LIMINA
A JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Appropriating the Classical Underworld: The Otherworld and its Spectacle in *Sir Orfeo*

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In the Middle English Breton lay, Sir Orfeo *(c. 1340), the Underworld transforms from its classical prototype of an ominous realm of shadows into the marvellous Otherworld. In this paper, I examine the Orfeo poet's rewriting of Greco-Roman Orpheus tradition with a focus on the poet's reception of the classical Underworld so as to explicate how frequently the poet makes use of romance elements to relocate the Underworld / Otherworld in a context blended with Celtic folklore and chivalric conventions. I argue that the Orfeo poet refashions the classical Underworld and formulates a world full of natural and artistic spectacle. More importantly, far from being a world of mournful shadows and the symbol of forever loss, the Otherworld in* Sir Orfeo *is a domain of light and hope where mortals encounter adventures, undergo trials, and return to the corporeal world in bliss and good faith.*

This paper examines the rewriting of the Greco-Roman Orpheus tradition in *Sir Orfeo*, focusing on the appropriation of the Classical Otherworld in the medieval frame of the *Orfeo* poet. It argues that the underworld of *Sir Orfeo*, far from being a realm of mournful shadows and a symbol of loss, is instead a twilight zone where the grotesque clashes with the wondrous. More importantly, the poet of *Sir Orfeo* underscores the Otherworld as a *topos* in medieval romance tradition, in which mortals encounter adventures, undergo trials, and return to the corporeal world in bliss and good faith. The Underworld, *Dis*, in the works of classical poets such as Homer, Ovid and Virgil, is a murky realm barred to humans and governed by Pluto and his wife, Proserpina. For instance, Virgil's *Geogics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* use the depiction of the dismal world of the dead as a way of questioning the meaning of life through the tale of Orpheus' futile visit to the Underworld to rescue his beloved wife, Eurydice. From antiquity onwards, the Orpheus myth becomes a literary legacy, and produces many adaptations that centre on Orpheus' visit to the Underworld.[1] The Middle English Breton lay *Sir*

[1] The Orpheus myth has a long literary legacy in Western Europe right up to the Middle Ages; Virgil's *Geogic*s (29 BC), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. 2 AD), Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524AD), Fulgentius' *Mitologiae* (c. 5th century), Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* (c.1183), anonymous *Ovid Moralisé* (c. 13th century), Breton lay *Sir Orfeo* (c. 13th century), Geoffrey Chaucer's *Boece* (c. 1370s-1380s), and Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (c. 15th century).

Orfeo is an example of the medieval rewriting of the Orpheus myth.[2] The lay explores the world of the immortals by illustrating the journey to the Fairy Kingdom of a medieval knight, Orfeo. Unlike the dark, death-shrouded grove of the classical Underworld, the Otherworld of the Fairy Kingdom seems to be not only a place of splendour but also a mirror of contemporary courtly society, with an emphasis on courtly manners.

The poet of *Sir Orfeo* appropriates the classical prototype of the eternally ominous realm of the shadows to create an ambiguous Otherworld. For example, the poet frequently makes use of romance elements, such as 'auentours' (line 15 & 21) and 'mervailes' (line 18), to relocate the Underworld/Otherworld in a context blended with Celtic folklore and chivalric conventions—the supernatural and the chivalric codes of behaviours are ubiquitous in the lay. The *Orfeo* poet refashions the classical Underworld in order to create a world full of spectacle by means of the considered portrayal of splendid architecture, assorted precious stones, and marvels of supernatural power alongside Heurodis' mutilation and the horrifying display of grotesque bodies that were' þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt' (line 390).

The classical Orpheus myth depicts Orpheus as a man of wisdom and a passionate husband, who grieves the loss of his wife, Eurydice. When a serpent's sudden bite robs Eurydice of her mortal life, forcing her to linger forever in Pluto's realm, Orpheus, filled with despair, travels to the Underworld in the hope of bringing his wife back to the world of mortals.[3] In classical mythology, the Underworld of Dis is represented as a dismal realm barred to the mortal world. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, describes it as the sad realm of ghosts where Orpheus descends to it, 'Through the phantom dwellers / The buried ghosts, he passed, came to the king / Of that sad realm, and to Persephone' (X, lines 15-17). The dead silence and murky aura of Dis are reiterated when Orpheus and Eurydice climb a path upwards 'through the absolute silence, / Up the steep murk, clouded in pitchy darkness' (X, lines 53-54). In the *Georgics*, Virgil portrays the Underworld as a dark pit shrouded with woe and fear where the dead and their King forever sojourn. 'Even the jaws of Taenarus, the steep gates of Dis, / the grove shrouded in black dread / he entered, and approached the dead, and their terrible king' (IV, lines 467-69).[4] Diverse historical periods and their socio-cultural

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[2] All citations of *Sir Orfeo* are from A. J. Bliss' edition of *Sir Orfeo*; see A.J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966. The manuscript of the lay that I analyse in this paper is the Auchinleck MS (c.1330-1340). For details of the Auchinleck MS, see *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS. 19.2.1*. Introduced by Derek Pearsall and I.C.C. Cummingham. Scolar Press, London, 1977.

[3] The account of Eurydice's death by serpent's bite appears both in Ovid and Virgil. For instance, Virgil's *Georgics* illustrates that "illa quidam, dum te fugeret per flumina praeceps / immanem ante pedes hydrum moritura puella / servantum ripas alta non vidit in herba" [Just so: headlong along the river that she might escape you, / doomed girl, she didn't see the snake / before her feet hugging the banks in tall grass] (IV, lines 458-459; translated by Kimberly Johnson). For Virgil's version of Orpheus story, see Virgil, *The Geogics: A Poem of the Land*. Translated and edited by Kimberly Johnson, Penguin, London, 2009, pp. 148-155.

[4] "Taenarias etiam fauces, alta ostia Ditis, / caligantem nigra formidine lucum / ingressus, Manisque aditt regemque tremendum" (IV, lines 467-69).

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contexts from the late antiquity up to the fifteenth century influence adaptation and appropriation of the classical Orphic myth. Boethius and Fulgentius, both writing in late antiquity, retold the Orpheus myth with a focus on self-restraint, rationality and resistance to sensual pleasure; given the Greco-Roman tendency to accentuate men's rationality, they tended to allegorize myths along Stoic lines and moralistic standpoints.[5] The Christian glossators, such as Pierre Bersuire and the anonymous writer of *Ovid Moralisé*, allegorise the Orpheus legend as a Christian exegesis and identify Orpheus as Jesus Christ, who saves the sinful human soul (Eurydice). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, therefore, the Underworld is rationalised as Hell. In Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* (The Courtiers' Trifles), the Underworld turns out to be a political metaphor— it is a '*locus penalis*' (a place of punishment) in a court which Map scornfully calls the Court of Hell, clearly identifying it with the court King Henry II.[6]

In *Sir Orfeo*, the poet merges the conventional Underworld with the Otherworld. The concept of the Otherworld derives from the Celtic myth of Annwyn (or Annwn, Annwfn), which is a commonplace in the Celtic poems such as the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, the *Book of Taliesin*, and the *Mabinogion*.[7] In contrast to the murky Underworld in the classical literature or the Christian concept of the world of the dead— in the form of purgatory— the romance treatment of the Otherworld inclines toward the *locus amoenus*, a place of brightness and delight set in the pastoral serenity.[8] Moreover, it is a parallel or mirror world that not only reflects the human world and its activities, but also surpasses it in many aesthetic aspects. Adaptations and appropriations of the Orpheus myth as well as its literary element of the Underworld enable dialogues between the classical sources and the adapted texts; moreover, they also enrich readers' response to various versions. Jeff Rider rightly remarks that, 'What makes *Sir Orfeo* so remarkable is the degree of critical response it has generated, the high praise it has earned, and the almost utter lack of accord among critics as to its interpretation'.[9]

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[5] In *Orpheus in the Middle Ages,* John Block Friedman explains that the allegorisation of pagan myth was commonplace in antiquity. For instance, one of the most influential allegorised texts, pseudo-Heraclitus' *Homeric Allegories*, shows the influence of exegetical method by writers, such as Chrysippus as well as early Stoic philosophers, who read the 'gods as symbolic representations of natural phenomenon in their efforts to give a philosophical base to the worship of the gods' (p. 87). In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Christian authors approached classical myths— such as Ulysses and Aeneas— from an allegorical standpoint. For details, see John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970, 86-145, p. 90.

[6] Neil Cartlidge, 'Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer,* vol. 26, 2004, 195-226, p. 200.

[7] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Middle English Romance.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010, pp. 180-181

[8] Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Trans. Willard R. Trask, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 192.

[9] See Jeff Rider, 'Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*', *Papers on Language and Literature,* vol.24, no.4, 1983, 343-366, p. 361.

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This paper investigates the manner in which the *Orfeo* poet reshapes and medievalises the classical tradition of the Underworld by bringing forth the generic features of medieval romance along with the courtly culture to his audience. I would deal with the concept of cultural appropriation for a start and later focus on how the poet makes use of romance and folklore elements to reshape the Underworld with wonders and spectacle so as to turn the Orpheus myth into the unique narrative of the Breton lay. Approaches to adaptation and appropriation as well as reception theory have, since the 1990s, come to scholars' attention in the arena of literary criticism; it has since then become a significant movement in the literature scholarship in the UK and elsewhere.[10] In the early years before the 1990s, when discussing the issue of textual adaptation or rewriting, scholars, such as Harold Bloom, tended to concentrate on the influence of one 'original' text or authorship upon other texts and writers. In their essay, 'The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation"', Kathleen Ashley and Véronique Plesch point out that 'Scholarly transmission studies, then, emphasized the influence of that privileged (if largely hypothetical) original object on extant texts or objects'.[11] As the concept of intertextuality has risen in prominence, the influence of a privileged original text has waned, replaced by a belief, theory, or idea of the dimensional, the kinetic, and the multi-layered idea of dialogues between texts. Texts are now seen as the space where manifold writings blend and converge with one another.[12] According to Ashley and Plesch, appropriation designates a two-way process: exchange and creative response.[13] Literary adaptation and appropriation therefore concerns itself the multiple dialogues - composed of diverse texts - that occur between writings and the socio-cultural context. The term 'appropriation' derives from the Latin 'to possess as one's own' without giving back: *ad*, to + *proprius*, one's own, or belonging to oneself. Yet in a Post-structural reading, the processes of appropriation is far from being the practise of stealing without

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[10] See Charles Martindale, 'Introduction: Thinking Through Reception', in Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (eds), *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. Blackwell, London, 2006, pp. 14-20.

[11] This essay belongs to the introduction to a special issue in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* vol.32, no. 1, 2002. In this volume, Ashley and Plesch succinctly summarize the history of the approach of literary appropriation up to the twentieth century; for more details, see Kathleen Ashley and Véronique Plesch, 'The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation"', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* vol.32, no.1, 2002, pp. 1-15, p. 2.

[12] According to Roland Barthes, the author's voice is of least importance in a text; instead, he argues that culture is the driving force. He suggests that a text ought to be 'writerly', having its own voice. It is the reader's task to pay attention to what a text says; thus the reader can take control and construct the meaning of a text: 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody and contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author' (p. 1469). See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', reprinted in *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch (ed), W. W. Norton, New York, 2001, pp. 1466-1470.

[13] Ashley and Plesch, 'The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation"', p. 12.

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return: instead, it is composed of 'the dispensable constitutive elements that generate surface, density, and texture; in short, they are culture'.[14]

The poet of the Breton lay, *Sir Orfeo*, adopts and adapts the classical Orpheus myth by retelling King Orfeo's journey to the 'Other' world in search of his missing queen, Dame Heurodis. What impels Orfeo to enter the Otherworld is not the death of his beloved wife as it is for Orpheus but the abduction of Heurodis. Heurodis' abduction by the King of the Otherworld is similar to Persephone's by the King of the Underworld—it is possible that the latter had an impact on the former. The crucial difference between the classical Orpheus myth and *Sir Orfeo* lies in the denouement: Orfeo not only successfully retrieves his queen from the Fairy Kingdom, but he restores his court and lives happily ever after with his wife, with his steward designated as heir. Much unlike its Greco-Roman predecessor, *Sir Orfeo* is contextualised in the unique milieu of medieval court culture, situated among contemporary analogues of Christian allegory and political satire. The generic features of romance, popular from the twelfth century, mark *Sir Orfeo* as a Breton lay.[15] The connection between the Orpheus story and the genre of lay—the notion of 'le lai d'Orphey'—is mentioned in the French romance, *Floire et Blanceflor*, and seems to be the earliest connection.[16] The common thematic structures of the Breton lay—intense human emotions, chivalry, courtly love, adventures, and supernatural forces—are essential to the poet's rewriting of the Orpheus legend. In *Sir Orfeo*, the poet adopts the thematic features of the Breton lay—adventures, abduction of the lady, exile and return, supernatural element, marvels, to name a few—as a way to disarm the audience's expectation of the Orpheus convention, thereby creating a story full of surprise and wonder.

The framing of the conventional Orpheus myth in the scheme of romance in general, and a Breton lay in particular, demonstrates the use of cultural appropriation by the poet. Apart from the generic features of romance, the poet's use of a Breton setting as well as his use of the vernacular language of English (South-Midlands dialect), set the lay in the background of late medieval England. The original Orpheus myth has the seat of power as being the Roman city of Thrace; the *Orfeo* poet changes it to Winchester, writing that 'þis king soiournd in Traciens / þat was a cite of noble defens / (For Winchester was cleped þo Traciens, wiþ-outen no)' (lines 47-50). The poet's alternation

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[14] Ashley and Plesch, 'The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation"', p. 12.

[15] The Breton lay (or lai) is thought to have originated in the Bretagne area, belongs to a type of rhymed narrative recited by a minstrel, accompanied by a musical instrument, such as a harp. In a series of lays composed by the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman writer, Marie de France, the usage of the generic term, Breton lay, recurrently appears. Marie de France appears to be the first poet to have mentioned that 'Bretons composed a *lai*.' The themes of lays are often about human emotions, chivalry, adventures and courtly love. In many of her literary texts, Marie asserts her poetic narrative as lays at the very beginning of the story, such as in *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Les Deut Amans* etc. For more information, see Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (eds), *The Lais of Marie de France,* Baker, Grand Rapids, 1978.

[16] Two other French romances, *Lai de l'Espine* and *Prose Lancelot*, also indicate "Le lai lor sone d'Orphei" and "le lay dorfay" in each text (Bliss, *Sir Orfeo,* pp. xxxi-xxxii).

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of the location can be read as an attempt to emphasise Englishness. Dominique Battle specifies Englishness in *Sir Orfeo* as a particular highlighting of the Anglo-Saxon culture. According to Battle, the poet's reference to Winchester 'makes an important and historical statement' that demonstrates a setting that belongs solely to the pre-Conquest England, given that Winchester used to be the royal seat of Anglo-Saxon kings (p.190-191).

In the lay, the poet introduces the Otherworld and its supernatural beings by the dramatic interruption of Queen Heurodis' noon-day nap under a grafted tree in the orchard. In this way, he makes use of the Celtic belief in the supernatural, as well as the taboo of sleeping at noon under a tree—a dangerous transitional space, a taboo often considered to have been influenced by the Celtic folktales such as *The Wooing of Etain* and *Tydorel*. Marie de France's *Lanval*, *Sir Launfal,* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* also relate woods to a transitional space where humans encounter fairies. A. J. Bliss indicates that 'It is a commonplace in the narrative *lais* that those who sleep, or even lie down, under a tree place themselves in the power of the fairies'.[17] (p.xxxv). Middle English romances such as *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Degaré* both depict a woman either lying under a tree or alone in the woods. Such an act signifies a gesture that openly invites the incubus, devil, or the supernatural to intrude into the human world and there attempt to sexually assault the women while they sleep.[18] The Otherworld is not a territory of the dead shadows, nor is it barred from the human world as is portrayed in the Greco-Roman tradition of *Dis*. In the pattern of romance, the Otherworld is a space of ambivalence where human beings (particularly a damsel) confront the threat of the supernatural force. Thus, whilst sleeping under an 'ympe-tre' (line 70) on a bright 'vndrentide' (line 65) in May, Heurodis wakes up to a nightmare, wherein she comes across the fairies. To the consternation of her entourage, she shrieks horribly and mutilates her body until she bleeds:

> Sche crid, & loþli bere gan make:
> Sche froted hir honden and hir fet,
> & crached hir visage—it bled wete;
> Hir riche robe hye al to-rett,
> & was reueyd out of hir witt.
>
> (lines 78-82)

[17] Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, p. xxxv.

[18] In *Sir Gowther*, the duchess is raped by a 'felturd fende' in the guise of her husband (line 74) while lying under an orchard tree; as a result, she gives birth to the protagonist, Gowther. In *Sir Degaré*, the princess (Degarre's mother) sleeps alone under a 'chastein tre' (line 74) and is sexually assaulted by a 'gentil, yong, and jolif' (line 91) fairy knight (*fairi knyghte*, line 100) in full scarlet armor. For these two Middle English Breton lays, see Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (eds), *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, 1995.

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According to the report of her two maids, Heurodis becomes a queen 'awede wold' (line 87). Queen Heurodis' self-mutilation and 'madness' are considered one of the most disturbing aspects of the lay and have been the site of vehement dispute within *Orfeo* scholarship in the past two decades.[19] Heurodis' hysterical emotions and somatic gestures strengthen the tension in the structure of the lay, specifically, the queen's bloody and mutilated body make a spectacle *per se* and initiate the romance motif of *rapus*.[20] In *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, Corinne Saunders states that the structures of chivalry often depend on the concept of *raptus*, initially built on the concept of *fin'amors*. Later, the motif of *fin'amors* develops into a 'highly stylized and formulaic narrative mode' in England.[21] Due to its diverse audience, English romance combines realism and romance themes that color the motifs of rape and ravishment. In Middle English romance, unlike classical legend, medieval chronicles or French *pastourelle*, rape is often deferred and found only on the margin of romance—rape appears as a shadow and a threat.[22] The poet of *Sir Orfeo* does not offer any direct evidence as to whether Heurodis is raped or not; nevertheless, by depicting the queen's intense emotions and physical mutilation, he successfully highlights the threat from an unknown force that lurks at the edge of Orfeo's court.

With the exception of Heurodis' intense emotional outbreak, the poet expends all his effort in drawing the audience's attention to the supernatural power and the Otherworldly spectacle. In addition, unlike Eurydice who dies because of a serpent's

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[19] A. C. Spearing argues that Heurodis' abnormal behaviour is the result of mental disorder; see A.C. Spearing, '*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender', in *The Spirits of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds), Longman, Harlow, 2000, pp. 258-272. Derek Pearsall suggests that Heurodis' voicing of her pain is an articulation of self-will. See Derek Pearsall 'Madness in *Sir Orfeo*', in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative presented to Maldwayn Mills*, J. Fellows, R. Field, G. Rogers, and J. Weiss (eds), University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1996, pp. 51-63. Denise Ming-yueh Wang reads Heurodis' abnormal behaviour and emotional expression as the representation of poet's art of *poetria*. Wang subtly explores the representation of emotion and sentiment in the lay with a view towards dialogism. See 'Madness of Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*', in *Emotions in Literature*, An Sonjae and Francis K.H. So (eds), Seoul National University Press, Seoul, 2010, pp. 77-103. As I argue in my master thesis, Heurodis' volcanic emotional expressions and violent somatic gestures may represent a feminine discourse to confront the masculine one for her own interests, that is, she is a barren queen who fails to reproduce an heir to the throne.

[20] The Latin term *raptus* is derived from *rapere*, which, as Kathryn Gravdal suggests, "bears the seeds of an ambiguousness" but commonly refers to the act "to carry off or seize; to snatch, pluck, or drag off; to hurry, impel, hasten; to rob, plunder; and finally, to abduct (a virgin)" (p. 4). Thus, the term *raptus* in the late Middle Ages denoted interchangeable meanings of sexual assault and abduction. For more details, see Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maiden*s: *Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1991.

[21] Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2001, p. 188.

[22] Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 187-188.

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venom, Heurodis encounters fairy visitants and is taken by the Fairy King. In her dream, Heurodis is suddenly visited by 'fair kniȝtes' (line 135) who force her to meet with their king, who is accompanied 'Wiþ an hundred kniȝtes & mo, / & damisels an hundred also' (lines 143-144). Heurodis recounts that the Fairy King had brought her to his *palays* (line 157) to demonstrate his territory, which is enclosed by magnificent architecture, 'castels and tours' (line 159) and natural wonders, 'Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours, / & his riche stedes ichon' (line 160-161). It is in this episode that the poet, for the first time in the lay, compares and contrasts Orfeo's kingdom with that of the Fairy King: he portrays the Otherworld as a pastoral scene, endowed with architectural wonder. The poet's emphasis of the marvellous landscapes and magnificent architecture in the fairy territory serves as a means not only to surprise the audience who may have known the conventional Orpheus myth well but also create a fantasy to the Otherworld.

The abduction of Heurodis functions as a catalyst for Orfeo's self-exile into the wilderness and his subsequent journey to the Fairy Kingdom, all in an effort to retain the order of his court. Jeff Rider points out that in romance the otherworldly intervention signifies a catalyst rather than a threat that 'helps the central aristocratic society attain a new order by provoking a process through which a problem in that world is resolved or a fault in it is exposed'.[23] Orfeo commands his ten thousand knights to guard the queen the next morning following her nightmare, but to no avail: Heurodis disappears in front of Orfeo and his knights, taken by the fairies, 'Ac ȝete amiddes hem ful riȝt/ þe quen was oway y-tviȝt,/ Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome' (lines 191-193). That the *Orfeo* poet spends several lines on explaining how Orfeo attempts to defend his wife with his knights and later seeks counsel from his 'barouns / Erls, lordes of renouns' (lines 201-202) might have reminded his audience of the courtly system: the system of a parliament. More interestingly, the term 'parlement' as used in the lay came into the official English usage in 1236 during the reign of King John. By using such a legal term, the *Orfeo* poet once again draws attention to the disjunction between his story and that of the classical Orpheus myth.

In the wilderness, Orfeo witnesses the pageant of a fairy hunt. Fairy knights and ladies who dress 'In queynt atire, gisely, / Queynt pas and softly' (lines 299-300) dance in the woods. Here, the poet's mention of fairy clothing, like his emphasis of fairy architecture, also serves to accentuate that the Otherworld is somehow exotic and better than the human world. By depicting Orfeo's encounter with the fairy hunt and the dance, he highlights the recreational and sensual aspects of the supernatural. This reminds Orfeo of the courtly entertainment of the good old days, '"Parfay!" quaþ he, "þer is fair game; / þider ichil, bi Godes name!/ Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!"' (lines 315-317). The poet neatly illustrates the parade of the fairy huntsmen alongside the banners, hounds, the fairy ladies' falcons and prey—all these quasi-courtly games and accoutrements serve as marvels in the space of woods. As I have mentioned earlier, in medieval romance the woods signify a transitional space where humans encounter the

[23] Jeff Rider 'The Other Worlds of Romance', in Roberta L. Krueger (ed), *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 115-31, p. 118.

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supernatural, given such space is on the edge between human civilisation and the wilderness, and thus a twilight zone. The poet's portrayal of the Otherworld causes the narrative to unfold in 'dream-like and irrational ways' that are full of 'bizarre, unexpected supernatural events'.[24]

The Otherworld proceeds to surprise Orfeo as well as the audience with unexpected 'mervailes' of supernatural events: the fairy hunt, the marvellous Fairy Castle. Orfeo is amazed by the pastoral scenery of green plains and the magnificent architecture, which is not only exquisitely constructed with advanced architectural features such as the 'butras' (line 361) but also decorated with 'diuers aumal' (line 364), 'burnist gold' (line 368), and various kinds of precious stones (lines 364-368). In the Otherworld, everything appears to be beautiful, spectacular, and incredible to human eyes. The Otherworld represents not merely a parallel or mirror world to the mortal world; in fact, it has surpassed the mortal world in many ways in regards to materiality and aesthetics. As the poet narrates, the precious stones make the fairy castle 'clere & schine as cristal' (line 358). The poet not only rewrites the Underworld but also further removes it from its classical roots: the Underworld of the classical Orphic myth is as dark as night, whereas the Fairy Kingdom is set in crystal bright pastoral scenery. The Fairy realm now shines as bright as the sun at noontide, making Orfeo believe he is in the 'proude court of Paradis' (line 378):

> Al that lond was ever light,
> For when it schuld be therk and night,
> The riche stones light gonne
> As bright as doth at none the sonne.
>
> (lines 369-372)

By portraying the splendid Fairy Castle decorated with various precious stones, the poet strengthens the castle's artistic value as if it had not been created by the mortals: 'No man may telle, no thenche in thought / The riche werk that ther was wrought' (374-75). Compared to Orfeo's castle in Winchester, the Fairy Castle is a spectacle in itself, not merely because of the decorations of rare jewels, but also because of the 'exotic' and innovative architectural features, such as the flying buttresses, fortifications, high towers and the ditch. Bliss mentions that the architectural feature of the flying buttress was scarcely known in England in the thirteenth century but was a common feature in French architecture.[25] The *Orfeo* poet may call the audience's attention to the function of a real castle in the real world regarding its military use or even to the knowledge of medieval lapidary that concerns the allegorical meaning of diverse precious stones. Yet, what is more important is the poet's refashioning of the classical Underworld that in turn exhibits the aesthetic value of the Fairy Castle as a craft of art in architecture.

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[24] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, pp. 180-181.

[25] Bliss, p. xl.

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At the edge of the Fairy Castle, Orfeo witnesses a group of distorted figures that seem to be dead and yet not dead, 'þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt' (line 390). Marginalized from the communal society of the Otherworld, these grotesque figures are a display of the Fairy King's collection of bodies—they may have been taken alive by the fairies as in the case of Heurodis and now remain forever frozen in the posture of the moment when they were snatched. These grotesque bodies articulate the *molestiae* (pain) and fear of the mortal world by portraying various horrifying manners of death, including decapitation, dismemberment, still-birth, death on the battlefield and so forth:

> Sum stode wiþ-outen hade,
> & sum non armes nade,
> & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,
> & sum lay wode, y-bounde,
> & sum armed on hors sete,
> & sum astrangled as þai ete;
> & sum were in water adreynt,
> & sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt,
> Wiues þer lay on child-bedde,
> Sum ded, and sum awedde'.
>
> (lines 391-400)

I argue that with their static poses and terrifying gestures reflecting their deaths, the grotesque bodies are themselves a part of the Otherworldly spectacle, speaking to the *heteroglossia* reflecting and refracting medieval people's fear of warfare, childbirth, disease, accidents, death itself and hell. The fascinating Otherworld encloses a dark side where death and the *tableau vivant* of human suffering are exhibited. As Saunders rightly points out, the Otherworld serves as the two sides of one coin—it is both an idealized golden world and a world of ambiguous force, violence, and threat.[26] I read the imagery of the Otherworldly figures—'þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt'—as the *Orfeo* poet demonstrating his deep concern for human suffering and emotion in his contemporary world. In the lay's denouement, Orfeo, in the guise of a poor minstrel, outwits the Fairy King not only because of his musical skill, but also because he values the chivalric virtue of troth. In accordance with the thematic structures of romance—which stipulate the exile's return, order is restored, and human wishes are eventually fulfilled—the final episodes of *Sir Orfeo* deal with the virtue of loyalty and the mutual love between husband and wife.

Through the dual processes of adaptation and appropriation, the *Orfeo* poet medievalises the classical Orpheus myth in general and the Underworld in particular, refashioning the original story in the context of romance and folk culture, and telling the story with his vernacular language. The Otherworld of the Fairy Kingdom in *Sir Orfeo* is transformed from the world of the dead to an ambivalent space composed of wonders,

[26] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, pp. 179-180.

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spectacles, latent threat and human suffering. By adopting the generic form of Breton lay, a short-length rhymed narrative sung by the Bretons with a harp, the *Orfeo* poet underlines Orfeo's ideal court in the British *locus* together with a knight's chivalric virtues, optimism and prosperity. By refashioning the classical Underworld—a word originally symbolising eternal loss and remorse—the poet of *Orfeo* makes use of the Otherworld as a *topos* in the structure of medieval romance and draws the audience's attention to this ambivalent space, in which human beings encounter the supernatural, undergo trials, and return to the mortal world of chivalry.

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