Henryson used the word "elf" on purpose, in order to underline Pluto's and Proserpina's fairy nature.

King and queen of the underworld set Eurydice free, but on condition that Orpheus does not turn back to look at her until they reach the upper air. Henryson thus re-adds to the myth that original classical element the anonymous author of *Sir Orfeo* had removed. Orpheus disobeys Proserpina's orders and loses Eurydice forever, as happens in the Latin versions of the myth.

> Allace, it was grete hertsare for to here
> Of Orpheus the weping and the wo,
> […] Flatlyngis he fell and mycht no forthir go,
> And lay a quhile in suoun and extasy (ll. 394-5, 398-9)

As Gros Louis points out, moving on over time, classical features won over Celtic features, so that in Henryson we have, like in Ovid, Virgil and Boethius, the "classical journey into a world ruled by death" rather than a "Celtic journey into a world ruled by magic".[265] Such a contrast, though, is not as sharp as Gros Louis maintains. It is true that in *Sir Orfeo* we find fairies and fairy hunts, while in *Orpheus and Eurydice* we come across the classical underworld and classical creatures and characters, yet Henryson unquestionably specifies that Proserpina is a "fary" (l. 119). Furthermore, it is not the only reference to Pluto and Proserpina as king and queen of fairies, since the two gods are described as fairies also in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*. I think Henryson took advantage of the similarities between the underworld and the Fairy Land to create a brilliant synthesis of classical and Celtic elements: the kingdom, the characters, the main plot are utterly classical, but the nature of the rulers of hell is Celtic, and in that Henryson proves to be an unquestionably medieval poet. What is more, by sticking to the classical motif of Eurydice's death – instead of her abduction – Henryson spares us the effort to try to give a plausible explanation as to why the queen of Thrace ends up in the underworld.

A further element suggesting a "mediaevalization" of the myth is the digression about love which occurs right before the *Moralitas*.[266] Henryson's reflection is rather bitter, since he basically

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265 Gros Louis, p. 649.
266 Gros Louis, p. 646.

says that love cannot be defined unequivocally. Love is, at the same time, "bitter and suete, cruel and merciable; | Plesand to sum, til othir playnt and pyne; | To sum constant, till othir variabil" (ll. 402-4). The resulting idea of love is gloomy. As Fox puts it, "the poet, when he looks at the fallen human world, can only say, with Orpheus, 'I am expert, and wo is me thar-fore'".[267] This "sorrowful apostrophe to love […] shows that [Orpheus] has come to see the danger of earthly affection, and so complements the advice offered in the *Moralitas*, that we should turn our thoughts heavenward".[268]

The *Moralitas* (ll. 415-633) is based on Nicholas Trivet's commentary on Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*.[269] Nicholas Trivet (c. 1265- c. 1334), wrote his commentary on *Consolation* around 1300.[270] In the *Moralitas*, Henryson analyses his whole poem by adding comments and moral judgments to what he has written. Orpheus represents the intellective side of man, a man "instructed by wisdom and eloquence".[271] Eurydice stands for the affective or passional side of the human nature, while Aristeus represents virtue, from which Eurydice flees away, which leads to her premature death.[272] Orpheus goes down to hell to win back his desire (Eurydice) thanks to eloquence and wisdom.[273] We can easily understand the reason why Orpheus and Eurydice have been assigned their respective qualities: Orpheus is the son of Calliope, "of all musik maistresse" (l. 44) – thus it is not surprising at all that he is well versed in music – and of the god of the sun and poetry Phoebus. Being the offspring of a couple of gods, he could not but carry positive values with him. Eurydice, on the other hand, is a mortal woman who declares her love to Orpheus on her own initiative, in an unexpectedly emancipated way. I suppose that is the reason why she is considered the passional part of human nature. As for Aristeus, though, his being associated with virtue is rather odd: how could a potential rapist be designed as a model of virtue?[274] Furthermore, why is

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267 Fox, p. cx.
268 Friedman, p. 208.
269 Fox, p. cv.
270 Fox, pp. cv-cvi.
271 Fox, p. cvi; Gros Louis, p. 653.
272 Fox, p. cvi; Gros Louis, p. 653.
273 Fox, p. cvi.
274 Gros Louis, p. 654.

Eurydice, the passional woman, portrayed "so delicately and tragically"?[275] And why does Orpheus fall into despair when Eurydice dies, when he is the one who embodies intelligence and wisdom?[276] These contradictions make me think Gros Louis is right when he writes that "for Henryson, the poem was just as important, if not more important, than the *Moralitas*".[277]

A great part of the *Moralitas* is then devoted to the analyses of the roles of the classical characters of the poem: Cerberus, the Furies, Tantalus, and Ticius. Henryson explains that Cerberus' three heads represent the three stages of life when death can occur: childhood, middle age and old age. The only way for us to avoid Cerberus' attack is to fill our mind with wisdom, so that "this dog oure saule has no power to byte" (l. 474). Moving on, we come across the three Furies, who have the power to decide about men's mutable fortune. To clarify this concept, Henryson introduces the myth of Ixion, who is trapped on the wheel of Fortune.[278] The mutable and tricky nature of Fortune can change only

> quhen reson and perfyte sapience
> Playis apon the harp of eloquens,
> And persuadis our fleschly appetyte
> To leif the thocht of this warldly delyte,
> Than seisis of our hert the wicket will
> […] the grete sollicitude,
> Quhile vp, quhile doun, to wyn this warldis gud,
> Cessis furthwith, and oure complexion
> Waxis quiete in contemplacion. (ll. 507-11, 515-8)

The myth of Tantalus is used by Henryson to prove that the accumulation of wealth is pointless, because

> quhen that reson and intelligence
> Playis apon the harp of eloquence
> Schawand to ws quhat perrell on ilk syd

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275 Gros Louis, p. 654.
276 Gros Louis, p. 654.
277 Gros Louis, p. 654.
278 Ixion was condemned to spend the rest of his days on a turning wheel by Zeus, because he had tried to seduce Hera.

> That thai incur quhay will trest or confyd
>
> Into this warldis vane prosperitie,
>
> […] This auarice be grace quha vnder-stud,
>
> I trow suld leve thair grete solicitude,
>
> And ithand thouchtis, and thair besynes
>
> To gader gold and syne lyve in distres (ll. 545-9, 553-6)

Ticius' case, then, is exploited by Henryson to show how trying to emulate God leads to punishment. Ticius, indeed, was punished by Apollo for trying to pass himself off as soothsayer. Because the knowledge of the future is not under human control, whoever thinks to be able to foretell the future is a fool:

> O man, recleme thi folich harte!
>
> Will thow be God and tak on the his parte,
>
> To tell thingis to cum that neuir wilbe,
>
> Quhilk God hes kepit in his preuetie?
>
> Thow ma no mair offend to God of micht,
>
> Na with thi spaying reif fra him his richt. (ll. 579-84)

What Henryson wishes to express in his *Moralitas* is that all earthly pleasures and desires should be avoided by constantly looking for the true happiness, that is God. Alternation of Fortune, greed, and desire to emulate God – all of which, apparently, lead to death – can be overcome if we devote our life to the search of God. By the way, Henryson thinks we would not lose that much if we gave up on earthly things, about which he writes:

> This vgly way, this myrk and dully streit,
>
> Is nocht ellis bot blinding of the spreit
>
> With myrk cluddis and myst of ignorance,
>
> Affetterrit in this warldis vane plesance
>
> And bissines of temporalite. (ll. 600-4)

Orpheus' peregrinations illustrate this philosophical idea. Orpheus, the "ressoun" (l. 615) suffers from Eurydice's death. Pluto and Proserpina can grant him his wish, but only if a compromise between reason and desire is found ("Quhen oure desire wyht reson akis pes", l. 617).

Orpheus can have Eurydice back only if "he sekis vp to contemplacion, | Off syn detestand the abusion" (ll. 618-9). Our protagonist, though, casts "hys myndis" "backwart" (l. 621) and "gois backwart to the syn agayn" (l. 624), thus making "reson" (Orpheus) definitely a "wedow" (l. 627).

It is crystal clear that Henryson stuck to the textual tradition in the *Moralitas*. The minstrel tradition, however, comes up too, especially in the great mastery of alliteration and in Orpheus' most human patterns of behaviour, as those towards the tormented characters in the underworld. As for the question of fairies, it is interesting to point out that Henryson does not mention the word *fairy* or *elf* in the *Moralitas*. This may be due to the fact that Pluto and Proserpina being defined as fairies is not functional to the story at all, but is simply the result of the influence of the Celtic features in *Sir Orfeo*. By creatively mingling Celtic elements with the classical elements from the Latin accounts of the myth, Henryson has written a unique version of one of the greatest and most exploited myths of the Middle Ages.

4. Fairy Princesses, Incubi and Fairy Queens

In this fourth chapter, my aim is to examine how fairies and the fairy world are portrayed in further Middle English poems and whether gender norms and attitudes to sex are somehow defied. For this purpose, I analyse Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and its Old French analogue *lai de Lanval*, written by Marie de France. What is interesting about these two poems is the role played by the fairy princess and her power over the male protagonist. Then, I devote a section to *Sir Degaré*, mainly discussing the role of the fairy creature which seems to be an *incubus*. Finally, I write about Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, where supernatural elements are exploited to create a comic effect, which helps us understand how fairies and the fairy world were judged by medieval people – or at least by Chaucer.

4.1 The fairy princess: features and role

Sir Orfeo gave us the chance to meet a fairy king and a fairy queen. It would be wrong, though, to assume that fairy categories end here. In the following subsections, I am going to take the figure of the fairy princess into account, by drawing upon two different versions – in authors and languages – of the (almost) same story where a fairy princess plays a pivotal role.

4.1.1 Marie de France's lai de Lanval

We have already seen that Marie de France, who lived during the late twelfth century, is the author of twelve Old French *lais*, among which there is the *lai de Lanval*, which would be retold in Middle English by Thomas Chestre in the late fourteenth century. The *lai de Lanval* has survived in four manuscripts.[279] The initial setting of this *lai* is the Arthurian kingdom, at the time at war against the

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279 Stokes, Myra, "Lanval to Sir Launfal: a Story Becomes Popular", in Jane Gilbert & Ad Putter, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Harlow: Longman, 2000, pp. 56-77 (p. 59).

Picts and the Scots.[280] Lanval is a knight from a relatively humble background who is not granted lands and other kinds of rewards by king Arthur and is ignored by his fellow knights. The fact that he is not given any gifts by the king is exploited by Marie de France to justify what happens next, that is Lanval's isolation and his encounter with the fairy lady.[281] After fleeing from the court and finding a place to rest in a meadow near a brook, Lanval is approached by two fairy maidens ("il […] | guarda aval lez la riviere, | Si vit venir dous dameiseles"[282]) (ll. 53-5), who come with a golden basin and towels.[283] The two maidens then lead him to the fairy world to introduce him to their fairy princess (*la pucele*), whose name, in line with the conventions of the *contes mélusiniens*, is never uttered.

> Dedanz cel tref fu la pucele:
> Flur de lis e rose nuvele,
> Quant ele pert el tens d'esté,
> Trepassot ele de bealté. (ll. 93-6)[284]

The place where Lanval is conducted is not Avalon yet, as confirmed by the fairy princess when she says "Lanval, fet ele, bels amis, | Pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma terre: | De luinz vus sui venue querre!" (ll. 110-2)[285]. She has thus left Avalon to see him, and only in the end they will go back to Avalon together.

She is extremely rich and offers Lanval huge amounts of money.[286] They first meet in a pavilion ("tref"), and after declaring their mutual feelings of love she makes him swear to keep their romance secret.[287] As Burgess points out, "she represents a fearsome combination of beauty, wealth, power and knowledge" – knowledge in that she will know if he breaks his promise:[288]

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280 Burgess, p. 17.
281 Hoepffner, Ernest, *Les Lais de Marie de France,* Paris: Boivin, 1935, p. 59.
282 All the excerpts from *Lanval* are taken from Marie de France, *Le Lai de Lanval*, ed. by Jean Rychner, Genève: Droz, 1958.
283 Hoepffner, p. 60.
284 The young girl was inside the pavilion. Newly-flowered cornflowers and roses, when their time comes in summer, would fade in front of of her beauty. (*my translation*).
285 "Lanval, my lover, I have left my country for you. I came from far away to look for you!" (*my translation*).
286 Burgess, p. 104.
287 Burgess, p. 104.
288 Burgess, p. 105.

la pucele[...]
S'amur e sun cors li otreie.
[…] "Amis, fet ele, or vus chasti,
Si vus comant si vus pri:
Ne vus descovrez a nul hume!
De ceo vus dirai jeo la sume:
A tuz jurs m'avriez perdue,
Se ceste amur esteit seüe;
Ja mes ne me porrez veeir
Ne de mun cors seisine aveir." (ll. 131, 133, 143-50)[289]

The mortal man's commitment to the *fée amante*'s will is a basic feature of the *contes mélusiniens*,[290] together with the fact that the first meeting between the two lovers takes place in a forest near water.[291] To be specific, though, Marie de France does not write of a *forêt* (at the time not really a "forest" but "wilderness"), but of a *pré* (meadow), and what is more the encounter between Lanval and the fairy princess is mediated by two servants.

Lanval and the princess dine together and then Lanval, wondering when he will meet his lover again, rides back to the Arthurian court. Once arrived, sumputuously dressed, he distributes gifts to everybody. The other knights, who used to despise him, now have positive attitudes towards him. The queen attempts to seduce him, but when he rejects her she accuses him of homosexuality. Offended, Lanval replies:

Dame, dist il, de cel mestier
Ne me sai jeo nïent aidier.
Mes jo aim, e si sui amis,
Cele ki deit aveir le pris
Sur tutes celes que jeo sai.
E une chose vus dirai,
Bien le saciez a descovert:
Une de celes ki la sert,
Tute la plus povre meschine,
Valt mielz de vus, dame reïne,
De cors, de vis e de bealté,
D'enseignement e de bunté! (ll. 291-302)[292]

289 The young girl [...] gave him her heart and her love. […] She told him: "My lover, I order and beg you something: do not tell any living soul of us! I tell you why: if someone comes to know about us, you will lose me forever. You will never see me again and you will never hold me in your arms again. (*my translation*).
290 Harf-Lancner, p. 113.
291 Harf-Lancner, pp. 85, 87.
292 "My lady" he said " I know nothing of this kind of practices. But I love and am loved by a woman who wins over all the women I know. I'll tell you even more, the poorest and humblest of her servants is better than you ,my queen, as for physical appearance, face, beauty, kindness and goodness!" (*my translation*).

Mad with anger, the queen tells the king that Lanval has tried to seduce her and that, after her refusal, he insulted and humiliated her. The king thus decides that, unless Lanval has an impeccable justification for what he has done, he will be either burned or hanged. In the meantime, the knight feels guilty and anguished for having broken his promise to his lady. During the trial and preceeded by four fairy maidens, the fairy princess comes to rescue Lanval, in spite of his betrayal. Everyone at court looks at her and thinks she is the most beautiful woman ever seen. She says:

> Reis, j'ai amé un tuen vassal;
> Veez le ci: ceo est Lanval!
> Achaisunez fu en ta curt;
> Ne vueil mie qu'a mal li turt
> De ceo qu'il dist, ceo saces tu,
> Que la reïne a tort eü:
> Unkes nul jur ne la requist.
> De la vantance quë il fist
> Se par mei puet estre aquitez,
> Par voz baruns seit delivrez! (ll. 615-24)[293]

The two lovers ride away together towards Avalon (Od li s'en vait en Avalun, | Ceo nus recuntent li Bretun, | En un isle ki mult est beals.) (ll. 641-3), and form that moment on no one has ever had news about them (Nuls hum n'en oï plus parler, | Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter) (ll. 645-6).

Why does the fairy princess forgive Lanval? Why does she rescue him and thus expose herself to other humans when he clearly did not keep his promise? Ernest Hoepffner points out that, although Lanval is unequivocally guilty, he breaks his promise because provoked by the queen.[294] He is both a perpetrator in the wrong and a wronged victim at the same time, thus also worthy of being forgiven in the end.[295] The princess' forgiveness is not in line with the rules of the *contes mélusiniens*, where the hero who does not keep his promise is never forgiven:[296] likewise, their first encounter is mediated instead of direct, and the fairy goes back to the hero, his betrayal notwithstanding. Furthermore, Lanval is not in the wilderness to look for adventures or to hunt, as

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293 "King, I love one of your knights. He is here, it's Lanval! He was accused at your court, but I do not want him to be a victim because of what he has said. You should know that the queen is lying, since he never declared his love to her. And if my presence can justify his boasting, let your barons free him!" (*my translation*).
294 Hoepffner, p. 64.
295 Hoepffner, p. 64.
296 Harf-Lancner, p. 113.

happens in the *contes mélusiniens*, but because he has run away from king Arthur, who excluded him from a distribution of gifts.

As far as the fairy princess is concerned, her name never being revealed corresponds to the requirements of the *contes mélusiniens*.[297] It is noteworthy that the word *fée* is never mentioned, yet scholars agree on her fairy nature.[298] She is introduced in the first part of the *lai* and her description is partial.[299]

> Ele jut sur un lit mult bel –
> Li drap valeient un chastel –
> En sa chemise senglement:
> Mult ot le cors bien fait e gent!
> Un chier mantel de blanc hermine,
> Covert de purpre alexandrine,
> Ot pur le chalt sur li geté;
> Tut ot descovert le costé;
> Le vis, le col e la peitrine:
> Plus ert blanche que fleurs d'espine! (ll. 97-106)[300]

Such a description has erotic connotations: the fairy lies basically "half-naked",[301] and the fact that she possesses bedcovers which are as expensive as a castle enhances her wealth. Many bodily features, though, are left to the imagination of the reader, and I think such a device increases the princess' erotic power. A detailed description of the fairy is given only in the end, when she enters the Arthurian court to rescue Lanval. She is wearing a white blouse and a tunic which leaves her hips bare, and a purple mantle. As for her body:

> Le cors ot gent, basse la hance,
> Le col plus blanc que neif sur branche;
> Les uiz ot vairs e blanc le vis,
> Bele buche, nes bien asis,
> Les surcilz bruns e bel le frunt,
> E le chief cresp e alkes blunt:
> Fils d'or ne gete le luur

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297 Harf-Lancner, p. 41.
298 Burgess, p. 164; Hoepffner, p. 59; Spearing, p. 98.
299 Hoepffner, p. 68. He distinguishes three sections in the *lai de Lanval*. The first section revolves around the apparition of the fairy. In the second one, the focus is on the fight between Lanval and the queen. The third section is about the fairy coming to rescue her lover.
300 She was lying on a beautiful bed, whose sheets are worth as much as a castle. She wore only a blouse to cover her stunning body! She put on a valuable purple mantle decorated with ermine to keep hersefl warm. Her hips, her face, her neck and her breast were bare and whiter than the hawthorn. (*my translation*)
301 Spearing, A.C., *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives*, Cambridge: Cambridge Universiry Press, 1993, p. 99.

> Cum si chevel cuntre le jur! (ll. 563-70)[302]

Lanval is basically set free thanks to her stunning physical appearance.[303] In front of the king, she lets her mantle fall on the floor "que mielz la peüssent veeir"[304] (l. 606) and she manages to obtain what she wants. According to Hoepffner, she has both features of fairies and features of human women. She is a fairy in that she is a supernatural being, extremely beautiful, rich and powerful, exactly as fairies are depicted in popular romances, but at the same time she is angry at her lover who betrayed her as any woman would be, since he broke the most important rule of courtly love, that is discretion.[305] Furthermore, she shows mercy to her lover, which is, in medieval culture, a human and typically feminine trait.[306] She forgives him, but she does not make her forgiveness visible.[307] According to Hoepffner, she wants to try him, and Lanval manages to demonstrate his love when he jumps on the horse with her.[308] I think her dominant trait during this scene is the human: we can see in her a hint of feminine pride, in that she does not talk to Lanval or look at him, but waits for him to show his love for her. One could argue, though, that the princess' domineering femininity and sexual empowerment are a mark of her fairy nature. In any case, I find this double nature in line with the ambiguous nature of fairies in general: supernatural beings who are on the edge between good and evil.

As far as the whole *lai* is concerned, Myra Stokes, in analysing the differences between the *lai de Lanval* and Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, writes of "the compensatory construction of an alternative world in which the self lives an alternative life".[309] The alternative life is the one Lanval explores with his *amie* in her world, where questionable things happen, such as having a lover and having to

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302 She had a shapely figure, her neck was whiter than the snow on a branch. Her eyes shone, her face was white, her mouth was beautiful and her nose perfect. She had brown eyebrows and a beautiful forehead. Her hair was curly and blonde: a golden thread is not as shining as her hair in daylight. (*my translation*)
303 Hoepffner, pp. 66-7.
304 "so that people could see her better" (*my translation*).
305 Hoepffner, p. 69.
306 Hoepffner, p. 70.
307 Hoepffner, p. 70.
308 Hoepffner, p. 70.
309 Stokes, p. 60.

keep it secret,[310] (although I suppose we can consider them human activities as well). Normally, people resort to an alternative reality, made of "daydreams and fantasies", to find relief from negative events in real life.[311] In the case of Lanval, however, daydreams and fantasies are real, in that they are to be found in an actual, parallel world. What we have here is a "young knight who is the normal hero of medieval romance, an idealized everyman, [who] here gains without effort what every young man wishes, wealth and love".[312] To get what he desires, he needs to go as far as possible from society,[313] and the farther he flees, the better he feels. His escape from the court, I would argue, is the climax of the *lai*, whilst his encounter with the fairy marks Lanval's permanent-to-be distance from human society. Indeed, when he goes back to the court and spends time with his fellow knights, who enjoy the company of some of the queen's damsels, he suffers because he cannot enjoy the company of his *amie*, since he is trapped once again in the world he fled from (Lanval s'en vait a une part | Luin des altres: mult li est tart | Que s'amie puisse tenir, | Baisier, acoler e sentir; | L'altrui joie prise petit, | Se il nen a le suen delit) (ll. 253-8).[314] Both Stokes and Spearing point out that supernatural elements in the *lai de Lanval* might be read from a psychological point of view,[315] yet both think that it would be reductive not to look for further meanings. As Spearing maintains, "it would be mistaken to suppose […] that [Marie de France] and her public would have then distinguished between objective and subjective precisely as we do".[316] Surely the supernatural features of the story are considered impossible in real life by Marie de France too, still she did not think of magical features in the *lai* simply as a way to convey "subjective fantasy".[317] What happens to Lanval is all real: he does actually meet a fairy, loses her, regains her and flees away with her towards Avalon in the end.

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310 Stokes, pp. 60-1.
311 Stokes, p. 60.
312 Spearing, p. 98.
313 Burgess, p. 20.
314 Burgess, p. 20.
315 Spearing, p. 98; Stokes, pp. 60-1.
316 Spearing, p. 98.
317 Spearing, p. 98.

A psychoanalytical reading of the *lai*, however, is worthy of consideration. Lanval enjoys a "wish-fulfilling fantasy [which is] offered as a compensation for an unpleasant reality".[318] But what if the unpleasant reality is the fantasy? From a Freudian point of view, indeed, Lanval may be compared to a child who thinks his father (the king) does not care for him the same way he cares for his siblings (the other knights).[319] That would be a child's fantasy, from which the child might try to escape by falling for a fairy lady who offers him an alternative.[320] The fairy lady may represent the good mother, with whom he is in love in an oedipal way, whereas the queen may be the evil mother.[321] The good mother in the end takes her son back with her: indeed, "to be riding a palfrey behind a lady, rather than riding a warhorse on one's own, is not a very knightly situation; rather, it is that of a child".[322]

To sum up, the fairy lady in the *lai de Lanval* is unquestionably an ambiguous figure who lends herself to more than one reading, but that is, after all, what fairies are like: she is undoubtedly a fairy, still some of her behavioural features are human. She has an erotic charge which determines Lanval's fate and she fits the requirements of the *fée amante* of the *contes mélusiniens*.

Now that I have given an overview of this French analogue, I will devote the following section to Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, once again focusing part of my attention on the function of the fairy princess Tryamour, analysing especially her condition of empowered fairy woman who defies gender norms.

4.1.2 Thomas Chestre's Sir Launfal. Features and role of the fairy princess

Written by Thomas Chestre at the end of the fourteenth century,[323] *Sir Launfal* is the story of a knight who flees from Arthur's court and, while lying down in a forest, is approached by two

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318 Spearing, p. 103.
319 Spearing, pp. 103-4.
320 Spearing, p. 104.
321 Spearing, p. 104.
322 Spearing, p. 104. A similar interpretation of the child-knight is proposed later as for Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.
323 Bliss, A.J., ed., *Thomas Chestre's Sir Launfal*, London: Nelson, 1960, p. 1.

beautiful women.[324] These two maidens take Launfal to their fairy princess Tryamour, who declares herself to be in love with him. After spending the night together, she warns him not to reveal to anyone her existence. Back to Arthur's kingdom after many vicissitudes – including a fight against Sir Valentyne in Lombardy – Guenevere tries to seduce Launfal but he rejects her. He says he loves a woman whose poorest maid is more beautiful than her, thus breaking his promise to Tryamour. When Launfal is about to be punished for his behaviour, Tryamour enters the Arthurian court and blinds Guenevere for her hubris. The couple then leaves the court and rides to the Isle of Oliroun, where they will live for the rest of their lives.

Sir Launfal is the result of the "rehandling" of two previous pieces of works: Marie de France's *Lanval* and a Middle English romance called *Sir Landevale*,[325] but their relationship needs an explanation. In fact, *Sir Landevale* is itself an adaptation of Marie's Breton *lai de Lanval*,[326] and scholars generally agree that Chestre might have not read Marie de France's *Lanval* at all.[327] Not much is known of Thomas Chestre, but there is little doubt as to his authorship, since his name appears at line 1039 of the poem ("Thomas Chestre made þys tale").[328]

The poem begins as follows:

Be doughty Artours dawes
That helde Engelond yn good lawes,
Ther fell a wondyr cas
Of a ley that was ysette,
That hyght "Launval" and hatte yette.[329] (ll. 1-5)

It also seems that the Old French *lai de Graelent* has provided source material, in that four episodes seem to have been drawn directly on it, including Guenevere's negative attitude towards Launfal,

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324 I rely on the plot provided in "Sir Launfal" in *Database of Middle English Romance* / University of York, 2012 <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 29 April 2016].
325 Bliss, pp. 1-2.
326 Bliss, p. 2.
327 Bliss, p. 27; Spearing, p. 97.
328 Bliss, p. 12.
329 All the excerpts from *Sir Launfal* are taken from Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 29 April 2016].

who is King Arthur's steward.[330] It is interesting to note that Launfal's status is higher than the one he has in the *lai de Lanval*: he is a royal seneschal, which makes him an even more "heroic" hero than the one depicted by Marie de France.[331] When Arthur chooses to marry Guenevere, Launfal and the other knights think it is not a good idea, because she is known as a woman of loose morals. During the wedding banquet, Guenevere distributes gifts to every knight, except for Launfal. Sad, Launfal asks the king the permission to leave Kardevyle.[332] Unlike what happens in the *lai de Lanval*, thus, Launfal's flight is caused by the queen, and not by the king. King Arthur, though, lets him go and two of the king's nephews follow him. Launfal begins his journey "tyl he come to Karlyoun" (l.88).[333] Once arrived, he asks for hospitality from the mayor, whom he already knows. The mayor reluctantly allows him and his two friends to stay in a temporary accommodation, but in a year's time "so savegelych hys good he besette | That he ward yn greet dette" (ll. 130-1). Launfal has been losing all his wealth since Guenevere denied him his gifts. Frustrated with the situation, Arthur's nephews leave Karlyoun, promising Launfal not to tell anyone how poor he has become. Back at the court, the two fulfil Launfal's wish and tell the king and queen that he is doing well. In reality, Launfal is in such miserable conditions he is not even invited to a feast in Karlyoun. He asks the mayor's daughter if she can lend him " Sadel and brydel […] | A whyle forto ryde, | That I myghte confortede be | By a launde under thys cité | Al yn thys underntyde" (ll. 206-10). This is the second episode in *Sir Launfal* whose analogue is in *Graelent*.[334] He rides westwards until he reaches "a fayr forest" (l. 222), and "sat […] yn symplyté, | In the schadwe under a tre, | Ther that hym lykede beste" (ll. 226-8). It goes without saying that this scene is particularly reminiscent of

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330 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal-introduction> [accessed 01 May 2016].

331 Spearing, p. 107.

332 Carlisle. In the *lai de Lanval* the same city is called Kardoel (Bliss, p. 83).

333 As Bliss defines it, "one of the traditional sites of Arthur's Camelot" (p. 86).

334 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal-introduction> [accessed 01 May 2016].

Heurodis sleeping under the *ympe-tre* in *Sir Orfeo*. What happens next also recalls Heurodis' adventure, since Launfal is approached by two fairies, exactly as Heurodis was visited by the fairy king in a dream-like experience.

> As he sat yn sorow and sore
> He sawe come out of holtes hore
> Gentyll maydenes two. (ll. 229-31)

The following lines are a detailed description of the maidens' clothes: they wear magnificient kirtles, green velvet mantles and crowns enriched with gems. Their faces are white, their complexion is red and their eyes are brown. They carry with them a golden basin and a silk towel.

Launfal greets them politely and they reply:

> "Syr Knyght […] well the be!
> Our lady, Dame Tryamour,
> Bad thou schuldest come speke wyth here
> Yyf hyt wer thy wylle, sere,
> Wythoute more sojour." (ll. 254-8)

Launfal follows them until they reach a luxurious pavillion, which

> […] Was wrouth, forsothe, ywys,
> All of werk of Sarsynys,
> The pomelles of crystall;
> Upon the toppe an ern ther stod
> Of bournede golde, ryche and good,
> Ylorysched wyth ryche amall.
> Hys eyn wer carbonkeles bryght –
> As the mone they schon anyght,
> That spreteth out ovyr all. (ll. 265-73)

Such a marvellous description of the land of fairies has analogues throughout the Celtic and Middle English literature involving fairies I have written about in the previous chapters: *Sir Orfeo*'s and *The Wooing of Étaín*'s Fairy Lands are as magnificient and rich as this one. Gold especially is particularly dear to the three authors. In *Sir Orfeo*, "þe werst piler on to biholde | Was al of burnist gold" (ll. 367-8). In *The Wooing of Étaín*, Midir promises Étaín she will be his queen with "a crown of gold". Today we would have negative thoughts about whoever boasts of his/her richness in that way, but medieval people thought of "luxury and material splendour […] [as] symbolical or

significant – of sanctity, authority, valour, noble lineage or, at the very worst, of power. They were associated, as modern luxury is not, with graciousness and courtesy".[335]

Once entered in this marvellous building, Launfal finally meets "the kynges doughter of Olyroun, | Dame Tryamour that hyghte; | Her fadyr was Kyng of Fayrye" (ll. 278-80). Tryamour undresses and lies down on a bed. She is described in a way that evokes the "feminine beauty in the Middle Ages":[336] she "was as whyt as lylye yn May" (l. 292), and her hair "schon as gold wyre" (l. 298). Her physical description ends here: not many details are given about it by Chestre.[337] Towards the end of the poem, much more space is devoted to the description of her clothes, her horse, her falcon and her greyhounds than to her physical aspect,[338] probably to keep the character rather mysterious. She then speaks to Launfal by labelling him " my lemman swete" (l. 301), declares her love for him, and Launfal responds by assuring her he is at her service, which is in line with the rules of courtly love.[339] She goes on and says "Yf thou wylt truly to me take | And alle wemen for me forsake, | Ryche I wyll make the" (ll. 316-8). She promises him gold in abundance, her horse Blaunchard, her servant Gyfre and that he will never be harmed neither in war nor in tournaments. In other words, she provides him with all those riches Guenevere deprived him of: Launfal finally gets the distribution of gifts he could not enjoy at the beginning. After that, they eat and drink abundantly and then go to bed, where they are overcome by passion and "For play, lytyll they sclepte that nyght, | Tyll on morn hyt was daylyght" (ll. 349-50). What we have here is the pair lover-gifts: Launfal gets both Tryamour's body – in terms of erotic pleasure – and the gifts she gives him.[340] The following morning, she tells him that if he wants to speak to her again they should meet at a secret place where they cannot be seen by anyone. She also adds:

> But of o thyng, Sir Knyght, I warne the,
> That thou make no bost of me

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335 Lewis, p. 132.
336 Spearing, p. 45.
337 Spearing, p. 45.
338 Spearing, p. 45.
339 Bliss, p. 90.
340 Wade, p. 114.

> For no kennes mede!
> And yf thou doost, I warny the before,
> All my love thou hast forlore! (ll. 361-5)

This brief excerpt is highly *mélusinien*, in that the lady warns her knight-lover not to reveal their affair to anybody, or he will never see her again.[341] Wade calls this obligation *taboo* and says that its function is to balance out the fairy's magical gifts: basically, since Launfal cannot provide Tryamour with equally precious and supernatural gifts, he has at least to keep their relationship secret as she wants, that is he has to keep it a taboo.[342] Typical of the *contes mélusiniens* is also their first encounter in a forest, although initially mediated by two maidens.

Launfal then rides towards Karlyroun, where "ten | Well yharneysyth men" (ll. 376-7) bring him gold, silver, rich clothes and an armour. This scene has no analogue either in the *lai de Lanval* or in *Sir Landevale*, and is taken from *Graelent*.[343] When the mayor of Karlyoun sees Launfal so sumptuously clothed, he pleads a misunderstanding for not having invited him to the feast the previous day. In response, Launfal holds it against him that he never considered him worthy of note when he was poor. It is noteworthy that Launfal is dressed in purple and is wearing ermine fur, exactly as the fairy princess in the *lai de Lanval*. Purple and ermine, indeed, are signs of wealth.[344] Now rich, Launfal holds numerous feasts, where he shows off his magnanimity: he gives clothes to the poors, frees prisoners, rewards clerics, and the anaphorical repetition of "fifty" (Fifty fedde povere gestes, | […] Fifty boughte stronge stedes; | Fifty yaf ryche wedes | […] Fifty rewardede relygyons; | Fifty delyverede povere prysouns) (ll. 422, 424-5, 427-8) enhances his huge wealth. An analogous device is found in the *lai de Lanval*, where the repeated word is the name of the knight

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341 Harf-Lancner, p. 113.
342 Wade, p. 115.
343 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 01 June 2016].
344 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 01 June 2016].

("Lanval donout les riches duns, | Lanval aquitout les prisuns, | Lanval vesteit les jugleürs, | Lanval faiseit les granz honurs!") (ll. 209-12). Launfal's life is now full of happiness: he wins a tournament, holds many feasts and meets Tryamour in secret every night. Although Marie de France briefly makes Lanval boast of his riches, Chestre emphasizes this much more, to the point that the distinction between private space and public space, which is important in the *lai de Lanval*, seems almost vanished here.[345] Chestre makes a boastful hero out of Launfal: his servant Gyfre, his horse Blaunchard and, of course, his distribution of riches – all gifts from Tryamour – are entirely visible to others.[346] He is constantly in the spotlight: when he falls into poverty, the mayor makes sure everybody knows; when he regains wealth, a tournament is held in his honour.[347] His vicissitudes are well-known as far as Lombardy, and his victory in Lombardy comes to the ears of king Arthur in England.[348] The only thing Launfal wants and manages to keep secret – at least for a good part of the story – is his affair with Tryamour, who explicitly warns him by using the noun *boast*:

> But of o thyng, Sir Knyght, I warne the,
> That thou make no bost of me (ll. 361-2)

Marie de France cares much more than Chestre about the private remaining private, to the point that we are not told the name of the fairy and we are not even explicitly told that she is a *fée*.[349]

A further episode whose analogue can be found in *Graelent* is that of the fight between Launfal and the giant Sir Valentyne.[350] One night, while lying with Tryamour, Launfal is visited by a servant of Sir Valentyne, who tells him:

> Syr, my lord Syr Valentyne,
> A noble werrour and queynte of gynne,
> Hath me sent the tylle,
> And prayth the, for thy lemmanes sake,
> Thou schuldest wyth hym justes take. (ll. 535-9)

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345 Stokes, p. 63.
346 Stokes, p. 63.
347 Stokes, p. 69.
348 Stokes, p. 69.
349 Stokes, pp. 63-4.
350 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 01 June 2016].

Lanval accepts and Tryamour reassures him:

> Dreed the nothyng, Syr gentyl knyght,
> Thou schalt hym sle that day! (ll. 551-2)

Tryamour prophesying Launfal's victory is reminiscent of the role of the *fée marraine*, who basically has the power to decide whether men are going to die or not in specific circumstances.[351]

Launfal reaches the city of Atalye in Lombardy and manages to kill Sir Valentyne – thanks to the precious help of Gyfre – and has to kill all the lords of Atalye too, since they wanted to take revenge for the murder of their giant knight. After having massacred basically the entire city, "he wente ayen to Bretayn | Wyth solas and wyth plawe". (ll. 611-2). This victory rehabilitates his name in the Arthurian court, to the point that king Arthur himself invites Launfal to join him at the feast of St. John the Baptist, to which earls, barons and lords are invited. Launfal is now in the condition to be "stward of halle | For to agye hys gestes alle, | For cowthe of largesse" (ll. 622-4). Thanks to Tryamour, basically, he has managed to become again the wealthy and influential knight he was before Guenevere ruined him.[352] The feast lasts forty days. During a dance, the queen shows interest in Launfal:

> "I se", sche seyde "daunce large Launfalle;
> To hym than wyll y go.
> Of alle the knyghtes that y se there,
> He ys the fayreste bachelere.
> He ne hadde never no wyf;
> Tyde me good other ylle,
> I wyll go and wytehys wylle:
> I love hym as my lyf!" (ll. 647-54)

Numerous scholars have had trouble finding an explanation as to why Guenevere loves Launfal when, at the beginning of the poem, she clearly despises him.[353] Spearing explains it by bringing psychoanalysis into play: if the queen symbolizes the mother who is both desired and hated by the male child,[354] Launfal might be considered as the child who daydreams about his

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351 Harf-Lancner, p. 17.
352 Wade, p. 138.
353 Spearing, p. 108.
354 Spearing, p. 108.

mother's love for him, although he actually does not like her at all. A further psychoanalytical interpretation of Guinevere is that of the stepmother who manages to win the king's love but not the knights', thus she is the woman who takes the father away from his children.[355] Whatever the reason for this declaration of love, Launfal tells her he does not return her love. Mad with anger, Guenevere accuses him of homosexuality. As happens in the *lai de Lanval*, this is the moment in which Launfal breaks his promise to his fairy *amie*:

> I have loved a fayryr woman
> Than thou ever leydest thyn ey upon
> Thys seven yer and more!
> Hyr lothlokest mayde, wythoute wene,
> Myghte bet be a Quene
> Than thou,yn all thy lyve! (ll. 694-9)

Humiliated, the queen swears Launfal will pay for what he has done, until "all the lond schuld of hym speke | Wythinne the dayes fyfe" (ll. 707-8) – a further hint of Chestre's non-distinction between public and private. Guenevere lies to Arthur and tells him Launfal "besofte [her] of shame – [her] lemman for to be" (ll. 716-7). In the meantime, Launfal tries to summon Tryamour, "but sche was lore | As sche hadde warnede hym before" (ll. 730-1). All his riches disappear, as do Gyfre and Blaunchard. It is interesting to underline that Marie de France does not mention the loss of the riches the princess gave to Lanval at this point, which makes us understand how much more important the fairy gifts are for Chestre.[356] When Launfal losesTryamour, he loses also her gifts, which might mean that even Tryamour herself is to be considered a gift, as we have seen previously, and maybe also that Tryamour's gifts are more illusory than those received by Lanval in Marie de France's *lai*.

Perhaps the most important of the *mélusiniens* principles has been ignored, hence things cannot be as they were any longer for Launfal, who is then brought to his own trial, where he does not accuse the queen of telling a falsehood but does not even deny having a lover. Twelve knights are appointed jurors, and all of them agree on the fact that, given the bad reputation of Guenevere as a

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355 Spearing, p. 108.
356 Wade, p. 138.

woman of easy virtue, her words cannot be considered uttelry reliable. The jurors thus decide that, if Launfal proves the existence of his lover (and that she is more beautiful than the queen), he will be judged innocent. Should he fail in this task, he will be hanged. Guenevere even adds that

> "Yyf he bryngeth a fayrer thynge,
> Put on my eeyn gray!" (ll. 809-10)

The day Launfal has to summon Tryamour arrives. When the king demands him to show his *amie*, Launfal replies disconsolately that "he ne myght [bryng hys lef yn syght] | Therfore hym was well wo" (ll. 833-4). After the earl of Cornwall suggests banishment as a sufficient punishment – which is quite ironic since Launfal actually wants to go away from Kardevyle[357] –

> The barouns sawe comen rydynge
> Ten maydenes, bryght of ble.
> Ham thoghte they wer so bryght and schene
> That the lodlokest, wythout wene,
> Har Quene than myghte be. (ll. 848-52)

They ride towards king Arthur and ask him to prepare immediately a chamber for their queen, "for sche cometh ryde" (l. 867). Their arrival throws the whole court into total confusion, until another ten fairy maidens arrive, "fayryr than the other ten of syght" (l. 884). One of them demands king Arthur to prepare the hall and cover the walls with rich drapes, since "ayens my lady Tryamour" (l. 906). Concerned, Guenevere begs the king not to free Launfal and tries to convince the king that the jurors are humiliating him. Meanwhile,

> The barouns seygh come rydynge
> A damesele alone
> Upoon a whyt comely palfrey
> They saw never non so gay
> Upon the grounde gone:
> Gentyll, jolyf as bryd on bowe,
> In all manere fayr ynowe
> To wonye yn wordly wone. (ll. 926-33)

What follows is a rather detailed description of Tryamour, a description Chestre did not provide previously, presumably to keep readers in suspense. She is bright, has grey eyes and a lovely

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357 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 02 June 2016].

countenance. She has blonde hair on which a golden crown filled with gems lies. Her attractive body is covered by a purple mantle trimmed with ermine. Her saddle blankets are made of green velvet and painted with images, their borders made of golden bells. The saddle bows are decorated with a couple of Indian jewels. She bears a gyrfalcon on her hand, which may indicate her status of princess but also make her look like a warrior, given also the previous description of her saddle .[358] Furthermore, she is followed by two greyhounds with golden collars. Relieved to see her,

> "Her", [Launfal] seyde, "comyth my lemman swete
> Sche myghte me of my balys bete,
> Yef that lady wolde" (ll. 970-2)

She gets closer to king and queen, dismounts from her horse, takes off her mantle "that men schuld her beholde the bet" (l. 980) and begins to speak:

> Syr, hydyr I com for swych a thyng:
> To skere Launfal the knyght;
> That he never, yn no folye,
> Besofte the quene of no drurye,
> By dayes ne by nyght.
> 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 seyde
> That hys lemmannes lothlokest mayde
> Was fayryre than was sche. (ll. 992-1002)

King Arthur recognises that she is actually more beautiful than Guenevere, so Tryamour walks towards her and "blew on her swych a breth | That never eft myght sche se" (ll. 1007-8).[359] This event has an analogue neither in the *lai de Lanval* nor in *Sir Landevale*. Tryamour mounts on her palfrey, (apparently) summons Gyfre, who brings a further horse with him, which Launfal mounts and rides away from Kardevyle together with Tryamour, "fer ynto a jolyf ile, | Olyroun that hyghte" (ll. 1022-3). Once a year, Launfal's steed can be heard, and whoever wishes to joust with Launfal can do it. According to Wade, Chestre used this stratagem to let Launfal enjoy chivalric activities,

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358 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://www.d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal> [accessed 02 June 2016].

359 In his PhD thesis, Alaric Hall points out that pain in the eyes used to be associated with attacks by elves and that a good sight was indexical of masculinity and power (Hall, p. 129).

since it may be impossible for him to enjoy them in the Other World.[360] In other words, Chestre "attempts to give Launfal the best of both human and fairy worlds".[361] Chestre then reaffirms that "Launfal, wythouten fable, | That noble knyght of the Rounde Table, | Was taken ynto Fayrye" (ll. 1033-5), and that nobody has ever seen him again. Furthermore, Chestre makes sure his authorship is not doubted by anybody:

> Thomas Chestre made thys tale
> Of the noble knyght Syr Launfale,
> Good of chyvalrye. (ll.1029-41)

Chestre's ending is certainly longer and more effective than Marie de France's, who simply writes "Nuls hum n'en oï plus parler, | Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter" (ll. 645-6). It is more effective in that he gives us more information about Launfal's future life, yet both authors maintain they cannot tell us anything about what happens to the two lovers once they reach the Fairy World, which thus remains inaccessible to human eyes unless, as happens in *Sir Orfeo* and *The Wooing of Étaín*, humans enter it so that we can see it through their eyes.

As for the role of the fairy princess, she is an influential character: both in the *lai de Lanval* and in *Sir Launfal,* she has the power. She has the power to make the hero rich and, therefore, to control his life. Launfal relies upon Tryamour to be rescued from another woman – Guenevere – and from poverty. Gender norms are challenged, since in the Middle Ages – and, I would argue, sometimes even nowadays – men were the stronger sex, while women were fragile creatures who needed a man to be safe. In the *lai de Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, instead, it is a lady who assures the knight protection and wealth. Thomas Chestre is clearly anxious about this threat to masculinity, and resorts to some tricks as a form of compensation. For instance, Chestre makes Launfal show off his riches. Furthermore, Guenevere does not accuse him directly of homosexuality when he rejects her – although that is the implied meaning – while in Marie de France's *lai* the queen clearly accuses Lanval of sleeping with young boys. Marie de France has more fun playing with ambiguity

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360 Wade, p. 142.
361 Wade, p. 142.

and defying gender norms, probably because she is a female author and thus did not have Chestre's anxieties about the hero's masculinity being threatened. The traditional association male-power and female-lack of power is challenged in both texts. A woman is in both cases responsible for a man's wealth, but while Marie de France enjoys keeping an ambiguous attitude towards Lanval's masculinity, Chestre makes sure Launfal is always seen as a "manly man": he is not explicitly accused of being homosexual and he boasts of his gifts, thus not really managing to keep private and public separate.

The fairy princess and the fairy realm might also be seen as ways to escape real-life hardship. In this light, fairies could be interpereted as a form of escapism, as creatures who allow humans to find relief from real-life traumas. At the same time, though, fairies do also limit self-expression and self-realisation: Launfal, for example, comes back to the human world from the Other World once a year to enjoy human activities, which are thus prohibited to him in the fairy world. An extreme example of self-expression deprivation is Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, since she is trapped in the Fairy Land and prevented from enjoying every kind of human pleausure.

Fairies, thus, have the power to help humans to evade from real life (although Heurodis did not ask for that), but at a cost: humans have to behave as fairies wish, and the climax of this rule is reached in *Sir Launfal*, where the hero has to obey his fairy lady, who highly threatens his male nature.

4.2 The subtle bond between fairies and childhood

The protagonists of the poems I analyse in the following subsections are two children: that is explicitly told as for Degaré, who is twenty during the main events in the poem, whilst we can only infer from his description and actions that Thopas is a child. We will give a plausible explanation as to why the author of *Sir Degaré* and Chaucer make children the main characters of their works, and whether there is a link between their young age and their encounters with fairy creatures.

4.2.1 Sir Degaré and the fairy knight: an example of incubus?

The tale of *Sir Degaré* has survived in six manuscripts – of which one is the Auchinleck MS – and in three sixteenth-century printed copies.[362] It was composed in the early fourteenth century in the Southeast Midlands.[363]

This lai tells about a princess who gets raped and impregnated by a fairy knight and gives birth to a son.[364] Before leaving her, the fairy knight gives her a sword without a tip. Worried that people may think the son she carries is her father's, the princess leaves the new-born child outside a hermitage, together with some gold, a pair of gloves (sent by the fairy knight), and a letter explaining that the child can only love the woman whom the gloves fit perfectly, who is his mother. At the age of twenty, Degaré – this is the name of the child – begins to look for his parents. During his mission, he endures many vicissitudes which cause him unwittingly to marry his mother. The incest is prevented when he realises that the gloves fit her and that the woman he has married is actually his mother. She gives him the broken-tipped sword and lets him go to look for his father. During the journey, he falls in love with the mistress of a castle in the forest, where he is hosted one night. She begs him to stay with her but he wants to find his father first, so he promises her he will come back the following year. Finally, he meets the fairy knight, but still does not realise he is his father. During the fight, the fairy knight recognises the broken-tipped sword: the two reconcile and go back to the princess, who in the end marries the fairy knight. Later, Degaré marries the mistress of the castle in the forest.

After a brief introduction, the author tells us that

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362 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degare" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare-introduction> [accessed 05 June 2016].

363 "Sir Degaré" in *Database of Middle English Romance* / University of York, 2012 <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 06 June 2016].

364 I rely on the plot provided in "Sir Degaré" in *Database of Middle English Romance* / University of York, 2012 <http://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/> [accessed 06 June 2016].

> In Litel Bretaygne was a kyng
> Of gret poer in all thing, […]
> The Kyng he hadde none hair
> But a maidenchild, fre and fair; […]
> This maiden he loved als his lif,
> Of hire was ded the Quene his wif. (ll. 9-10, 19-20, 23-4)[365]

The king's wife died in giving birth to their daughter, whose beauty is admired by every king, emperor and duke. Many have asked permission to marry her, but "the Kyng answered ever | Than no man sschal here halden ever | But yif he mai in turneying | Him out of his sadel bring, | And maken him lesen hise stiropes bayne." (ll. 31-5). Many knights have tried to defeat him like that, but none has ever managed to.

We are then told that every year the king holds a feast in memory of his dead wife in an abbey in a nearby forest. The princess and two of her maidens ride through the forest, but they get lost, because "The wode was rough and thikke, iwis, | And thai token the wai amys. | Thai moste souht and riden west | Into the thikke of the forest" (ll. 61-4). They reach "a launde" (l. 65) and, uncertain about what to do,

> Hii leien hem doun upon a grene,
> Under a chastein tre, ich wene,
> And fillen aslepe everichone
> Bote the damaisele alone. (ll. 73-6)

The *chastein tre* is undoubtedly reminiscent of the *ympe-tre* in *Sir Orfeo*. What is more, it is almost noon and hot when they decide to rest under the *chastein tre*, once again as in the case of Heurodis when she is visited in a dream by the king of fairies. We have already seen in chapter three that, in the Bible, the burning sun makes men weaker and demons stronger.[366] Considering that the princess is raped by a fairy knight, in a Christian mode this might be interpereted as a demonic possession.

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365 All the excerpts from *Sir Degaré* are taken from Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degaré" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare> [accessed 06 June 2016].
366 Block Friedman, p. 188.

As for the chestnut tree, it symbolizes chastity in Christian iconography:[367] thus it may be a presage of the princess' imminent rape.

The princess decides to explore the land until "so fer in the launde she goht, iwis, | That she ne wot nevere whare se is" (ll. 79-80). While worrying about her situation,

> Toward hire comen a knight,
> Gentil, yong, and jolif man;
> A robe of scarlet he hadde upon;
> His visage was feir, his bodi ech weies;
> Of countenaunce right curteis;
> Wel farende legges, fot, and honde:
> Ther nas non in al the Kynges londe
> More apert man than was he. (ll. 90-7)

He is thus young and handsome, with beautiful face and body: he is the most attractive man the princess has ever seen,[368] and the contrast with the following rape scene is extremely enhanced.[369] He is as beautiful as the fairy princess in the *lai de Lanval* and in *Sir Launfal*. He begs her not to be afraid of him and then adds

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

His words are reminiscent of those of Tryamour: he claims he already knows her and says he wants her to be his *lemman* (lover). Unlike *Sir Launfal*, though, we can perceive a threat in his utterance, and I think it is because he is a male, and a male being on the edge between authoritarian and threatening towards a woman sounds much more dangerous than a woman being like that towards a man. It may be weird to think of Tryamour as an evil fairy forcing Launfal to have a romance with her against his will – although the fairy lover's dominance, as we have seen, does threaten Lanval's masculinity, especially in Chestre's version.

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367 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degare" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare-introduction> [accessed 06 June 2016].

368 His description is reminiscent of that of Sir Thopas, as we will see later. Sir Thopas, though, is described in an effeminate way (blond hair, red lips) with the intent of make readers and listeners laugh, while I would not say the same for the fairy knight. He is a fairy, thus he cannot be ugly.

369 Saunders, Corinne J., *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001, p. 214.

In *Sir Degaré*, what happens after their encounter leaves us without any doubt as for the fairy knight's nature, since "he anon gan hire at holde, | And did his wille, what he wolde. | He benam hire here maidenhod, | And seththen up toforen hire stod" (ll. 111-4). He then announces to her that she will bear his son and leaves her a broken-tipped sword to be given to the child when the time comes, so that, should they ever meet, he will be able to recognise his own son. After uttering these words, he disappears. As Wade points out, this is an "incubus-like behaviour".[370] As we have seen in chapter one, though, we cannot really differentiate in a crystal-clear way *fairies* from *elves* and *incubi*. Etymologically, *incubus* comes from Latin and means "a being lying on a sleeper" who acts at night-time and brings a sense of oppression.[371] We already have troubles in making our fairy knight fit this definition, since the princess is not raped while she is sleeping and the event takes place around noon. Furthermore, this definition makes us think of the incubus as an ugly creature, whilst the fairy knight is handsome. We have also seen, though, that St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that *incubi* sometimes impregnate human women, which perfectly matches what the *fairi knyghte* does here. He is surely an other-worldly creature who disrupts the moral laws of the human world.[372] There is little past work devoted to the fairy character in *Sir Degaré* but, whatever his exact nature is, he is a supernatural being who lives in a *launde* separated from the human world. The fact that he rapes a woman is surely a violation, but the consequent conception of the hero of the poem allows the act of rape to lose some of its negative connotations.[373] Moreover, the lack of abduction and the fairy nature of the knight as well make this outrageous behaviour somehow less violent.[374]

Shaken, the princess manages to go back to her maidens, goes to Mass at the abbey and then goes back to the castle with her father the king. The months pass by and her pregnancy begins to be obvious, though "therwhile she mighte, se hidde here sore" (l. 158). One day, though, she confesses

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370 Wade, p. 117.
371 Petrina, p. 393.
372 Saunders, p. 199.
373 Saunders, p. 215.
374 Saunders, p. 216.

to one of her maidens that she is "with quicke schilde" (l. 166) and that she is afraid other people, and most of all her father, find out about it:

> And yif [mi fader] hit himselve wite,
> Swich sorewe schal to him smite
> That never blithe schal he be,
> For al his joie is in me (ll. 171-4)

We will see later that this lai lends itself to an interesting psychoanalytical analysis as far as the mother-son and father-son relationships are concerned. I think, though, that even the king-princess relationship is worthy of attention. The princess is afraid not only that her father might discover her pregnancy, but also that other people, by seeing her belly, think she was raped by him and thus that she is carrying a child who is the product of an incest. Such a disturbing idea is somehow foreseen at the beginning of the poem, when we are told that the king would let someone marry his daughter only if the suitor in question beat him in a fight. He is depicted as a jealous father, who sometimes looks more like a jealous lover, which would explain why the princess is so concerned about him finding out about her condition.

The day of the birth comes: "a knaveschild ther was ibore: | Glad was the moder tharfore" (ll. 183-4). The princess cannot keep the child with her, so she takes some gold and silver, a pair of magic gloves "that nolde on no manne honde, | Ne on child ne on womman yhe nolde, | But on hire selve wel hye wolde" (ll.196-8), sent to her by the fairy knight, and writes a letter for whoever will find her child and will take care of him. In the letter, she asks for him to be christened by a priest and she requests that, when he is ten, he is given the pair of gloves. She then adds:

> And biddeth him, wharevere he go,
> That he no lovie no womman in londe
> But this gloves willen on hire honde;
> For siker on honde nelle thai nere
> But on his moder that him bere. (ll. 214-8)

She leaves at night with her son in a cradle and abandons him at the door of a hermitage. Early the following morning, the hermit finds the baby boy, reads the letter and takes the child to the chapel to baptize him:

> In the name of the Trinité,
> He hit nemnede Degarre (ll. 253-4)

"Degarre" means "thing that not never what hit is, | Other thing that is neggh forlorn also" (ll. 256-7). It comes from the French word *égaré*, whose literal meaning is "lost" and whose figurative meaning is "errant".[375] It goes without saying that it is an extremely meaningful name: it basically explains what the whole poem is about, that is a hero whose aim in life is to find out where he comes from and who he really is.[376] The truth about Degaré begins to come to light when his mother recognises him and reaches its climax when even his father realises Degaré is his son.

Degaré is fostered by the hermit's sister and her husband until he is ten years old, when he is "a fair child and a bold, | Wel inorissched, god and hende" (ll. 276-7). He ignores the fact that the hermit's sister and her husband are not his real parents, and thinks the hermit is his uncle. Back to the hermitage, he stays there until he is twenty, when the hermit gives him the letter his mother wrote. After reading it, Degaré thanks the hermit and "swor he nolde stinte no stounde | Til he his kinrede hadde ifounde." (ll. 309-10). The hermit gives him some money, a horse and armour, and Degaré himself chooses a branch of an oak as his weapon. It is meaningful that the hero chooses the oak, since it is symbolic not only for Christians – it seems the cross where Christ died was made of oak and thus it symbolizes strength of faith and virtue – but it was worshipped by Celtic populations too.[377]

Degaré is walking through a forest after midday when "he herde a noise kete | In o valai, an dintes grete" (ll. 339-40). He sees an earl, a knight and four servants, who apparently have just hunted a couple of deers. Their dogs are lost and they are being threatened by a dragon "ful of filth and venim, | With wide throte and teth grete, | And wynges bitere with to bete." (ll. 348-50).

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375 Simpson, James, "Violence, Narrative and Proper Name: *Sir Degaré*, 'The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney', and the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*", in Jane Gilbert & Ad Putter, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Harlow: Longman, 2000, pp. 122-41 (p. 124).

376 Simpson, p. 124.

377 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degare" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare-introduction> [accessed 07 June 2016].

In medieval literature, dragons have a number of meanings and their fights against humans can be interpreted in numerous ways.[378] In medieval bestiaries, the dragon is usually associated with the devil because of the similarities in their physical aspects and behaviour,[379] and here this association is supported by the fact that it is past midday, and midday, in the Bible, is considered the time when the devil is stronger. Although dragons were sometimes actual physical animals, they also usually symbolized some form of sinfulness or, more often, they were considered "a foil to the valour of [their] human antagonist[s]".[380] Samantha Riches focuses on the relationship between dragons and saints, which is not our domain since Degaré is a simple boy when he defeats the dragon. For this reason, I think this episode was narrated by the author as a meaningful goal for Degaré along his path towards manhood.

Back to our story: the knight and the servants are mortally wounded, while the earl is still fighting against the dragon. The earl sees Degaré and cries for help. The dragon sees the young boy and heads towards him,

> Ac Degarre was ful strong;
> He tok his bat, gret and long,
> And in the forehefd he him batereth
> That al the forehefd he tospatereth.
> He fil adoun anon right, […]
> And [Degarre] with his bat leide upan,
> And al tofrusst him ech a bon,
> That he lai ded, stille as a ston. (ll. 373-7, 382-4)

The earl, to thank him for saving his life, leads him to his castle and offers him "rentes, tresor, and eke lond", but Degaré answers that he will accept all that the earl offers him only if the gloves left by his mother fit one of the women who live in that country, otherwise he will leave. Degaré cannot marry any woman until he has found his mother: from a psychoanalytic point of view, it means that first he has to overcome the Oedipal complex.[381]

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378 Riches, Samantha J. E., "Encountering the Monstrous: Saints and Dragons in Medieval Thought", in Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, eds., *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, Cardiff: Universiry of Wales Press, 2003, pp. 196-218 (p. 197).
379 White, T.H., ed., *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, London: Cape, 1954, pp. 165-7.
380 Riches, pp. 197-8.
381 Simpson, p. 128.

The gloves do not fit any of the women, thus he leaves, not before the earl has provided him with a horse, armour, a palfrey, a male servant and has dubbed him knight. This marks his process of growth, which allegedly began with the killing of the dragon: he was a child before defeating it, now he is a knight.[382]

Degaré then comes to know that the king is looking for men who would joust against him in order to marry his daughter, otherwise he may die without leaving any heirs. The king has always defeated every knight who showed up in the most brutal ways, yet Degaré decides to face him anyway, and since nobody knows who he is, he is ready either to live or to die. Before the joust, Degaré goes to the church to pray and leave some offers: "To the Fader he offreth hon florine, | And to the Sone another al so fine, | And to the Holi Gost the thridde" (ll. 489-91). The day of the joust comes, and once again the author enhances people's ignorance about who Degaré is:

> […] al that in the felde beth
> Thay the justes iseth
> Seide that hi never yit iseghe
> So pert a man with here egye
> As was this gentil Degarre,
> Ac no man wiste whennes was he. (ll. 503-8)

The constrast with what is going to happen later is obvious: once he marries the princess – his own mother – he himself will gain self-knowledge as he never had before.

The fight between Degaré and the king is rather long – it takes seventy-five lines (509-584) – and in the end Degaré wins. The princess is

> […] sori,
> For hi wist wel forwhi:
> That hi scholde ispoused ben
> To a knught that sche never had sen,
> And lede her lif with swich a man
> That sche ne wot who him wan,
> No in what londe he was ibore;
> Carful was the levedi therefore. (ll. 585-92)

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382 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degare" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare-introduction> [accessed 07 June 2016].

These lines make us laugh because we know the truth and we realise that if things go smoothly, the result would be incest. As Elizabeth Archibald points out, though, this poem is not a moral about incest.[383] After raping her, the fairy knight leaves to the princess two tokens – the broken-tipped sword and the magic gloves – which are pivotal to the unfolding of the story: the fairy knight recognises his son thanks to the broken-tipped sword, whereas the princess recognises her son thanks to the pair of gloves.[384] What is more, in the letter she writes before abandoning her child she somehow reveals that their incest is likely to happen,[385] in that she writes down that he only must love the woman whom the gloves fit, and adds "for siker on honde nelle thai nere | But on his moder that him bere" (ll. 217-8). We do not really feel actual suspense:[386] we can guess that Degaré will try the gloves on her and thus realise she is his mother.

The king grants him his daughter's hand and the two get married, still unconscious of their mutual kinship, which the author, though, never misses a chance to highlight, as with the rather disturbing lines "so dede Sire Degarre the bold | Spoused ther is moder | And that hende levedi also | Here owene sone was spoused to, | That sche upon here bodi bar." (621-5). Suddenly Degaré remembers the gloves and, mad with despair, reveals to king and princess what he should have done before marrying her:

> I chal never, for no spousing,
> Therwhiles I live, with wimman dele,
> Widue ne wif ne dammeisele,
> But she this gloves mai take and fonde
> And lightlich drawen upon hire honde. (ll. 654-8)

This is a noteworthy excerpt because for the first time Degaré forgets about the magic gloves, unlike he did when the earl offered him a wife.[387] He marries his mother and that is a transgression of human nature, as if looking for one's mother were the same of looking for one's wife.[388] This

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383 Archibald, Elizabeth, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 129.

384 Archibald, p. 129.
385 Archibald, p. 129.
386 Archibald, p. 129.
387 Simpson, p. 129.
388 Simpson, pp. 129-30.

transgression, though, is necessary for restoration.[389] It is all a question of things nearly done, all of which are functional to a happy ending: "Degaré must nearly kill his grandfather, must nearly sleep with his mother, and must nearly kill his father" (as we will see later) in order for the natural order of familial relations to be restored.[390] As Simpson puts it, "Civilized order, in the world of this romance, is only achievable by entering into (rather than repressing) all that threatens that order".[391]

The princess recognises the gloves straight away ("She knew tho gloves thatwere hire", l. 663) and tries them. They perfectly fit her, so she exclaims:

> God, mercy, mercie!
> Thou art mi sone hast spoused me her,
> And ich am, thi moder der.
> Ich hadde the loren, ich have the founde;
> Blessed be Jhesu Crist that stounde! (ll. 668-72)

The two embrace, overcome with joy, while the king, rather puzzled, asks his daughter for an explanation of what has just happened. She tells him all the truth, and Degaré immediately asks his mother where he can find his father. She replies she cannot tell him anything about his father – primarily because she really does not know who he is, but also, I suppose, because he is not a human being, thus she is somehow magically tied to secrecy, similarly to what happens in *Sir Launfal* between Launfal and Tryamour. Anyway, she gives him the broken-tipped sword. Degaré says:

> Whoso hit aught, he was a man!
> Nou ich have that ikepe,
> Night ne dai nel ich slepe
> Til that I mi fader see,
> Yif God wile that hit so be. (ll. 712-6)

Degaré's wish to find his father may be seen as a response to the incestuous desire he felt for his mother: such a deep almost-transgression of the mother-son relationship caused in Degaré the "counter-impulse of restorative activity".[392]

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389 Simpson, p. 130.
390 Simpson, p. 129.
391 Simpson, p. 129.
392 Simpson, p. 129.

Degaré leaves and one day, in the middle of an ancient forest, "he segh a water cler, | And amidde a river, | A fair castel of lim and ston: | Other wonying was ther non." (ll. 739-42). He enters it to ask for shelter, but apparently nobody lives in it, until he sees

> Four dammaiseles, gent and fre;
> Ech was itakked to the kne.
> The two bowen an arewen bere,
> The other two icharged were
> With venesoun, riche and god. (ll. 771-5)

Degaré greets them but, instead of greeting him back, they enter a chamber and bar it. Then, a dwarf shows up who prepares the hall of the castle for a dinner. Indeed,

> […] ther come out of the bour
> A dammeisele of gret honour;
> In the lond non fairer nas;
> In a diapre clothed she was (ll. 801-4)

The lady has a bright complexion and, during the dinner, Degaré falls in love with her. The castle being surrounded by water, the lady's physical aspect and the fact that she is surrounded by beautifully clothed servants make us think that we are facing a group of fairies in a fairy land, although the author of the lai does not mention that.

After dinner, Degaré goes to bed and falls asleep quickly thanks to the sound of a harp. The following morning, he receives a reprimand by the lady:

> "Aris" sche seide, "grith the, and go!"
> And saide thus in here game:
> "Thou art worth to suffri schame,
> That al night as a best sleptest,
> And non of mine maidenes ne keptest." (ll. 851-5)

Degaré apologises and, overwhelmed by curiosity, asks her why women exclusively dwell in that castle.[393] She explains to him that she is the only daughter of a rich baron and that a powerful knight had fallen in love with her and tried to abduct her in every possible way, which caused the death of all her father's men. Moved by her story, Degaré tells her he will do whatever is needed to help. She replies:

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393 The theme of women living alone without any men is found in the Old Irish poem *The Voyage of Maelduin* (*Imram Mael Dúin*), where seventeen women welcome Mael Dúin and his seventeen men on the Island of Women. See Smyth, Daragh, *A Guide to Irish Mythology*, Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996, p. 90.

Yhe, Sire, […] than al mi lond
Ich wil the give into thin hond,
And at thi wille bodi mine,
Yif thou might wreke me of hine. (ll. 912-5)

Degaré defeats the aforementioned knight, who showed up to attack the castle again. As Corinne Saunders notes, Degaré saving the lady from a knight who allegedly wants to rape her balances his mother's rape,[394] and I also think it is a clear example of how everything that happens in this poem is functional to what happens next: if the fairy knight had not raped the princess, Degaré would have never been born, and if Degaré had never been born, who would have saved the damsel from that knight?

The lady invites Degaré to stay there with her, but he replies:

Wende ich wille into other londe,
More of haventours for to fonde;
And be this twelve moneth be go,
Agein ich wil come the to. (ll. 980-3)

This excerpt lends itself to a psychoanalytical reading: Degaré has found his mother, but he cannot marry the lady he likes until he finds his father too,[395] that is until he completely overcomes the Oedipal complex. Sad, she lets him go, though not without giving him gold, silver and good armour.

Degaré leaves and travels through many countries, until one day he meets a strong knight wearing a rich armour and carrying an azure and richly-decorated shield. The knight addresses him threateningly and utters "Yif thou comest to seke batail, | Here thou hast thi per ifounde: | Arme the swithe in this stounde!" (ll. 1011-3). Degaré accepts to fight, wears a helmet decorated with stones the lady of the castle gave him, takes his shield and "agein the fader gan ride, | And noither ne knew other no wight!" (ll. 1029-30). According to Simpson, the helmet is the last of a group of objects which mark Degaré's growth: at first, he is knighted by the earl, who also gives him his first sword

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394 Saunders, p. 217.
395 Simpson, p. 128.

and armour, then his mother leaves him the broken-tipped sword, and last his lady gives him the helmet.[396]

We, on the other hand, are utterly aware that the strong knight is the *fairi knyghte* who impregnated Degaré's mother. This fight between father and son can be read in the light of the Oedipal complex: according to Freud, male children subconsciously wish to kill their fathers in order to sexually enjoy – once again, subconsciously – their mothers. As in the case of Degaré's almost-incest with his mother, he also needs to almost kill his father in order for familial stability to be gained, because, in this lai, "accidents are programmed to reaffirm a genetically pre-given order of things".[397] According to Simpson, who in his essay focusses on the transgressive extravagancies of medieval romances, the plot of *Sir Degaré* at first seems intricate but actually is rather linear, because all the events that happen are functional to the ending of the story.[398] As we have seen earlier, Degaré has to nearly-kill his grandfather in order to meet his mother. He then has to nearly-sleep with his mother in order to recognise her. Finally, he has to nearly-kill his father in order for him to recognise his son: when Degaré unsheathes his broken-tipped sword, the *fairi knyghte* asks questions about his identity, and when Degaré reveals his name,

> O Degarre, sone mine!
> Certes ich am fader thine!
> And bi thi swerd I knowe hit here:
> The point is in min aumenere. (ll. 1058-61)

They both rejoice over their reconciliation, and Degaré proposes that they go back together "to [his] moder […] | For she is in gret mourning" (ll. 1073-4). The fairy knight accepts and

> Into Ynglond they went in fere.
> They were armyd and well dyghtt.
> A sone as the lady saw that knyght,
> Wonther wel sche knew the knyght;
> Anon sche chaungyd hur colowr aryght,
> And seyd, "My dere sun, Degaré,
> Now thou hast broughtt thy father wyth the!" (ll. 1077-83)

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396 Simpson, p. 128.
397 Simpson, p. 130.
398 Simpson, p. 130.

The marriage between Degaré and his mother is nullified and "the knyghtt weddyd the lady" (l. 1091). Now that the natural order mother-father-son has been restored, Degaré can finally marry the bright lady he met at the castle in the forest.

The plot of *Sir Degaré* is cyclical, in that readers can easily guess what is the potential order of the events.[399] Since the princess has been raped and impregnated by the *fairi knyghte*, who then leaves her two tokens (the magic gloves and the broken-tipped sword), it is predictable that those tokens will be the means through which two recognition scenes will take place, the recognition of the mother and the recognition of the father respectively. Furthermore, we have seen that the bright lady Degaré marries in the end might be a fairy, given the fact that her castle is surrounded by water and that she lives with her maidens, exactly as Tryamour, for example. If she actually is a fairy, then the cyclical nature of the story is due also to the fact that, as the *fairi knyghte* marries a princess, so prince Degaré marries a fairy lady.

Moreover, once the fairy knight recognises his son, the story somehow has to come to an end because Degaré, the "lost" boy, is not lost anymore:[400] he now knows where he comes from and who his parents are, so there is no need for the story to go on. Degaré, I think, may be considered a liminal character, since he is half-human and half-fairy. He finally manages to become "entire" when he discovers his real identity thanks to the very character who made it complicated from the beginning, who is his father: the fairy knight plays thus a role in complicating but also ultimately establishing Degaré's identity. After twenty years of uncertainty, near-incests and near-parricides, everything has come back to normality, every character has gained its originary and legitimate role: the king is a grandfather, the fairy knight is a father, the princess is a mother, Degaré is their son, and the bright lady is his spouse. In this light, unlike *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Degaré* is a rather conservative poem, at least for two reasons. First, every event, as we have seen, is functional to move towards familial stability. Second, the only-partial condemnation of rape makes it possible that the fairy

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399 Simpson, p. 128.
400 Simpson, p. 131.

knight becomes part of Degaré's family, which to a modern reader sounds rather disturbing and creepy. What is even creepier is the fact that Degaré himself, the product of a rape, aims to "redress" the crime "on a structural level",[401] by wishing and obtaining that her mother's rapist marries her in the end, which seems to promote patriarchal and sexual violence. These features make the lai quite conservative: the princess has no choice but to accept to marry the fairy knight who raped her – although we are not told whether she is reluctant or not – and the most powerful characters are without a doubt the male ones.

We have also seen that Degaré is named "child" on several occasions, even after he has been dubbed knight and even though he is twenty when he starts looking for his parents. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury suggest that the term "child" was of common use at the time even though, in a modern view, Degaré is not a child any longer.[402] In the Middle Ages, however, the idea of adolescence did not exist, and it kept on being confused with childhood until the eighteenth century.[403] I took this topic into consideration because *Sir Degaré* may be read as a poem about escaping unnaturally extended childhood: Degaré fights hard to reach his goals, and when he finds out who his parents are, he is finally able to create a family on his own. We will talk about childhood in a more detailed way in the next section, where I analyse Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

4.2.2 Chaucer's The Tale of Sir Thopas: the supernatural as comic feature

Geoffrey Chaucer owes much of his fame to his *Canterbury Tales*, a group of tales – plus the *General Prologue* – dealing with a great number of themes and belonging to different genres, and most likely begun around 1387. There are twenty-four tales and their composition was probably

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401 Saunders, p. 213.
402 Anne Laskaya & Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Degare" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, published online in TEAMS Middle English Texts Series <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-degare-introduction> [accessed 15 June 2016].
403 Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood*, translated from the French by Robert Baldick, London: Cape, 1962, p. 25.

interrupted because of Chaucer's death in 1400.[404] For the purpose of this thesis, I devote this section to the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, since a fairy creature – an elf queen – appears in it. Many scholars have defined this tale "doggerel"[405] and it is generally agreed that it "is a parody of the popular romance" or a kind represented by *Sir Orfeo* and the Middle English romances studied in this chapter:[406] the story is filled with mockery and irony. Chaucer is the real author of *The Canterbury Tales* – he is the one who wrote them – but the only tales narrated by the pilgrim Geoffrey Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* are the *Tale of Melibee* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas* – the others being narrated by different pilgrims (e.g. the Wife of Bath, the Squire, the Parson, the Monk). The *Tale of Sir Thopas* is about a knight who falls in love with an *elf-queene* – a fairy queen. As I have explained in the first chapter, *elf* is one of the first English words denoting an other-worldly creature, and Chaucer considered it a synonym of *fairy*. Nevertheless, the term *fairye* – or *fayerye* – in Chaucer also indicates the land of fairies and not necessarily a supernatural being.[407] After dreaming of her, Sir Thopas manages to enter the "contree of Fairye" (l. 802),[408] hoping to see her in person, but he is defied by a giant, "sire Olifaunt" (l. 808).[409] They arrange a fight for the following day, but Chaucer is interrupted all of a sudden by the Host, after having described the knight's armour.[410] This interruption is integral to his parody of popular romance.[411]

Sir Thopas is introduced to the listeners/readers as follows:

> a knyght was fair and gent
> In bataille and in tourneyment;
> His name was sire Thopas.
>
> Yborn was in fer contree,
> In Flanders, al biyonde the see,
> At Poperyng, in the place. […]
> [He] was a doghty swayn;

404 Cooper, Helen, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, p. 5.
405 Benson, Larry D., ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 3; Cooper, Helen, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, London: Duckworth, 1983, p. 86.
406 Cooper, Helen, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, London: Duckworth, 1983, p. 92.
407 Gray, Douglas, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 177.
408 Benson, p. 214.
409 Benson, p. 214.
410 Rudd, Gillian, *The Complete Critical Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 138.
411 Benson, p. 16; Gaylord, Alan T., "Chaucer's Dainty 'Dogerel'. The 'Elvyssh' Prosody of Sir Thopas", in Jean E. Jost, ed., *Chaucer's Humor: Critical Essays*, New York: Garland, 1994, pp. 271-94, p. 271.

> Whit was his face as payndemayn,
> His lippes rede as rose;
> His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,
> And I yow telle in good certayn
> He hadde a semely nose.
>
> His heer, his berd was lyk saffroun,
> That to his girdel raughte adoun;
> His shoon of cordewane.
> Of Brugges were his hosen broun,
> His robewas of syklatoun,
> That coste many a jane.   (ll. 715-20, 724-35)[412]

Mockery comes up already in this brief description: Sir Thopas has red lips and blond hair and beard. Except for the latter, these features recall the typical ones of women praised by medieval writers (and are reminiscent of the threat to Launfal's masculinity). Indeed, this passage brings images of Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura to my mind.[413] Poperyng, the town in Flanders where Sir Thopas is born, might have been chosen by Chaucer because of its funny sound.[414] Even the fact that Chaucer describes Flanders as a "fer contree" is quite ironical, since Flanders was a region of merchants, a "trade route",[415] England's main partner in its huge wool trade, and listeners probably expected to hear the name of a far-away country such as Greece or Turkey.[416]

One day, Sir Thopas rides through the forest, where he comes across several wild beasts and finally falls asleep and dreams of an elf queen:

> O Seinte Marie, benedicite!
> What eyleth this love at me
> To bynde me so soore?
> Me dremed al this nyght, pardee,
> An elf-queene shal my lemman be
> And slepe under my goore.   (ll. 784-89)

Chaucer might have known *Sir Orfeo*, from which he might have drawn inspiration. Indeed, two things are in common with *Sir Orfeo.* First, the presence of wild beasts in the woods and, secondly,

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412 All the excerpts from *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are taken from Benson, 1987, pp. 213-17.
413 Women are compared to angels (they are called *donne angelicate*) in the Italian literary movement Dolce Stil Novo. A description of Laura as an angel can be found in Petrarch's sonnets *Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi* and *Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro*. Dante dedicates a whole piece of work – *Vita Nova* – to his love for Beatrice Portinari, from the day he met her at the age of nine until her premature death, at which point he elevates her to a an angel and a spiritual figure.
414 Gray, p. 441.
415 Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales,* p. 169.
416 Gaylord, p. 277.

the fact that the fairy queen appears to the knight when he is in a dream-like state of mind, as happens to Heurodis (though, in that case, it was not a fairy queen but a fairy king). Unlike Orfeo, however, our protagonist does not carry a harp with him – instead, the harp is among the belongings of the elf queen:

> Heere is the queene of Fayerye,
> With harpe and pipe and symphonye,
> Dwellinge in this place.   (ll. 814-16)

What is quite comic in this tale is the fact that Sir Thopas does not so much fall in love with an elf queen as decide to fall in love with one, even though he has not seen her in person yet; he starts looking for her only after he has taken that decision:

> A elf-queene wol I love, ywis,
> For in this world no womman is
> Worthy to be my make
> In towne […]
>
> Into his sadel he clamb anon,
> And priketh over stile and stoon
> An elf-queene for t'espye.   (ll. 790-93, 797-99)

The parody of popular romance reaches its climax here. We witness the reversal of the canons of love: instead of seeing a woman and then falling in love with her, Sir Thopas falls in love with the elf queen first, and then leaves to see her – although Chaucer's narration is interrupted before they can meet. This reversal is unusual, all the more so because Chaucer is obsessed with eyes as the source of love, as we can see in his *Troilus and Criseyde*. Troilus is in the temple when "his eye percede, and so depe it wente,| Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente".[417] Chaucer is thus omitting an important aspect of his idea of love in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, and by doing so he highlights even more the reversal of love canons.

To be more specific regarding the parody of popular romances, Benson maintains that "almost every line has its parallel in one or another of the popular *minstrel romances*."[418] Main features of these minstrel romances are the use of "fit divisions" – the *Tale of Sir Thopas* has three – and the

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417 Benson, p. 477.
418 Benson, p. 16.

omission of the psychological sides of the characters in favour of action.[419] As far as the three fits are concerned, each one introduces a different part of the story and begins with Chaucer asking the listeners to pay attention to what is going to be told:[420] "Listeth, lordes, in good entent" (l.712); "Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale (l. 833); "Now holde youre mouth, *par charitee,*| Bothe knyght and lady free,| And herkneth to my spelle" (l. 891-93). The first fit opens with the introduction of Sir Thopas and ends with Sir Thopas fleeing away from the *contree of Fairye,* after having arranged a battle with the giant for the following day. The second fit is a long description of Sir Thopas's preparation for the fight. As Gray points out, this division is extremely – and comically – detailed:[421] six lines are devoted to Sir Thopas's meal, and as many as thirty to the description of his clothes: listeners are told every detail of his *breech* (trousers), *sherte* (shirt), *aketoun* (a quilted jacket to wear under the armour), *haubergeoun* (mail shirt), *hawberk* (plate armour) with the *cote-armour* (coat of arms), *jambeux* (leg-armour) and *helm* (helmet).[422] What is more, Sir Thopas "swoor on ale and breed | How that the geaunt shal be deed" (ll. 872-73). Swearing on ale and bread looks like something both blasphemous and comic. This fit also illustrates the lack of attention to the psychological side of the hero: no attempt is made to describe his state of mind . The third – and last – fit is a hyperbolic portrait of Sir Thopas, who is depicted as the one who "bereth the flour | Of roial chivalry!" (ll. 901-02) in comparison to other well-known knights of popular romances. A simile ("His goode steede al he bistrood, | And forth upon his wey he glood | As sparcle out of the bronde", ll. 903-05) and a hyperbole ("Upon his creest he bar a tour, | And therinne stiked a lilie flour", ll. 906-07) reinforce the idea of Sir Thopas as an extremely brave and adventurous knight. Besides the hyperbole itself, even the simile is hyperbolic, so Chaucer keeps making fun of Sir Thopas, undermining the virtuous implications of the two figures of speech. He even "drank water of the well, | As dide the knyght sire Percyvell" (ll. 915-16). At this point, Chaucer is about to

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419 Benson, p. 17.
420 Gray, p. 441.
421 Gray, p. 441.
422 Modern English translation are provided by Benson.

continue and finally tell about the battle against the giant Olifaunt everybody was waiting for, but the Host interrupts him all of a sudden: "Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee" (l.919) and labels the tale a "rym dogerel" (l. 925). As Gray says, however, literally speaking the Host is right to be angry at Chaucer.[423] It is the real-life audience, at this point, that should recognise the irony and realise the tale is badly written and ridiculous on purpose.

I would like to focus now on the prologue of this tale. Having just listened to *The Prioresses Tale*, which is about a child martyr killed by Jews, the Host asks Chaucer to tell a "tale of myrthe, and that anon" (l. 706). Before saying that, he also maintains that Chaucer looks like "a popet in an arm t'enbrace | For any womman, smal and fair of face" (ll. 701-02). The Host then adds that "[Chaucer] seemeth elvyssh by his countenance, | For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce" (ll 703-04). He is thus saying that Chaucer seems a doll (*popet*) and "mysterious, not of this world" (*elvyssh*).[424] But what is the actual meaning of *elvyssh*? Richard Firth Green gives us an account of the different meanings of the word *elvyssh*, which seems to have different meanings in different contexts: "mysterious", "strange", "weird", "foolish", but also "supernatural", "elvish" and "magical" (these last three are linked together).[425] He especially thinks of the *elvysshe craft* (l. 751), that is alchemy, in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Having to choose among many potential meanings, Firth Green chooses "elvish", thus also "supernatural" and "magical", so that the craft of alchemy is a fairy craft.[426] A relationship exists between an alchemist and a fairy thanks to their essence of marginal beings and to the fact that fairy beliefs and alchemy "hovered at the very edge of orthodox thought": indeed, men of religion thought of fairies as "minor devils".[427] One other quality in common between alchemists and fairies is transformation: alchemists turn metals into gold and fairies perform changelings and turn humans into inanimate objects or animals.[428] We thus have to

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423 Gray, p. 441.
424 Benson, p. 213.
425 Firth Green, Richard, "Changing Chaucer", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 25 (2003), pp. 27-52 (p. 28-9).
426 Firth Green, p. 29.
427 Firth Green, p. 35.
428 Firth Green, p. 42-4.

do with liminal creatures with the power of transformation: it is obvious that Chaucer believed neither in alchemy nor, even more so, in fairies, and that is even clearer given the satirical use of fairies in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (about which I will write later) and the pointless quest of an elf queen in *Sir Thopas*.[429]

Lee Patterson advances an extremely interesting interpretation in his article "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*". According to him, the term "popet" and the phrase "smal and fair of face" hint that Sir Thopas is actually a child. This idea can be confirmed by the use of the noun "swayn" (young gentleman)[430] to define the protagonist and by the fact that his lips and hair, besides recalling those of a woman (as I have pointed out previously), might be those of a child too.[431] One could refute this theory by pointing out that Sir Thopas has a beard too, which surely is not an attribute of a child. A possible explanation for that might be that Sir Thopas is a pre-adolescent, or maybe the beard is mentioned but does not exist yet, and Chaucer assumes it will be the same colour as the boy's hair. Furthermore, Patterson suggests that the giant Olifaunt might be compared to the "village bully" against whom the child Thopas wants to fight, wearing the armour of a knight.[432] One other function of the adjective "elvyssh" in the prologue might also be simply to anticipate the other-worldly element of the tale, on which Chaucer relies to show "the power of imagination".[433] As we all know, imagination plays an important role in the life of children, and the fact that the object of Sir Thopas's quest is an elf queen, thus someone belonging to the other world instead of the human world, is the result of fantasy.[434] That being said, Patterson's theory of Thopas as a child makes perfect sense and is supported by many other factors. For example, I have mentioned that Sir Thopas swears by ale and bread to kill the giant, which is something that has nothing to do with

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429 Firth Green, p. 51.
430 Benson, p. 213.
431 Patterson, Lee, " 'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 11 (1989), pp. 117-175 (p. 129).
432 Patterson, p. 130.
433 Patterson, pp. 128-29.
434 Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* p. 217.

chivalry and honour, but might have been considered suitable by a little boy who pretended to be a knight. Also, Sir Thopas is given the epithet of "child" in the tale twice (l. 817, 830), and the fact that he "escapeth" from the giant might be associated with the flight of a child from the bully who torments him. I think that a plus point for the theory of Sir Thopas being a child is pointed out by Susan Crane: she highlights that the hero is alone in this tale and no other characters surround him, apart from the elf queen, the giant and Sir Thopas's "mynstrales" (l. 845).[435] Sir Thopas might easily be a little boy because he has no duties to fulfil, no parents to whom necessarily to obey, no princess he is bound to marry despite longing for an other-worldly woman.[436]

Apart from the need to show the power of imagination and thus identify Sir Thopas with a child, the fairy world appears in this tale also because it is a literary trope in medieval literature and Chaucer loves playing with genre. As I have already pointed out, it seems clear that Chaucer understood fairies/elves simply as a literary device and by exploiting it in a tale about an aspiring knight who believes in them and decides to love their queen, he is laughing at the medieval middle class, who used to read those kinds of romances, probably actually believed in elves and wished to be part of the aristocracy. It is also plausible that children used to believe in fairies, which might be a further explanation of why Sir Thopas is depicted as a little boy. We have to underline indeed that, in the Middle Ages, elves/fairies were not thought to be a separate species, special creatures on a different level in comparison with humans. On the contrary, they were considered as another ethnic group, and maybe that is the reason why many people were convinced they actually existed. What is more, the fact that people – mostly illiterate people – believed in fairies is indirectly proved by Chaucer himself, otherwise there would be no reason for him to parody fairy beliefs as harshly as he does in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Chaucer is allegedly trying to prove that fairies can deceive only those stupid people who are attracted by the glamour of a fairy life, and who consequently believe

435 Crane, Susan, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 29.
436 Crane, p. 29.

in them almost as if they had been bewitched. Fairy Land was considered the place-to-be by many, and Chaucer demonstrates how illusory such an idea is, as illusory as Sir Thopas' s desire to marry an elf queen he had not even ever seen before. The subtle but extremely important difference is that Sir Thopas is a child, so the fact that he believes in fairies is justified by his fertile imagination, while there is no excuse for adults who still believe in elves.

Let us now briefly concentrate on the role of Chaucer himself in this tale. When, at the beginning of the prologue, the Host asks the pilgrim Chaucer "What man artow?", he actually means "What is your job?", a question which underlines the author Chaucer's "dilemma of self-authorial definition".[437] Chaucer the author, by writing in bad verse and by imitating *minstrel romances*, is making fun of courtly minstrels and also of "literary ambition and chivalric achievement": we can witness here Chaucer's disengagement from the world of adults,[438] and what better, for this purpose, than imagining another world, a world of fantasy, whose author is an *elvyshh popet*?[439] We saw that the adjective *elvyssh* denotes imagination and magic in Chaucer, but it does also label Chaucer as an author with his "head in the clouds" and who, as a consequence, writes in a bad way. But why does the pilgrim Chaucer tell such a bad story? Why is he making fun of himself? I think it is because he thinks of himself as such a gifted author that he can allow himself to do that: he writes badly but he can do so because he perfectly knows how to write well. It is as if he were saying: "I am so clever I can write poorly". Chivalric traditions which could be found in romances here sound meaningless conventions that can be easily parodied,[440] but even to do that requires great ability in writing skills. The irony and self-deprecation of Chaucer the pilgrim is thus counterbalanced by the greatness of Chaucer the author. Curiously enough, the same

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437 Patterson, pp. 118-20.
438 Patterson, p. 133.
439 The fact that Chaucer, while self-deprecating himself, is defined as a *popet* by the Host, suggests Chaucer believes that fantasy is rather girly – even at the time a doll was a toy for little girls. What is more, Thopas' physical aspect is reminiscent of that of a girl, since he is blond and has red lips. It is as if Chaucer were trying to tell us that fantasy – thus fairies – is not boys' stuff. Chaucer also thinks that reading romances, which are based on fantasy, is a girly activity. For example, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Pandarus enters Criseyde's parlour, he sees her listening to a maiden reading aloud a romance (arguably the *Roman de Thebes*).
440 Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales,* p. 307.

question "What man artow?" is uttered also by the king of fairies when he asks Orfeo how he dared

to enter his reign (l. 421). Now, if we assume that Chaucer had read *Sir Orfeo*, which is a poem

involving fairies, and that the same question is found in one of Chaucer's tale concerning fairies, it

is unlikely that it was mere coincidence. Should we point out a parallelism, we can compare the

host Harry Bailey in the *Canterbury Tales* to the king of fairies in *Sir Orfeo*. By doing so, the Host

becomes a diabolical figure, and the consequences are stunningly similar: after that question, Orfeo

starts playing his harp, whereas Chaucer the pilgrim begins to tell his tale.

Coming back to the role of supernatural creatures, elves are mentioned also in *The Miller's*

Tale. This story is about a love triangle involving a carpenter, his wife Alison and her lover

Nicholas. At one point in the tale, Nicholas retires to his bedroom for two days to think about how

to trick the carpenter so that he and Alison can be together. The carpenter is worried and thinks that

Nicholas might be dead. He manages to enter the room, grabs Nicholas by the shoulders and says:

> What! Nicholay! What, how! What, looke
>   adoun!
> Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun!
> I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes. (ll. 3477-79)[441]

In the glossary, Benson translates *elves* into "evil spirits", and an almost identical translation is

proposed for *wightes* ("evil creatures"). In this case, so, the meaning of *elves* is close to the one

suggested by Lewis, who maintains that Longaevi can also be devils *tout court*.[442] As in *The Tale of*

Sir Thopas, here Chaucer is laughing at the carpenter who believes in elves.

The *Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Miller's Tale* are not the only ones in the *Canterbury Tales*

where fairy creatures appear. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the wife of Bath begins her story by

describing England at the time of King Arthur:

> In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.

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441 This excerpt from *The Miller's Tale* is taken from Benson, 1987, pp. 68-77.
442 Lewis, pp. 134-7.

> […] But now kan no man se none elves mo,
> For now the grete charitee and prayeres
> Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
> That serchen every lond and every streem,
> […] This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
> For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
> Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself […]
> Wommen may go saufly up and doun,
> In every bussh or under every tree
> Ther is noon other incubus but he,
> And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (ll. 857-61, 864-67, 872-74, 878-81)[443]

So, she is telling us that fairies, who used to live in great number in England, have been replaced by friars (*lymytours*), who settled all over the land. Not a fairy, nor an elf, nor an incubus could be found anymore. It is crucial to underline once again that Chaucer makes no distinction between the three of them: he begins by mentioning fairies, then says that there are no more elves and incubi. In this tale, the function of elves is satirical: Chaucer satirises the Church by claiming that friars, with the advent of Christianisation, go around and rape women as incubi used to do. This cruel anti-clerical satire, where friars are considered to act worse than non-Christian or demonic supernatural beings, does also emphasise that Chaucer's fairies are there to make a political point and are part of a rather grisly joke.

The main male character of the tale is a rapist knight. The queen tells him his life will be spared if he discovers what women desire most. Later in the tale, the knight – while looking for ladies to whom to ask that question – comes across a group of ladies dancing in the woods. It is generally agreed that these ladies are fairies, although they are simply referred to as *ladyes* and the word *fairye* never comes up in the text. When they disappear, the narrator says that "no creature saugh he that bar lyf" (l. 997). The theme of the dancing fairies is not new: as I have written in chapter one, we find it in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* too, which had been written almost two centuries before Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In the passage in question in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the knight is riding back home and

> in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
> In al this care, under a forest syde,

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443 All the excerpts from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are taken from Benson, 1987, pp. 116-22.

> Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
> Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;
> Toward yhe whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
> In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
> But certeinly, er he cam fully there,
> Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
> No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
> Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf.   (ll. 989-98)

The *wyf* herself, at this point, is to be considered a supernatural being. More specifically, the woman in this tale is identified by scholars as a *loathly lady*. Traditionally, loathly ladies are ugly women who threaten men: in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the woman insistently asks the rapist knight to marry her and he is obviously reluctant to do that because of her ugliness. At the end of the tale, however, she will change her physical aspect to please him, becoming a beautiful girl.[444]

One last tale I want to take into consideration is *The Merchant's Tale*. In here, fairy folklore mingles with the pagan underworld, because Pluto and Proserpina, the Roman king and queen of the underworld, become queen and king of the land of fairies.

> That in that gardyn, in the ferther syde,
> Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,
> And many a lady in his compaignye,
> Folwynge his wyf, the queene Proserpine.   (ll. 2226-29)[445]

The two of them act as moderators in the plot and they seem "happily settled in their own bickering marriage".[446] When they see May having sexual intercourse with young Damyan on a pear tree, thus betraying her blind husband January, Pluto:

> saugh this grete wrong,
> To Januarie he gaf agayn his sighte
> And made hym se as wel as evere he myghte. (ll. 2354-56)

January starts shouting at his wife but she replies to him:

> For certeinly, if that ye myghte se,
> Ye wolde nat seyn thise wordes unto me.
> Ye han som glymsyng, and no parfit sighte.

Both these scenes have been prophesised previously by Pluto and Proserpina:

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444 Carpenter, Ann, "Woman as Victim in Modern Folklore", in Abernethy, Francis Edward, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas*, University of North Texas Press, 1994, pp. 211-16 (p. 213)
445 All the excerpts from *The Merchant's Tale* are taken from Benson, 1987, pp. 154-68.
446 Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 211.

> "Dame […]
> I swoor myn ooth
> That I wolde graunten hym his sighte ageyn,
> My word shal stonde, I warne yow certeyn.
> I am a kyng; it sit me noght to lye"
> "And I" quod she, "a queene of Fayerye!
> Hir answere shal she have, I undertake."   (ll. 2311, 2313-17)

It seems that fairies appear in *The Merchant's Tale* both for satirical purposes and as literary trope: old January believes to the indirect words of the fairy queen Proserpina and forgives his unfaithful wife May, and at the same time the two sovereigns are key characters in the development of the plot and in the resolution of the crisis.

As for the link between fairies and childhood, it is quite evident in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. We have seen that Thopas is almost undoubtedly a child who tries to escape real life the moment he decides he wants to marry an elf queen. The theme of escapism is present is *Sir Launfal* too, but in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* Chaucer, by satirising the child's infuation for a fairy he has never seen, makes fun of and criticises those who look for happiness and pleasures somewhere else than the real world. Since Chaucer, unlike maybe other medieval people, is utterly convinced of the non-existence of fairies, we might argue that fantasies about fairies in here have an anti-escapist role. Let us compare, for instance, *Sir Launfal* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Launfal flees from the Arthurian court because he does not like the way he is treated there, meets an empowered fairy lady who grants him wealth, and in the end flees with her towards the Other World. All this, though, is possible at a cost: Launfal has to accept the fairy lady's superiority in their relationship, and in the end he has to give human pleasures up – although Chestre says he comes back to the real world to joust once a year. Thopas' ambitions are rather similar to Launfal's, in that he wants to marry a fairy queen, but Chaucer makes clear that Thopas is a child who plays with his fantasy. By turning fairies into a child's fantasy, Chaucer satirises everything I have argued for in the analyses of the previous poems: according to Chaucer, basically, looking for satisfaction and self-realisation in another world is childish. Sir Thopas has fun pretending to be a knight who looks for his fairy queen, and by

swearing on ale and bread he performs a knightly ceremony in a comic way . This knight-like behaviour was common among medieval children, for whom playing and pretending to be at war was seen as a veritable military training.[447] Nicholas Orme thus disagrees with Philippe Ariès, who, as we have previously seen, writes in his *Centuries of Childhood* that in the Middle Ages there was basically no distinction between adolescents and children. According to him, "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist".[448] Orme, instead, proves that medieval children had their own culture, different from that of adults.[449] They enjoyed spending time with their peers and playing in the open air,[450] which is what Thopas does: albeit apparently alone, he wanders in the woods, dreams of an elf queen and then has fun pretending to be a knight who must defeat a giant and conquer his love. What if fairy research sheds a new light on the history of childhood? Let us begin with a definition of *child* in the Middle Ages. In the Middle English dictionary,[451] *child* is defined in the following ways: a) *a young child, a baby*; b) *the Christ Child*; c) *a boy or girl (usually to the age if puberty)*; d) *a schoolboy*; e) *a child regarded as innocent or immature*; f) *a young man; youth, lad*; g) *a youth of noble birth, esp. an aspirant to knighthood; also, a knight or warrior*; h) *a descendant, son or daughter*. In light of these definitons, I would say that the one which better fits Thopas are c) and e), in that he has not probably reached puberty yet (he has a beard but, as pointed out previously, it may indicate that he is a pre-adolescent or that, once grown, it would be the same colour as the hair), and he is immature, childish, naïve. He enjoys playing the part of the knight and likes the idea of falling in love with a supernatural queen. As for Degaré, the best definitions for him are f) and g). Indeed, he is a young man when he begins to look for his parents (he is about twenty), he is the noble son of a princess and also an aspirant – and then an actual – knight.

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447 Orme, Nicholas, "The Culture of Children in Medieval England", *Past & Present*, 148 (1995), pp. 48-88 (p. 63).
448 Ariès, p. 128.
449 Orme, p. 49.
450 Orme, p. 87.
451 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?size=First+100&type=headword&q1=child&rgxp=constrained>
    [accessed 08 August 2016].

Sir Orfeo, on the other hand, does not have a child as protagonist, yet it seems to have been written for a public of children. Bennet A. Brockman gives us two reasons for such a hypothesis. First, the poem is easily accessible to children thanks to its tone, theme and structure. Secondly, the poem was "physically available to children", who could read or hear it, also through simplified versions.[452] We know that simplified versions of *Sir Orfeo* did exist, since we still have some ballad versions of it, considerably reduced in length.[453] Furthermore, Brockam points out that the three manuscripts where *Sir Orfeo* is found were destined to families – where children were clearly included – and that the latest manuscript (Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 61) contains several religious, entertaining and devotional poems, which should prove that "Sir Orfeo [is] a kind of paradigm of medieval literature for children".[454] I think Brockman's thesis is highly susceptible of counterargument: medieval romances – among which *Sir Orfeo* – were specifically intended to be entertaining and somehow amusing, and they lack elements which could encourage an improvement in a person's spiritual and/or moral condition.[455] Simple tone, structure and theme, thus, do not necessarily mean that *Sir Orfeo* was exclusively children's literature. Similarly, the fact that the poem is found in manuscripts which belonged to families does not mean it was destined to children exclusively. A more convincing piece of evidence may be the fact that *Sir Orfeo* appears along with some didactic poems in the Bodleian Library manuscript, yet "didactic" does not necessarily mean "for children".

Back to Degaré and Thopas, now that we have come to the conclusion that they are children, we might argue that there is a strong correlation between fairies and children. In this light, the anonymous author of *Sir Degaré* and, in greater measure, Chaucer might be considered as writers who are ahead of writers of the Romantic era. Such a point of view may explain why stories

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452 Brockman, Bennett A., "The Juvenile Audience of *Sir Orfeo*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1 (1985), pp. 18-20 (p. 18-19).
453 Brockman, p. 19.
454 Brockman, pp. 19-20.
455 Petrina, Alessandra, "Prima della Letteratura per l'Infanzia: il Tardo Medioevo e la Prima Età Moderna", in Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, eds., *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter. Storia della Letteratura Inglese per l'Infanzia e la Gioventù*, Bologna: Bononia Universiry Press, 2011, pp. 33-54 (pp. 38-39).

(re)written during Romanticism for children, and whose contents are based on medieval folklore and deal with fairies and supernatural beings and/or objects in general – *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty* – are called "fairy tales".[456] C.S. Lewis himself, as we have already seen in chapter one, says he uses the word *longaevi* instead of *fairies* because the latter is too reminiscent of children's tales,[457] thus some kind of link between the idea of childhood and the fairy world is likely to exist.

Focusing my attention on Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, the anonymous *Sir Degaré* and Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas* has allowed me to explore a range of different fairy creatures: fairy princesses, *incubi* and elves.

As far as *Sir Launfal* and its Old French analogue are concerned, the fairy princess, be it the unnamed one or Tryamour, acts as the means through which the hero reaches wish-fulfilment and obtains what the human world has denied him: wealth and love. The fairy princess is extremely beautiful and rich, lives in Avalon – or Oliroun – and fits the canons of the *contes mélusiniens*. The happy ending, though, is a deviation from the "Mélusine-style" tales. It might be considered, however, as the new tendency of Middle English poems involving fairies, since even *Sir Orfeo* ends positively.

As for *Sir Degaré*, the fairy creature is no longer a woman, but a man, specifically a knight, who soils his hands with rape. Despite such a dreadful action, he is forgiven both by the woman he raped and impregnated and by his son, and in this lai too there is a happy ending. He is a fairy – allegedly an incubus – since he lives in another land and leaves magical tokens behind him, and he is incredibly beautiful, as all the fairies are. The protagonist of the poem being a young boy, the

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456 We have to underline, though, that not all fairytales have to do with fairies. What I am suggesting here is a plausible, but not necessarily true, correlation between childhood and medieval poems concerning fairies, which may explain why nowadays we use the expression *fairy tale*.
457 Lewis, p. 123.

fairy knight promotes Degaré's self-discovery and self-knowledge: he comes to know where he comes from and who he is thanks to his fairy father.

As far as fairies in Chaucer are concerned, they have a literary relevance but undoubtedly an important comic and satirical role as well. It is a question of how balanced these two aspects are in the four tales I have analysed: satire is particulary prevalent in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, where incubi/elves/fairies – there is no distinction among them according to Chaucer – are tools of mockery. In *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, moreover, the fact that Thopas is allegedly a child makes fairies a way to wish-fulfilment, in that seeking fairies – or come across them as in *Sir Launfal* – allows human characters to obtain what they would hardly get in the real world. In *The Merchant's Tale*, however, the importance of the fairy world is greater in terms of development of the story and literary trope, unlike Chaucer's other tales.

To sum up, the Middle English poems I have analysed show that fairies and their behaviour are somehow standardised, in that fairies/incubi are what and act as medieval readers would have expected them to be and act: they are beautiful, authoritative, live in the Other World, possess magical tools and have the ability to influence human lives. What has come up from my analyses is that the theme of self-discovery and self-knowledge in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Degaré* is always associated with fairies. These magical creatures were thus considered as a means through which people – in our cases, heroes – could find their identity. In his *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer satirises this whole idea by making the hero a child. A further interesting finding of my analyses is the link between fairies and children we spot in *Sir Degaré* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Thopas, in particular, is a child who searches for his identity in an elf queen, and, according to Chaucer, that is a childish behaviour. This link between childhood and fairies thus seems to have its roots in the Middle Ages, and it has come down to us through the so-called "fairy tales", which are indeed – at least in the collective consciousness – children's literature.

Conclusions

One of the first questions I asked myself when I decided to devoted my thesis to *Sir Orfeo* was: "Why the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice? What makes this legend suitable for a 'celticized' version?" I think the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice lends itself to a Celtic reinterpretation for two reasons.

First, it mat be thanks to the similarities between the classical underworld and the Fairy Land. In both cases there is a ruler, whose nature is difficult to figure out: are Pluto and the king of fairies good or evil? I would say they are neither good nor evil. They are eerie rulers, whose ways of exercising the power sound evil to us, but which may be considered rightful in their worlds. Pluto rules over the underworld, whose dwellers are dead and some are kept in a perpetual condition of torture. While we may consider these tortures the right punishment for what those people have done in their lives – let us think about the faults of the damned mentioned by Robert Henryson – such a thought is more problematic when it comes to the behaviour of the king of fairies. We have seen, indeed, that he has no justification for what he does: he basically abducts people randomly, on a whim. There is no reason for Heurodis to be seized. It is no accident that scholars underline the amorality of the Fairy World and the lack of justifiable motivations from the king in *Sir Orfeo*.[458]

What if, though, Heurodis herself is the key to the link between the classical legend and *Sir Orfeo*? Indeed, the theme of the stolen bride is to be found in Celtic myhtology,[459] in the Irish poem *The Wooing of Étaín*, somehow in the Breton *lai* of *Yonec*, where an imprisoned wife is seduced by a fairy, and in *Sir Degaré*, where the virginity of a princess is taken by a fairy knight.

Whatever the reason, the ambiguous nature of fairies is rather constant through the numerous poems concerning them. The king of fairies abducts Heurodis, but then sets her free. The fairy princess binds Launfal to secrecy as for their relationship, immediatly establishing she is the

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458 Conrad-O'Briain, p. 81; Wade, p. 77.
459 Squire, p. 150.

powerful half of the couple, but in the end forgives him and runs away with him. The fairy knight rapes a princess and impregnates her, but in the end he happily reconciles with his son Degaré and marries the raped woman. In Middle English literature, the nature of fairies is not as clear-cut as in medieval French literature, where we have the good fairies – *fées marraines* and *fées amantes* – and the evil fairies – *fées courcies*.

What is clear, though, is that fairies are a means through which our protagonists reach self-realisation, self-knowledge and self-definition. Although this may be less plain in *Sir Orfeo* – we might argue that Heurodis' abduction temporarily prevents her self-realisation – *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Degaré* brilliantly convey this idea. Launfal looks for self-realisation by fleeing from the Arthurian court and obtaining by Tryamour all Guenevere has never given him – love and wealth, though he has to give up part of his identity in order to stay with Tryamour – whereas Degaré manages to discover his real identity thanks to the encounter with his fairy father. Chaucer, through Thopas' adventures, shows how childish and unrealistic looking for self-realisation in fairies is. It may be the case that fairies being a "childish matter" is the reason why tales for children are labelled "fairy tales".

We have to remember that a great number of people in the Middle Ages believed in the existence of fairies. In literature, fairies used to be a very serious matter, until Geoffrey Chaucer made a childish fantasy out of the belief in fairies. With Robert Henryson, the mention of fairies in *Orpheus and Eurydice* seems to have become a simple literary device: since it is typical of British writers to mingle together elements from several traditions without explicitly account for their different origins, fairies are simply there as a reminder of the presence of Celtic roots too in Middle English literature.

<center>*Riassunto*</center>

"Le fate e il loro mondo nella letteratura inglese medievale: la tradizione di Orfeo dall'epoca classica al Medioevo". Questa potrebbe essere una buona traduzione del titolo della mia tesi, che ha come obiettivo un'analisi del ruolo delle *fairies* ("fate" in italiano) nel *Sir Orfeo*, poema in inglese medio di cui non conosciamo l'autore, scritto probabilmente tra la fine del tredicesimo secolo e l'inizio del quattordicesimo.

Il termine medio inglese *fairie*, entrato nella lingua tra il 1300 e il 1325, deriva dal francese *fée*, che a sua volta deriva dal latino *fata*. Tuttavia, molti altri termini sono passati ad indicare lo stesso tipo di creatura soprannaturale: *elf* (dall'anglossassone *ælf*), *incubus*, *lamia*, *eumenis*. Questa mescolanza di termini provenienti da lingue diverse (inglese medio, francese, latino) non fa che riflettere la situazione di trilinguismo che dominava nella Gran Bretagna post 1066, quando la nobiltà parlava francese, il clero latino e il resto della popolazione inglese medio. In realtà, molte altre lingue erano sopravvissute all'invasione normanna – cornico, gallese, gaelico scozzese – e anche in questi idiomi era presente un termine analogo a *fairy*, che indicava diverse tipologie di creatura soprannaturale. Le fate, nella tradizione celtica, si differenziano dagli umani nel rapporto con lo spazio ed il tempo. Nella letteratura irlandese, le fate sono esseri immortali che vivono su una collina fatata, di solito nei pressi di un ambiente silvano e vicino a corsi d'acqua. Come gli umani, le fate sono di bell'aspetto e praticano attività quali la caccia e la corsa a cavallo. In alcune leggende irlandesi, invece, l'Altro Mondo è parallelo a quello degli umani e separato da quest'ultimo da un fiume o da una caverna, e spesso vi si trova un melo. Questi due elementi sono presenti nel *Sir Orfeo*.

Leggende sulle fate si trovano anche nella letteratura medievale francese, dove troviamo tre tipologie di fata: la fata madrina, la fata amante e la fata cattiva. Di tradizione francese sono inoltre i *contes mélusiniens* ("racconti melusini"), caratterizzati da una trama ben precisa. Innanzitutto, il

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primo incontro tra fata e mortale avviene in una foresta e vicino ad un corso d'acqua; il nome della fata non viene mai rivelato; il mortale fa una promessa alla fata e, qualora questa promessa non venisse mantenuta, la fata sparisce e il mortale viene sconfitto. Un'importante figura da ricordare quando si parla di letteratura francese medievale e fate è Maria di Francia. Scrisse dodici *lais* tra cui il *lai* di *Yonec*, dove uno dei personaggi è una creatura fatata. I suoi dodici *lais*, come anche da lei ribadito, appartengono alla tradizione celtica, in quanto traggono origine dai *lais* cantati dai Bretoni (popolazione celtica di lingua bretone).

Sir Orfeo è molto probabilmente la traduzione di un lai perduto, scritto in francese medievale (*lay d'Orphée*), chiaramente menzionato in tre scritti: il lai *Floire et Blancheflor*, il *lai de l'Espine* e il *Lancillotto in prosa*. *Sir Orfeo* può essere definito una versione "celtica" del mito classico di Orfeo ed Euridice. Elementi provenienti dalla tradizione celtica sono la presenza delle fate e l'Altro Mondo (*Other World*), o Terra delle Fate (*Fairy Land*). Un interessante analogo del *Sir Orfeo* è il poema irlandese *The Wooing of Étaín* (*Il corteggiamento di Étaín*), scritto tra l'ottavo e il nono secolo. Le somiglianze tra i personaggi e alcune affinità nella trama lasciano pensare che l'autore del *Sir Orfeo* – o meglio, l'autore del perduto *lay d'Orphée* – potrebbe aver letto e tratto ispirazione da *The Wooing of Étaín*. Eochaid ed Étaín, infatti, sono molto simili nel comportamento ad Orfeo ed Euridice: Eochaid ed Orfeo sono due mariti cui una creatura fatata – il re delle fate – ha sottratto la moglie – rispettivamente Étaín ed Euridice. In entrambi i poemi, inoltre, troviamo il regno delle fate, che viene però solo descritto e mai mostrato in *The Wooing of Étaín*, mentre in *Sir Orfeo* buona parte della storia si svolge nella terra delle fate. In entrambi i casi, comunque, questo regno fatato è descritto come una terra bellissima, armoniosa, attraversata da corsi d'acqua – sebbene in *Sir Orfeo* alcuni dettagli lo rendano molto più terrificante che invitante. Un ulteriore analogo e presumibile fonte d'ispirazione è il *De Nugis Curialium* dello scrittore gallese Walter Map, soprattutto per quanto riguarda gli episodi di danza e caccia che vedono per protagoniste le creature fatate.

Tuttavia, come anticipato dal titolo della tesi, la leggenda di Orfeo ed Euridice affonda le proprie radici nella mitologia greca e nella letteratura latina. In particolare, il mito è stato riproposto da tre diversi autori latini: da Virgilio nelle *Georgiche*, da Ovidio nelle *Metamorfosi* e da Boezio ne *La Consolazione della Filosofia*. La trama vera e propria proviene da queste tre opere: un re a cui viene sottratta la moglie affronta un lungo viaggio nel tentativo di riportarla a casa con sé. Nonostante ciò, le differenze tra il modello classico e la versione inglese medievale sono piuttosto evidenti. Nel mito classico, Euridice muore e di conseguenza viene portata nel regno degli Inferi, da cui Orfeo non riuscirà a salvarla: disobbedendo al volere del re degli Inferi, Orfeo si volta per accertarsi che Euridice lo stia seguendo nella salita verso il regno degli umani, perdendola così per sempre. Nel *Sir Orfeo*, l'oltretomba viene sostituito dal regno delle fate, Ade diventa il re delle fate, ed Euridice, anziché morire, viene semplicemente rapita e portata nel regno fatato, da cui Orfeo riesce a salvarla, garantendo così un lieto fine alla storia. Un' ulteriore versione del mito di Orfeo ed Euridice ci viene fornita dal poeta scozzese Robert Henryson, che nel suo *Orpheus and Eurydice* mischia elementi classici e celtici donandoci un'opera tipicamente britannica, dove elementi provenienti dall più disparate tradizioni vengono riuniti in un unico scenario. Euridice muore e la ritroviamo nell'oltretomba, dove alcuni personaggi della mitologia greca soffrono terribili punizioni. Pluto e Proserpina, dèi classici, vengono tuttavia presentati come re e regina delle fate. Questa fusione di elementi classici e celtici sembra non avere alcun significato: Henryson, infatti, non ne parla nemmeno nella *Moralitas*, di chiaro stampo boeziano e quindi strettamente concentrata sugli aspetti classici della leggenda. La leggenda classica di Orfeo ed Euridice ben si presta quindi alla reinterpretazione in chiave celtica che troviamo in *Sir Orfeo*: l'oltretomba viene sostituito dalla terra delle fate, ed entrambi i sovrani dei due regni sono figure ambigue, sinistre, difficilmente catalogabili come buoni o cattivi.

Nonostante l'argomento centrale della mia tesi sia *Sir Orfeo*, ho ritenuto opportuno analizzare altri poemi medievali riguardanti le creature fatate, che di certo non si limitano a comparire

solamente nell'anonimo poema sopracitato. In *Sir Launfal* (estremamente simile al *lai de Lanval* di Maria di Francia, che tuttavia non è la fonte primaria), la fata in questione è la principessa Tryamour, che abbandona il suo regno per fare visita al cavaliere Launfal, dopo che questi ha abbandonato la corte arturiana in seguito ad un torto subíto dalla regina Ginevra. In questo poema è Tryamour a detenere il potere: la principessa offre a Launfal amore e ricchezza, ovvero ciò che egli non è riuscito ad ottenere nel mondo umano, e sarà la fata stessa a salvare il cavaliere da morte quasi certa alla fine. Tryamour permette quindi a Launfal di fuggire dal mondo reale per trovarne uno migliore – il mondo fatato – tuttavia il cavaliere dovrà in parte rinunciare ad alcuni suoi lati umani per poter stare con Tryamour: alla luce di ciò, possiamo affermare che le fate permettono agli umani di evadere dalle restrizioni del loro mondo, ma in alcuni casi ne limitano in parte l'autorealizzazione. Nel *Sir Degaré*, la creatura fatata in questione è un cavaliere, che incontra il figlio Degaré, frutto di uno stupro ai danni di una principessa mortale, durante uno scontro verso la fine del poema. Solo dopo aver riconosciuto il proprio padre, Degaré può finalmente crearsi una propria famiglia, a testimonianza dell'importanza delle fate per trovare la propria identità. In *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, l'idea delle fate come mezzo per scoprire se stessi e realizzarsi viene totalmente ridicolizzata da Chaucer. L'autore, ifatti, ironizza su Thopas, un bambino che si atteggia a cavaliere e parte alla ricerca di una regina delle fate da amare, salvo poi interrompere il racconto prima del suo scontro con un gigante.

Il fatto che Degaré e Thopas siano due ragazzini che incombono in o fantasticano su creature fatate fa pensare che probabilmente le *fairy tales* ("fiabe" in italiano), nella maggior parte dei casi racconti per bambini, siano chiamate in tal modo proprio per via di questo legame tra bambini e fate che troviamo in *Sir Degaré* e in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Chaucer in particolare dimostra quanto sia infantile l'idea di cercare la propria realizzazione nelle fate, offrendoci un interessante spunto di riflessione: se le fate piacciono ai bambini e stimolano la loro fantasia, potermmo avere una giustificazione del perché racconti per bambini come *Cenerentola* e *La Bella Addormentata nel*

Bosco, che affondano le proprie radici nel folclore medievale e includono le fate tra i personaggi, vengano definiti *fairy tales*.

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