

SORENSEN, ERIC MICHAEL, M.A. Quarrels of Sir Conscience: Langland's Critique of Knighthood in the Visio of *Piers Plowman*. (2015)  
Directed by Dr. Denise Baker. 37 pp.

*Piers Plowman* was written in its three forms roughly between 1365 and 1388, in the midst of the Hundred Years' War. This war spanning 1337 through 1453 saw English knights in France performing acts of violence, theft, pillaging, and ransom which directly opposed the societal understanding of chivalric figures. There existed a disconnect between what society, as displayed through the knightly depictions in literature at the time, perceived as knightly behavior and what was occurring overseas in France, due in part to a cultivation of chivalric identity spurred by King Edward III.

In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland depicts knights which do not match the traditional literary knightly depictions; rather, Langland deconstructs what it means to be a chivalric literary knightly figure in order to criticize the contemporary knight in feudal society. The deconstructed depictions of knights seen in Sir Conscience and the nameless knight of the field allow Langland to highlight contemporary societal problems with knights and to facilitate the need for a new model of knightly depiction. The behavior of knights in the Hundred Years' War as purely mercenary becomes a model for Langland to illustrate the problems of the failing feudal system in late fourteenth century England due to the rising proto-capitalist influence caused by the mercantile class. Langland's knights in *Piers Plowman* serve as a model for the problematic impact proto-capitalism has on feudal society and present a display to maintain an atavistic connection to feudal society through the introduction of the Christ-knight figure at the conclusion of the narrative.

SORENSEN, ERIC MICHAEL, M.A. "And Harped at His Owhen Wille": Developing Bardic Kingship in the Lay of *Sir Orfeo*. (2015)  
Directed by Dr. Amy Vines. 45 pp.

The Breton lay of *Sir Orfeo* is a text which explores the relationship between space and authority and how these two combine to influence a king's development. Through the utilization of the medieval spaces of the courtly society and the wilderness the lay provides instances of medieval spaces which provide different opportunities for the development of kingly chivalric authority.

I utilize the depictions of these different spaces to orchestrate the texts development of a new kind of kingship to parallel the already established militant kingship which is displayed in most medieval romance narratives. Through Orfeo's initial loss of his wife and the subsequent undermining of his kingly authority the king is shown to be an ineffective militant king and a need for transition is developed. By removing himself from the courtly setting and retreating into the wilderness, Orfeo is able to transition his supernatural harping ability from a tool of pure entertainment into a tool for attaining kingly authority. The necessity of the wilderness as a space for this transition is stressed because of the possibilities of isolation and individual agency which the medieval wilderness space provides. Orfeo's transition from the wilderness into the otherworldly setting of the fairy kingdom allows for the opportunity for application of bardic authority in a courtly space outside of Orfeo's own court, the success of which allows for the return of Heurodis to Orfeo's kingdom and the final solidification of Orfeo as a successful bardic king.

QUARRELS OF SIR CONSCIENCE: LANGLAND'S CRITIQUE OF  
KNIGHTHOOD IN THE VISIO OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*

AND

"AND HARPED AT HIS OWHEN WILLE": DEVELOPING BARDIC  
KINGSHIP IN THE LAY OF *SIR ORFEO*

by

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QUARRELS OF SIR CONSCIENCE: LANGLAND'S CRITIQUE OF KNIGHTHOOD  
IN THE VISIO OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*

In 1337, Edward III, English king and descendant of Phillip IV of France, made claim that he was the rightful heir to the French crown, an action which triggered the start of a series of wars and ceasefires that, together, has been labeled the longest war in history: the Hundred Years' War. Up until the Treaty of Brétigny, signed May 8 in 1360, the English saw a reasonably successful military campaign, a success which can be attributed, at least in part, to a cultivated resurgence of chivalric ideology in medieval England. Edward III developed an atavistic pursuit of knightly chivalry, one spurred on by the Arthurian romances and stories of glory and honor. This led to the return of the tournament and knightly personas which became beneficial in support of military pursuits in France. In the midst of tournaments and parades and military gatherings, William Langland was writing *Piers Plowman*, a text which trades the knightly quest for glory for the pilgrims' quest for salvation. In this unique context, Langland provides a curious depiction of the knight within a late medieval society, one which differs drastically from what was cultivated by Edward III and one which offers a surprising glimpse into the greater societal issues which England in the fourteenth-century was facing.

Apart from the Christ-knight allegory in Passus XVIII, William Langland's knights compare poorly to the spirit of chivalry which Edward III inculcated and to the literary knightly heroes of the romance narratives. Where the heroes of Arthuriana are

superbly effective, perfect in almost every conceivable way, the knights of *Piers Plowman* are the opposite. William Langland's knights do not represent the chivalric ideal which Edward III drew upon but instead represent the reality of knightly roles in late fourteenth-century England. Langland's literary knights highlight the flaws of contemporary<sup>1</sup> knightly behavior and present to the reader the problematic position of knights in society as they were, not as they were imagined to be. By representing knights in such a manner, Langland is able to use the estate of “those who fight” to highlight contemporary problems and to facilitate the need for a new model of knightly depiction other than the romance knights of the past. Through his critical depiction of knights and the subsequent absence of ideal chivalric figures, Langland develops a space for the Christ-knight to inhabit.

King Edward III's love for chivalry and, more importantly, literary chivalry, was a defining characteristic of his rule and a social structure which proved beneficial for him. Edward III was an avid fan of Arthuriana and took that to an extreme degree; in addition to appearing in tournaments under the guise of the Arthurian knight Sir Lionel and naming his son after the same knight, King Edward III constructed a special band of twenty-six knights that he called the Knights of the Garter which he modeled on the Arthurian texts. Nigel Saul notes that the use of traditional romantic chivalry was beneficial for Edward III in that it helped to validate his claims for the French throne: “[t]he Hundred Years War was therefore in a technical sense a chivalric dispute, a quarrel

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1. Any references to the “contemporary” in this paper relate to the knights of Langland's contemporary time in the second half of the fourteenth-century.

between two knights over the right to bear a particular coat of arms.”<sup>2</sup> The cultivation of chivalry in England served to motivate the military efforts as well as legitimize the king's own ability to rule. The atavistic appeal to a past glory solidified Edward III's claim as a chivalric king and transitioned the cultural ideology back to the chivalric, despite shifting societal conditions.

It is significant that Edward III's model for chivalric kingship and knighthood was derived less from past rulers as it was from the medieval romances. Exhibited through his obsession with Arthuriana, Edward III's model for behavior came from texts which displayed an ideal which, by the very nature of the material, could never be achieved. While not directly opposing the ideologies of chivalric kingship, Langland's text seems to be far more critical of Edward III's campaign and the role of knights in contemporary society. What is apparent through Langland's writing and fervent criticism of Edward III's campaign is that the spirit of martial chivalry was inculcated without as much attention paid to the religious side of chivalric knighthood. It was not ignored by Edward III by any means; the Order of the Garter was tied to chapel in the lower ward of Windsor Castle which “was a witness to the dedication of the member knights to a Christian knighthood,”<sup>3</sup> but the emphasis on the holy knight seems to have only extended in a domestic sense. Behaviors of domestic obeisance to papal authority were easily depicted in the knightly devotion to the church, the presentation of holy symbols, and the religious importance placed on knightly behaviors within England. However, abroad, knightly

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2. Saul, Nigel. “Edward III and Chivalric Kingship, 1327-99.” *Chivalry in Medieval England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 93-114. Print. 94-95

3. Ibid. 104



behavior was far more mercenary, the religious aspects of knighthood ranking second to the material gains to be made through aggressive militant behaviors.

Two of Langland's contemporaries, Chaucer and the Gawain poet, emphasized the religious aspect of the chivalric ideal within literature. Chaucer attempted to confer the religious significance on chivalric values with the character of the Knight as described in the General Prologue. As Nigel Saul illustrates, Chaucer's knight in the *Canturbury Tales* is “an idealized version of the careers of many late fourteenth-century English crusaders”<sup>4</sup> and one which was developed “less to reproduce in mirror form a particular career than to evoke a representative figure who could embody the highest chivalric ideals of the age.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* celebrates the hero of his romance as a Christian knight. Gawain is the only one of Arthur's knights to accept the Green Knight's challenge and, although he fails the exchange of gifts test because he fears for his life, Bertilak nonetheless declares him a pearl among peas “On the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede; / As perle bi the quite pese is of prys more.”<sup>6</sup> The anonymous copyist who adds the motto of the Order of the Garter, “Hony soyt qui mal pence,”<sup>7</sup> at the end of the only manuscript copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* certainly recognizes the contemporary significance Edward III's

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4. Saul, Nigel. “Chivalry and Crusading.” *Chivalry in Medieval England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 219-238. Print. 230

5. Ibid. 231

6. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period 2nd Ed.* Trans. James Winny. Broadview: Broadview Press, 2009. 258-323. 2363-64

7. “Old French: evil be to him who evil thinks” Winny, James, trans. “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* Broadview: Broadview Press, 2009. 258-323. 323, note 2)

cultivation of a chivalric ideal even though the war with France was not waged according to Christian values.

Although it is unlikely that Langland would have been familiar with these works by his contemporaries, he, too, is appealing for a Christian ideal of knighthood to displace the secular chivalric one. As George Kane observes, “Langland and Chaucer are in the same historical perspective. Both were impelled to write about behavior in their bad times, their almost exclusive concern with people evincing a new sensibility.”<sup>8</sup> Despite their differences in technique, both poets looked to criticize and illuminate society. As Saul explains, Chaucer's knight embodies the idealized chivalric behavior of crusaders and provides a good reference point for how Langland's knights fail to uphold these idealized notions. The non-Langland texts (both contemporary and preceding) glorify and romanticize the religious knight figure to extremes through an often contradictory process of broad and continuous preeminence, a process where knights in a text are presented to be the ultimate model for different chivalric virtues: a knight is not simply courteous, but *the most* courteous knight in the land: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, Arthur is “the hendest, as I had herde telle.”<sup>9</sup> However, there was not qualm in the medieval audience if, in another text, it is a different knight who is the noblest of knights. This preeminence which occurs throughout the medieval romance narratives will be inverted when Langland's Sir Conscience is presented to not be *the most courteous* but is instead *too courteous* to function in his expected role in the

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8. Kane, George. *Chaucer and Langland: Historical and Textual Approaches*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. 133

9. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 26

narrative. Interestingly, while Langland may be drawing upon the same chivalric texts as source material that Chaucer and the Gawain poet would have had at their disposal, the three authors provide a drastically differing depiction of the knightly character. Langland in his presentation of knights refuses to endorse the idealized stereotypes of knightly behavior and instead reveals the flaws of knighthood both at home and on the battlefield.

Chaucer's knight of the General Prologue provides an interesting model in which to compare the knights of Langland's text, such as Sir Conscience. Through these knights, both authors depict a figure returning from war who is, in some ways, a symbol of the religious difficulties of military conflict (It is of interest to note that, despite returning from a holy war where his actions would have been vindicated in the eyes of God, Chaucer's knight has not even changed his clothes before setting out on an pilgrimage of absolution). However, Chaucer's knight seems to present the problems of war on the psyche but not upon the character of the knight himself in that, while the knight is obviously bothered by his actions abroad, he himself remains a true and virtuous knight. Chaucer's knight is a model of the same chivalric literary tropes that fill the literary material he may have drawn upon, including the perfection of character and constant preeminence. Understanding Chaucer's knight as a figure who maintains the societal ideal of the knightly figure whilst still questioning certain aspects of knightly service (such as the weight of war on the conscience, even if the war is supposed to convert heathens), it is interesting to see how Langland presents a contemporary knight who is not ideal, whose depiction reveals the failures of the traditional literary knightly model to address the problems of Langland's contemporary society.

While Chaucer's and the Gawain poet's knightly characters mimic the ideals and emphasis of religious chivalry, Langland's knights are presented differently. Langland's knightly figures are, from the beginning of the text, inextricably tied to the feudal system in a way which the knights of his contemporaries are not. The primary goal of Langland's knights is to establish and maintain the English feudal system and, unlike prior literary knights who are always successful, Langland's knights fail. Langland's knights provide an important window into the complexities of late feudal society, particularly with the introduction of competing power dynamics coinciding with the rise of mercantilism.

As a result of the unique and non-idealized way they are characterized, the knights in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* are not often the subject of critical study save the rather extensive work that has been done on the Christ-Knight figure. The lack of scholarly attention is probably due to the often complicated and compromised way in which Langlandian knights are depicted. Langland's knights are ineffective, long-winded, hypocritical, or so unknighly in their behavior that, save the prefix of 'Sir' before their names, they would not be read as knights at all. I assert that Langland deliberately depicts secular knights in this manner in order to provide a social criticism of the state of knights in contemporary society. Langland provides knightly depictions that deliberately oppose the chivalric ideal of knights in medieval romance narratives in order to deconstruct what constitutes the medieval literary knight and to better reflect the knights of the late fourteenth-century.

Through the juxtaposition of the chivalric ideology promulgated by Edward III's imitation of Arthuriana and the ineffectual knights, Sir Conscience and the nameless

knight of the fields, against the idealized knightly figure of the Christ-knight in Passus XVIII, Langland constructs a societal criticism on the role of the contemporary knight. Langland performs a deliberate deconstruction of the knightly ideal in his text in order to accomplish two things: first, to more accurately represent the knightly figures of his time and, second, to present a better exemplar of knightly behavior, namely the ideal Christian knight. Through this process Langland is able to underscore the social duties of the knightly class in feudal ideology and to demonstrate how those responsibilities are not being actualized in the contemporary behavior of English knights at home and in France. By disassociating the chivalric exemplar from the traditional literary knight and applying these ideals to the Christ-knight figure, Langland is able to offer readers a Christian ideal to which other literary knightly representations should aspire rather than the secular model found in other chivalric texts. The inclusion of the Christ-knight as an ideal knight helps to reinforce that Langland, despite his criticisms, still endorses the feudal system. Despite Langland's affirmation of the different duties of each estate, he is well aware of the shortcomings of each group and the changes being wrought by the rise of the mercantile class. With the addition of the Christ-knight in Passus XVIII, Langland is able to highlight the problems caused by the shifting societal system, mainly, the movement away from the feudal order, while still maintaining a possibility for an ideal feudal society. Langland's criticisms of late fourteenth-century society are made with an atavistic longing for the feudal society of the past, not the non-feudal future.

Knights make their first appearance in the text during the prolonged estates satire of the Prologue. The knights enter alongside the king, "Thanne come there a kyng,

knyghthod hym ladde,”<sup>10</sup> appearing in their proper place in the feudal hierarchy. The three estates – those who fight (knights and the king), those who pray (clergy), and those who work (the commons) – are depicted as operating in cooperation with each other alongside the figure of Kind Wit. That Kind Wit is present reinforces that this cooperation is a natural human social contract. This parade establishes the knights and the king responsible for establishing and maintaining the rule: “Casten that the comune shulde [here communes] fynde.”<sup>11</sup> Kind Wit's involvement with the different estates in the passage, all culminating in the creation of “law and lewté eche [lyf] to knowe his owne”<sup>12</sup> establishes from the beginning of the text that the structured feudal system with its hierarchical structure is not only to be desired, but is instructed by Kynde Wit, an allegory for natural acumen or good sense: natural understanding. In the depiction of knights in this passage, it is notable that the role of the knight as soldier is downplayed in comparison to the knight as a protector and lawman. Langland has begun his depiction of the knight by stressing the importance of the domestic duties of the knight over the activities taken abroad and juxtaposed this with the depiction of society working in tandem through the facility of Kynde Wit or natural human understanding.

In Passus I of Langland's text, the role of knights is brought up again in the discussion between the dreamer (presumable Will) and Holi Cherche: “[For David in his dayes dubbed knightes / And did hem swere on here swerde to serve Trewthe evere.] /

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10. Langland, William. *Piers Plowman*. Eds. Elizabeth Robertson, Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006. Print. Prologue.112

11. Ibid. 117

12. Ibid. 122

That is the professioun appertly that appendeth for knyghtes.”<sup>13</sup> Presented in the beginning of the quest, albeit briefly, is Langland's ideal for the primary duty of the knight in society: to serve Truth before all else. “Langland plays on three meanings of the term “Truth”: (1) fidelity, integrity – as in modern “troth”; (2) reality, actuality, conformity with what is; (3) God, the ultimate truth.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, knights' involvement in governing society is not a violation of their duty to fight, but a clarification of their purpose for fighting. Langland's realistic understanding of the job knights must perform for society includes their responsibility as upholders of the law, for they should “Riden and rappe down in reumes aboute, / And taken *transgressores* and tyen hem faste / Til Treuthe had y-termyned her trespas to the ende.”<sup>15</sup> Langland has provided the rules for judging knighthood in this passage. He has displayed that the knight is expected to be holy and to uphold the societal task required of the martial figure, so long as the fighting is done for the right. The knight's task, therefore, is to maintain God's peace and to persecute wrongdoers so they may face God.

Langland's criticism of knights in fourteenth-century England reveals the failure of the traditional militant knight that results from the decline of the feudal system due to the societal shift towards a proto-capitalist<sup>16</sup> system. Langland's writings about or against

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13. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, I.98-100

14. Robertson, Elizabeth and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, Editors. *Piers Plowman*. Eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006. Print. 15, note 1

15. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, I.95-97

16. In the context of this paper, the utilization of the term “proto-capitalism” is used to depict a shift in the cultural paradigm from one which prioritizes heredity and class to one which prioritizes power *without* being itself a purely capitalist system. Proto-capitalism involves the introduction of fluid class dynamics through the opportunities for individual economic growth whilst still operating under a feudal estates system with a king above all and the prevalence of serfdom and commons. The phrase in this text is used to depict the cultural change impacted by the mercantile system in a state where there exists a confluence in the societal prioritization of power: both power in class and power in wealth.

knights can be interpreted through a Marxist lens as highlighting the problems that shifting the power dynamic in feudal society causes. The interactions between Conscience and Meed and between Piers and the knight of the fields dramatizes the problem of changes in the feudal system as the proto-capitalism of mercantilism was expanding to the late fourteenth-century. In the feudal system, power and status, at least theoretically, are passed on through blood or lineage and conferred by birth with the wealth that comes from such status existing separate from that status. This means that the actual attainment of societal power comes from a source that is, for the most part, out of one's own control. As Saul notes, the second estate responded to the threat of mercantilism by emphasizing lineage:

In England... a growing interest was taken by the elite in lineage and nobility. The fact that the coat of arms, a key ensign of identity could, unlike knighthood itself, be passed down the generations was probably a factor in this process. The pride which every gentleman took in his family coat of arms encouraged him to think in hereditary terms. (Saul, "Chivalry and Nobility," *Chivalry in Medieval England*, 162)

This is a notion which has been criticized by authors such as Chaucer in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and his poem "Gentilesse," texts which object to the idea that birth confers a privileged character. With the top down feudal system, those below the king get what is allotted to them by those of higher status: wealth trickles down and you are, ideally, given what you need in return for your service to those above you. However, with the introduction of a sort of proto-capitalism in the form of the rising mercantile class, individuals are given the opportunity to rise beyond their station based on their own capabilities to acquire money and property. With the introduction of capitalism, money



becomes the source for societal power; this disrupts the feudal hierarchy and changes the impetus for action in society.

To understand how the knights function in society within this proto-capitalist context it is helpful to understand that the literary knight is a social construct not unlike music or art. The knight is simultaneously a living entity and a cultural idea, a figure which can be seen in one's day to day experiences but also a symbol for a society's values. The medieval world seems to always be looking back to an idealistic golden age of chivalry (as exhibited by Edward III's attempts to reconstruct an Arthurian chivalric England) in which the physical entity and the cultural ideal of the knight would be embodied in the same figure. However, in late fourteenth-century England, the cultural image of the ideal romance knight conflicts with the plundering knight of the *chevauchées* in France waged during the Hundred Years' War. Langland sees greed as the cause of this rift between the actual and the ideal knight in fourteenth-century England. He shows how Conscience and the knight of the field fail to uphold the law in their dealings with Meed at court and the Wasters on Piers' half-acre. After depicting the ineffective knightly behavior throughout the *Visio*, Langland redeems the second estate by employing the allegorical figure of the Christ-knight in *Passus XVIII*. Langland's act of deconstructing the aspects of the literary chivalric knightly figure can be interpreted as an act of disassociating the object from the meaning of the knight in society (the romantic and fictional entity of the knight as pictured by the societal consciousness) from the physical knight (the actual knight as are fighting in the Hundred Years' War) in order to

highlight the discrepancies between the two and move towards a reformation of the literary depiction of the chivalric knight.

Passus III begins with the presentation of the character of Mede at Westminster betrothed to False. This betrothal is denied because Theology declares “And God [graunted] to gyf Mede to Treuthe.”<sup>17</sup> The act of connecting Mede to False undermines the sanctity of the church, and instead a new marriage must be found for Lady Mede. The King decides that it should be Sir Conscience who marries Lady Mede, and in his refusal a debate about the role of both Conscience and Mede in society is developed, centering around Mede's problematic effect on society by allowing wealth to function over law or justice. The argument between Conscience and Mede throughout Passus' III and IV highlights the complicated notions that both characters represent. Conscience is an incredibly complex figure embodies the Prologue's ideal of knights as upholders of feudal society as well as the mercenary motives of actual participants in the French campaigns that undermine contemporary knighthood. As Conscience serves both as a model for the knight operating abroad in the Hundred Years' War and as an adviser to the king, a model of both the actual and ideal knightly behavior, his almost contradictory depiction is necessarily complex. Although Sir Conscience is not utterly ineffective, he *is* a fallible character who has his strong points (the refusal to marry Mede for instance) and his weaknesses (his acceptance of earthly meed in France).

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17. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, II.120

As an allegorical figure, Conscience may be read as both simple and incredibly complex, depending on which definition of medieval “conscience” he embodies. As a knight, Conscience represents in Langland’s narrative the protector of the moral sense and the judge of right and wrong. However, Mary Schroeder offers another definition when she compares Langland's writing to other contemporary works, suggesting that

it is conscience which essentially makes it possible for man to know God... it is man's guide to salvation. Thus while not in any sense a divine faculty, it is the more comprehensive and highest of all human faculties when purified by grace. (Schroeder, “The Character of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*,” 17)

This more theological definition, of which Langland would have been aware and from which he likely drew for his character of Sir Conscience, raises quite a few questions. Why, if the idea of conscience is so powerful, is Langland's personified Conscience so ineffectual? Why is it Piers, and not Conscience, whom Langland purifies through grace and whose allegorical armor the Christ-knight fights in? Why, if conscience is so powerful, is Sir Conscience so weak? Although Conscience is an embodiment of a moral faculty, it is a natural power not informed by grace. This identity becomes important again in the concluding Passus' of *Piers Plowman* when Conscience, as a fallible character, allows the Friar Flatterer in Unity and must go in search of Grace after Contrition is weakened. What we see in Conscience at first is a knight attempting to rationalize himself and his behaviors to the character of Mede, then, in Passus XX, attempting to fulfill the role of protector: he is proven unsuccessful in both endeavors. As noted by Baker, Mede’s criticism of Conscience is that he is to blame for the King accepting the Treaty of Brétigny, “Meed disavows the treaty because, she asserts, the

King has renounced the great wealth promised by his claim to the French throne for a paltry sum.”<sup>18</sup> Lady Mede is in opposition to the Treaty and the cease-fire in the war and blames Conscience, acting as the King’s conscience, for the withdrawal.

By situating Langland's text within the historical framework, the complicated depictions of Sir Conscience, particularly in regards to his relationship with Mede, can more easily be explained. *Piers Plowman* was written in its three versions roughly between 1365 and 1388, in the midst of the Hundred Years’ War, spanning from 1337 through 1453, at a time when, despite Edward III's cultivation of a reborn chivalric ideal, the traditional knightly and chivalric behavior of the feudal system was vanishing in favor of a more mercenary military. In 1369, with the resumption of the war (the signing of the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360 resulted in a temporary cease-fire), this mentality was made abundantly clear: military service was an opportunity to make money, and, for those with the right determination and a little luck, there was a lot of money to be had. Denise Baker translates Edward III from *Roturi parliamentorum*: “those who participate will be rewarded with conquered land ‘to be held by them and their heirs and successors, from the King and his heirs, Kings of France’ [a tenir eux & leur heirs & successeurs, de Roi & ses heirs Rois de France].”<sup>19</sup> During this war, Edward III cultivated the perhaps already antiquated concept of an idealized chivalry to gain support for the war, and to build a functioning military force. At this time, military service was no longer required but relied on volunteers from the upper classes thus ruling out the option of a drafted

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18. Baker, Denise. “Meed and the Economics of Chivalry in *Piers Plowman*.” *Inscribing the Hundred Years’ War in French and English Culture*. Ed. Denise N. Baker. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000. 55-72. Print. 56

19. *Ibid.* 59

military. Payment for soldiers during the Hundred Years War was by wage, but was actually just enough to afford the requirements of military service; “the rates of pay for soldiering in the Middle Ages were not high. They had been fixed at two shillings a day for a knight in the early fourteenth-century, and they remained at that level for virtually the whole of the Hundred Years' War.”<sup>20</sup> As knightly upkeep – maintaining multiple horses, armor, weapons, and other assorted expenses – was sure to excel beyond what a two shilling per day pay would have afforded, other methods of income had to be found.

To remedy the poor income being afforded soldiers, illegal measures were taken in order to accrue a profit for their military ventures. This extracurricular engagement, more often than not, took the form of pillaging and ransom, acts not traditionally associated with the ideals of chivalric knighthood. Saul notes, “profits in the Hundred Years' War were realized in three main forms: in straightforward plunder and booty on the march, in the ransoming of prisoners and in grants of land and office in occupied territories;”<sup>21</sup> knights were able to take through campaigning that which would have not been as readily available in the domestic sense. These illegal acts became permissible in that “the loot and ransoms which the knights accrued were to be considered meed from the king just as surely as the appointments and gifts he more directly bestowed.”<sup>22</sup> This behavior developed a rift between the knights of the fourteenth-century and the idealized knights in the literature Langland would have drawn from, a rift which Langland attempts to illustrate in the depictions of knights in his text.

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20. Saul, Nigel. “War, Fame and Fortune.” *Chivalry in Medieval England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 115-134. Print. 120

21. Ibid. 121

22. Baker, “Meed and the Economics of Chivalry,” 62-63

The behaviors depicted by the knights while on campaign in France highlights this problematic role of lady Mede as Langland's representation of the growing proto-capitalist during the Hundred Years' War. Edward III's decree that all gifts taken by knights on campaign is to be considered the king's, "...provision was made for division of the spoils of war, with all towns and castles captured being reserved to the king."<sup>23</sup> Once established, it was also made known that what is taken "for the king" is to be considered need to the knights. While seemingly an action of productive chivalry (he cannot be there to personally receive and dispense everything earned in such a large military venture, so this action should skip the middle man while still maintaining his chivalric authority) this highlights impact of mercenary motives on feudal society. This also highlights the shifting chivalric relationship between the knight and his lord in the period, as outlined by Sylvia Federico:

The idea of chivalry and many of its defining practices underwent significant changes in the late fourteenth century. Recent scholarship, has demonstrated, for instance, how one of the foundational elements of chivalric culture – the sworn feudal relationship – was eroded and ultimately replaced by new models of affiliation, and how such changes in practice were attended by changes in the way the chivalric ethos was defined and described (Federico, *The Place of Chivalry in the New Trojan Court: Gawain, Troilus, and Richard II.* *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narratives*, 171-172)

Had Edward III's reign been a chivalric venture as is depicted in the Arthurian and romance texts he was so enamored with the knights under his command would have been fighting purely for their king and the inherent honor and glory involved. The wages needed to maintain themselves (which, though considerable, probably didn't involve the

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23. Saul, "War, Fame, and Fortune," 119

amount and the type of “wage” taken during the Hundred Years' War) would have been easily provided by the king and what they would have taken would have been of pure monetary or utilitarian value. It is not surprising that the excessive greed led to the wanton destruction and appropriation of property, the capture and ransom of enemies, and the physical and sexual violence imposed upon conquered peoples.

The relationship between knights in the Hundred Years' War with meed leads to the complicated relationship depicted between Sir Conscience and Lady Mede in Passus' III and IV. Mede's criticisms of Conscience attempt to prove him to be both ineffectual and weak, unable to fulfill the virtues expected of knights as well as hypocritical in that he “Without pité, piloure, pore men thow robbedest / And bere here bras at thi bakke to Caleys to selle.”<sup>24</sup> Lady Mede's criticism circulates around Conscience's inability to provide meed for his land. If Mede represents the ill-gotten “gifts” of pillaging and warfare, why then is Conscience's lack of meed frowned upon? It is not only Conscience's lack of meed, but is his cowardice on the field of battle which Mede attacks, criticizing Conscience for taking meed even as he urged the King to withdraw from France and thus deny meed to other knights. Conscience, serving in the story as both the physical knight character but also the king's own conscience in regards to the withdrawal from France, is said to have, by Mede, lead the king to cowardice over the possibility of further rule. However, this supposed cowardice saved countless lives and led to a shifting focus back to the domestic rather than abroad in the actions of the king and his knights. Langland's text highlights how this shift back to the domestic has not

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24. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.195-96

been actualized by the knights due to the introduction of mercenary motivations developed during the war and expanded upon in England. Whether or not Langland endorses Edward III's claim to the French throne, the actions of both the king and knights in the Hundred Years' War are presented for debate in the text. It can be assumed through the criticism of the actions in France that Langland did not endorse the war itself and instead supported the withdrawal of troops, using the conversation between the Mede and Conscience to highlight the discrepancy between what was assumed of knights in the time and what was being practiced by those knights. The argument with Mede helps to highlight the complicated nature of the war efforts in France without undermining the necessity of the knight in feudal society. It is important to remember that Mede distinctly does *not* win the argument against Conscience and that, despite the allegations levied against Sir Conscience (and by proxy, late medieval knightly figures) Mede is still herself a distinctly problematic figure who is as much a source of the problem as she is the solution.

Conscience's cowardice is highlighted by Mede and culminates in a debate where neither party is, in the eyes of the author, "in the right." Through the argument between Mede and Conscience, a notion of what a *good* knight would be according to Langland: one who denies taking ill-gotten meed while still providing for himself and others and, most of all, whilst being stalwart in the face of difficulty. We are presented with a knightly ideal made all the more poignant by Sir Conscience's seeming inability to adhere to these ideals. However, despite having his actions on the field at least questioned if not proven to be cowardly, it is Conscience, and not Mede who "wins" the argument. It is



important to inspect Conscience's actions in France as more than just a knight who took ill-gotten meed but also as an extension of the king's own conscience. If Conscience's role as an advisor to the king is taken into account, the withdrawal of Edward III due to Conscience's urgings can be seen not as an action of cowardice but as an action of preservation. The retreat can then be seen to symbolize a turning away from the greed encouraged by meed towards a desire to preserve the lives of men and thus a transition from mercenary action back to preserving the feudal society. While Conscience is guilty of taking meed (a sin as Sir Conscience is a fallible character) he is also the reason for the lives saved by withdrawing after the Black Monday hailstorm which could have instilled the fear of divine retribution in the knight.

If meed is understood as an earthly gift, often bribery or reward, Conscience's debate can be seen as his refutation of earthly reward in favor of heavenly gifts. As noted by Baker and others, the dialogue in Passus III is a poorly veiled debate about the ethics of the mercenary mentality in the Hundred Years' War as well as the role of chivalry and knighthood. Because Langland registers his own apparent dislike of the character Mede throughout the first dream vision, it might be expected that Sir Conscience would prove a well-equipped and efficient counter response to Mede's mentality of reward. Yet, while Conscience rebuffs Mede, he still provides a poor depiction of a knight. Mede proves that Sir Conscience is hypocritical because, despite his refutation of Mede, he has called upon her multiple times, "Thow hast hanged on myne half ellevene tymes / And also griped my golde [and] gyve it where the liked."<sup>25</sup> Mede then attacks Conscience for persuading the

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25. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.181-82

King to retreat from the battlefield in Normandy. This retreat is thought to be a result of the Black Monday hailstorm on April 14, 1360, which resulted in the king's signing the Treaty of Brétigny, giving up his claim to territory in France. The different meanings of "conscience" are put into play by Langland in Mede's claim, "Conscience is being conceived of as consciousness or awareness more generally than ethical conscience; Meed accuses him of being what makes the soldiers realize they are cold, hungry, and frightened."<sup>26</sup> Even in his refutation of the knightly practices of greed in the war, Langland undermines the efficacy of the knight by attaching Conscience's cowardice to an English military failure. Additionally, Mede claims that she performed the opposite role for the troops in France, saying "I made his [meyné] meri and mornyng lette; / I bated hem on the bakke and bolded here hertis / And dede hem hoppe for hope to have me at wille."<sup>27</sup> Langland demonstrates the culturally complex role of meed in feudal society.

What is illustrated is not an inherent fault in the idea of meed but in the connection between meed and the mercantile mindset. Meed is not an inherently negative concept, it only becomes problematic or sinful in the way which it is practiced. While Sir Conscience presents earthly meed to be a sin, his views heavenly meed to be a gift from heaven at the moment of death so long as one has done well. Earthly meed cannot then be legitimate because it exceeds the deserts of the receiver and often is conferred for evil motives. Conscience's problem with the nature of meed is that it is given unwarranted and that the only gift which can be received unwarranted is the gift of the divine (which by

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26. Robertson and Shepherd, *Piers Plowman*, 45, note 2

27. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.198-200

nature is never warranted since man is fallible). The alternative, then, is measurable hire, a positive term for an equal exchange between work performance and wages.

Conscience's distaste for meed is made evident in his rebuttal of Mede's claim, a claim which, notably, appeals to the king, "Bi Criste, as me thynketh Mede is wel worthi, [me thynketh,] the maistrye to have."<sup>28</sup> Sir Conscience's argument is one which develops two different kinds of meed and helps to ratify the pervasive rift between the secular and the clerical when dealing with chivalric knightly practices. Sir Conscience presents the good meed first, saying "There aren two manere of Medes, my lorde, [bi] yowre leve: / That one God of his grace graunteth in his blisse / To thothat wel worchen whil thei ben here."<sup>29</sup> Meed is an acceptable concept when it is a gift from God and is distinctly detached from any fiscal attachment; Conscience continues by outlining who will be given meed from God (meed being the greatest Christian gift, eternal life in heaven), "Those who enter of one color and of one will / And have done their work with right and with reason, / And he who does not lead his life making loans for usury."<sup>30</sup> For Conscience, meed is a gift separate from the value of money. This is capitalized upon in his depiction of the other type of meed, "There is [a] mede mesurelees that maistres desireth; / To meyntene mysdoers mede thei take."<sup>31</sup> This is a meed relationship which is founded upon immediate and earthly gratification "[Shal have]mede [on this molde that]

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28. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.228-29

29. Ibid. III.231-33

30. Ibid. III.238-40

31. Ibid. III.246-47

Mathew [hath graunted]: / *Amen, amen, recuperunt mercedem suam (Verily, verily, have they received their reward).*<sup>32</sup>

Sir Conscience displays an intimate knowledge of the societal structure and usages of the meed relationship in order to depict the complicated nature of meed. Conscience draws a line between what the feudal system is based upon, that of a top down dissemination of goods based upon service, and the idea of meed as a reward beyond what is immediately necessary:

That laboreres and lowe [lewed] folke taketh of her maistress,  
It is no manere mede but a measurable hire.  
In marchandise is no mede, I may it wel avowe:  
It is a permutacioun apertly, a penyworth for an othre. (Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.255-258)

Notably, measurable hire is *not* meed and is what Sir Conscience promotes; the reward itself is not the problem, it is the manner in which one attains such a reward that is debated in the Conscience and Mede episode. That Sir Conscience opposes the marriage to Mede can be read in a couple of ways once the knight's own knowledge of the nature of meed is developed. The marriage is opposed due to the nature in which Mede has operated in the late feudal society but also because of the inherent opposition of the nature of meed and conscience: if conscience serves as the judge of right and wrong guided but inherently not the divine, then his connection to an ideal that he sees to be completely wrong would be problematic. As outlined by Conscience, meed can serve as either a heavenly or an earthly reward and conscience, defined as the highest of human

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32.Langland, *Piers Plowman*, III.253-54

faculties meant to lead man to grace, only permits one of the forms of meed: that of heavenly meed and thus rendering earthly meed as evil. Similarly, the prospect of meed can run counter to its expected feudal purpose, as is demonstrated through the actions of knights in the Hundred Years' War: knights are being rewarded meed for sinful and mercenary acts (bad people are being rewarded while good people are not). While himself a flawed figure in the text, Sir Conscience outlines the complicated nature of meed and the problems which it creates in a society which is straying away from the feudal system in which meed was able to function in a more Xianist way by operating as measurable hire. In the latter middle ages, the structure of the feudal system in regards to military shifted to what has been labeled "bastard feudalism." In the traditional feudal sense, a king's retainers fought for him out of loyalty to the crown and were rewarded for due service. In bastard feudalism, those retainers would instead hire others to fight in their stead, transitioning the impetus for servitude from loyalty to the crown to loyalty for the florin.

Throughout the passages including Mede, Langland is critiquing a multitude of different facets of medieval society involving the concept of meed. Notably, while meed or Lady Mede are often the source for this critiques, the concept of meed is not one which Langland is agreeing with. Langland's critique of the mercenary mentality of the military illustrates the problematic double nature of medieval meed as that which could function as a reward for just service just as it can function as encouragement for improper behavior. Langland depicts the struggle between what meed could represent, functioning either as a reward or as a bribe. Baker notes:

Though she mocks Conscience's newfound sympathy for the victims of pillage, Langland uses her speech to expose the economic incentives for war with France occluded by the ideology of chivalry. Such mercenary motives, he implies, corrupted the moral judgement of the warrior class. (Baker, "Meed and the Economics of Chivalry in *Piers Plowman*," *Inscribing the Hundred Years' War in French and English Cultures*. 67)

As Conscience is proven, by the end of the episodes involving meed, to have been in the right, Conscience's definition of the two types of meed are finalized: all earthly rewards exceed the merits of the receiver and are therefore not legitimate (and thus sinful) while God's meed *must*, by its very nature, exceed man's merits because no one can do well all the time. That all meed it received unwarranted, it is only permissible if there is no alternative: the opportunity for measurable hire on earth renders earthly meed unnecessary and problematic. To solidify Langland's disagreement with the idea of meed, he depicts her problematic relationship with the domestic courts through bribery. The episode with Peace sees Mede banished from the kingdom (and still unmarried) as Langland's final word on the problematic, partially useful but dangerous concept of meed.

The resolution of the Conscience and Mede episode in Passus IV sees both the conclusion of the possibility of viable earthly meed as well as a depiction of the proper role of Conscience in the courtly setting. As Conscience is himself a knight, the installation of Conscience as an advisor (alongside Reason) to the king helps to reinforce the knight's proper place in the domestic feudal as a governing official. For this to occur, Mede's place in the king's court must be eliminated. At the beginning of Passus IV, the king is still trying to combine Conscience and Mede, proclaiming "Kisse hir, quod the

Kynge, 'Conscience, I hote.'<sup>33</sup> Conscience refuses and is sent to bring Reason to the court so that the place of Mede may finally be decided upon. What follows, thanks to the introduction of Reason, is a parliament trial where Mede's undermining of the judicial system is brought to light and she is finally repudiated and made to leave. Mede is said to be interfering with the societal necessities of adjudication:

For I seighe Mede in the moot-halle on men of law wenke  
And thei lawghyng lope to hire, and lafte Reason manye.  
Waryn Wisdome wynked uppon Mede  
And seide, "Madame, I am yowre man, whatso my mouth jangleth;  
I falle in floreines," quod that freke, "an faile speche ofte." (Langland, *Piers Plowman*, IV.152-56)

Through depictions of Mede's flirtations it is presented that she is disrupting the ability for the court to determine just outcomes. Mede's infidelity is similarly stressed, resulting in her slander in the court as a "mansed schrewe"<sup>34</sup> and a cuckoldress. Mede's unjust connections coupled with her infidelity result in her removal from the court system in exchange for a new collection of determining bodies. The king's initially attempts to marry Mede to Conscience are an attempt to validate the notion of Mede as societally permissible and that they fail exhibits the inherent problems with the meed relationship as providing unwarranted recompense. The rebuttal of Mede by Conscience depicts a necessity for just reward in order for the feudal society to function and the introduction of meed, or unjust or unwarranted reward is destructive to the feudal mindset. Therefore, rather than permitting meed to be a law for kingly rule, Reason and Conscience take their

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33. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, IV.3

34. Ibid. IV.160

place alongside the king. Langland attempts to assert the proper mode for kingly rulership as one which rewards service but does not utilize meed while also reinforcing the proper place of the knight in feudal society as one alongside the king. While the Mede episode ends in an ideal depiction of feudal kingly behavior, the crumbling feudal system remains a primary concern for Langland throughout the rest of the narrative.

In Passus XIX and XX, Conscience attempts to fulfill his role as the knight-protector and the conscience itself, fulfilling the role, as defined by Schroeder, “not only as a guide and protector of the individual soul but as a collective conscience defending the collective soul of the Church.”<sup>35</sup> However, Conscience's ability to fill these requirements in this final Passus is questionable as the romantic aspects of knighthood which Conscience also represents (namely that of knightly courtesy) disrupt his other functions. Sir Conscience becomes a parody of the trope of preeminence utilized by other authors in defining knights: Sir Conscience is the most courteous knight but this prevents him from successful boasting and defying those that he would challenge (also necessary traits for a good knight). It is because of his courtesy that Conscience is unable to fulfill his role as a protector and a guide. His excessive courtesy and subsequent inability to behave, in a sense, rudely are what allow Unity to be penetrated and the concluding events of the poem to occur. Because of this failure, it becomes evident as to why Piers, and not Conscience becomes the armor of Christ. Conscience, because of his romantic aspects, lacked grace. “And sitthe he gradde after Grace til I gan awake,”<sup>36</sup> the dreamer's

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35. Schroeder, Mary C. “The Character of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*.” *Studies in Philology* 67.1(1970). 13-30. Web. 5 Dec. 2013. 18

36. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, XX.386



final moments are of Conscience seeking the allegorical depiction of that which he could not have: grace.

Langland's ability to critique the institution of knighthood without outright rejecting its necessity is readily depicted in the plowing of the field episode in passus VI. Piers is approached by a knight who requests that Piers teach him how to plow: "Ac kenne me,' quod the knyghte, 'and [I wole konne erie].'"<sup>37</sup> The knight is doing what he thinks to be the right thing (avoiding sloth, performing labor, helping others) and, one would think, the plowman would be happy to have as much assistance as possible. However, Piers denies the knight and reinforces the estates system by placing the knight in his appropriate position in the hierarchy:

"Bi Seynt Poule," quod Perkin, "[for] ye profre yow so [lowe]  
I shal swynke and swete and sowe for us bothe,  
And [eke laboure] for thi love al my lyftyme,  
In covenaut that thow kepe Holy Kirke and myselve  
Fro wastoures and fro wykked men that [wolde me destruye]." (Langland, *Piers Plowman*, VI.24-27)

Piers asserts both his and the knight's place in feudal society and reminds the knight what his role in that society is, as Raymond Lull phrased it in *The Book on the Order of Chivalry*:

to maintain the land, for because of the fear that the common people have of the knights, they labor and cultivate the earth, out of terror lest they be destroyed... [t]he office of the knight also includes search for thieves, robbers, and other wicked folk in order to have them punished. (Lull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, 2.12)

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37. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, VI.23

Piers attempts to maintain the structures of feudal society by establishing the knight's proper role within the domestic societal framework. It is of note that this depiction of knightly duties was depicted from a distance in the parade in the prologue and that, up close, it is not being actualized. The eager knight quickly assents to the job which Piers puts forward to him in a curious manner, saying "To fulfille this forward though I fighte sholde."<sup>38</sup> The knight agrees to serve his duty but his words make it seem like he does not want to fight or that he is taking on his duty despite the fact that he may have to display violence. This is problematic when taking into account the knights domestic role as one founded almost purely on the partaking of or the threat of violence. The knight of the fields allows Langland to criticize the mentality of the domestic knight as the direct opposite of the knight abroad. While the English soldiers who are out conquering France are displaying an excessively violent mentality, the domestic knight has lost the ability to uphold his militant duty. Langland highlights through the use of this knight the failing of knights on both fronts in regards to their military might: what is highlighted by contrasting Langland's differing depictions of knights is an inability for contemporary knights to properly utilize the military force which is attributed to them through the feudal system. Because of the knight of the fields fails in his ability to police the feudal society as he is expected to, Piers is forced to step out of his expected societal role and attempt to police the pilgrims himself. This effort is proven futile by the introduction of the character, Waster.

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38. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, VI.35

In the face of his legitimate feudal duties, the knight of the fields proves to be ineffectual in his dealings with Waster by being unable to remove or successfully confront him. His lack of competence causes the common folk no longer to fear the knight as they should and ensures that the knight, ultimately, will provide nothing for the plowing-pilgrimage. The knight threatens Waster, “thow shalt abugge by the lawe, by the ordre that I bere,”<sup>39</sup> but is scoffed at and made light of, leading Piers to requisition the aid of Hunger and leaving the knight without functional purpose. Thus, in this scene Langland has invoked the feudal order simply, it seems, to expose an inadequacy which is, at least in part, due to the ineffectiveness of knights. The knight threatens the force which his societal role should be able to utilize, but he does nothing with it, presenting the knight of the fields to be a blustering figure prepared to talk the talk of being a knight without the conventions behind it. Langland displays in the domestic knight an ineffectivity that can be read as the problematic outcome of the Edward III's insistence of revitalizing the romantic knightly tropes within modern society. The knight has been taught the romance elements of knightly virtue without the realities of being a chivalric knightly figure. As figures which, as seen in the prologue, are performing a more political and less military role in late feudal society, the knights are no longer able to prove effective in their prescribed societal tasks. This ineffectivity is displayed through his inability to perform the tasks which are his cultural responsibility: policing those below him and protecting them from outside threats. Langland's knight of the field proves unable to maintain the established hierarchy. Langland's knight of the fields is more

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39. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, VI.166

reminiscent of the knights of the Hundred Years' War in his actions, but his speech reflects the speech of a traditional romanticized knight. Through the nameless knight of the field, Langland draws attention to the difference between the physical and the literary knight, further criticizing the unchivalric behavior of the former. Langland deconstructs the knight by presenting what it is the knight should be doing in society and then presents forward a knight who distinctly does not satisfy those needs.

Having depicted how the mercenary greed impacted the behavior of knights abroad, the episode that occurs between Piers and the knight of the field highlights the domestic problems of an increasingly fluid class dynamic. This is done through showing how knights displaced from their proper role in society lose their functionality in that society. While Piers is not above the knight due to his own changing class but is instead above the knight because the knight is ineffective, the problems of shifting power structures are depicted. When the knight fails in his duty to protect, Piers is forced to “step up” and take the knight's position in society. When he does this, he is only marginally successful and the plowing-pilgrimage fails. This failure is due to the displacement of the knight's role as enforcer of the law in feudal society and highlights one of the sources of knightly ineffectiveness that pervades Langland's text. Due to labor shortages following the black plague, “those who work” suddenly found themselves with new found degrees of agency in that, due to demand, they could charge more or move to different places to find work. In the feudal system, this is a problem, a problem which the Statute of Laborers in 1351 attempted to resolve. The statute attempted to instate limits

on laborers by prohibiting movement or wage increases, in response to workers seeing a lack in the population in the commons and hoping to gain better employment:

if such a person is sought after to serve in a suitable service appropriate to that person's status, that person shall be bound to serve whomever has seen fit so to offer such employment, and shall take only the wages, liveries, reward or salary usually given in that place in the twentieth year of our reign in England, or the usual year of the five or six preceding ones. ("Statute of Laborers (1351)," *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*, 230)

However, the statute was poorly enforced and ultimately did not work as intended. Piers' inability to get the pilgrims to work demonstrates the problematic outcome of workers not adhering to their feudal system duties by equating the plowing to a pilgrimage.

That the plowing is a failure due solely to the unwillingness to work exhibited by the pilgrims displays the issues involved when the lower classes find opportunities for fiscal mobility. The same sense of greed supplanting cultural responsibility that was apparent in knightly endeavors in the Hundred Years' War is depicted in the actions of the commons during the Plowing-Pilgrimage episode. The refusal to work exhibited by the commons can be compared to the refusing to fight seen by the knights unless meed or monetary gain is presented. Langland is criticizing the impact of mercantile mindsets across the estates, presenting that the decline in the viability of the feudal system is not solely apparent in the knights but also in the estate of those who work. The failure of the statute of laborers displays the failing feudal system against the rising proto-capitalist influence which, when applied to the plowing-pilgrimage episode highlights Langland's disdain for the shifting cultural dynamic.

As has been mentioned throughout this paper, the Christ-knight serves as a surprising exception to the presentation of knights in Langland's text. Unlike Sir Conscience or the knight of the fields, who are both mortal and thus, fallible, the Christ figure in the narrative is, by his very nature, the ideal. The question arises then, with such an unsatisfactory presentation of knight up until the Christ-knight episode, why is Christ a knight at all? The presence of Christ as a knight reinforces Langland's approval and desire for the second estate despite the criticisms and contemporary failings which are highlight in *Piers Plowman*. The Christ-knight is utilized to maintain the importance of the validity of the warrior class in the feudal society.

The Christ-knight is an interesting figure in that *Piers Plowman* is not the first text where the notion of a "Christ-knight originates, the first recorded use occurs in the *Ancrene Wisse*,<sup>40</sup> a guide for anchoresses. In part 7, Christ is depicted as a lover knight:

Ant he as noble wohere efter monie messagers ant feole god-deden com to  
pruvien his luvē ant schawde thurh cnihtschipe thet he wes luvē-wurthe, as weren  
sum-hwile cnihtes i-wunet to donne – dude him i turneiment and hefde for his  
leoves luvē his scheld i feht as kene cniht on euche half i-thurlet. His scheld, the  
wreah his Godd-head, wes his leove licome thet wes i-spread o rode, brad as sheld  
buvē in his i-strahte earmes, nearow bineothen as the an fot – efter onies wene –  
set up-o the other. (*Ancrene Wisse*, 380-381 lines 83-89)<sup>41</sup>

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40. "Written sometime roughly between 1225 and 1240" preceding Langland's use of the phrase by over a hundred years. (*Ancrene Wisse*, Ed. Robert J. Hasenfratz. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000. Print. 1)

41. Trans: And he, like a noble suitor, after numerous messengers and many acts of kindness came to prove his love, as was the custom of knights once upon a time. He entered the tournament and, like a bold knight, had his shield pierced through and through in battle for the love of his lady. His shield, which his divinity, was his dear body, which was stretched out on the cross: broad as a shield above in his outstretched arms, narrow below, where the one foot (as many people think) was fixed above the other. (Millett, Bella. *Ancrene Wisse: A Guide for Anchoresses: A Translation*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009. Print. 147)

The Christ-knight figure in Langland's narrative emphasizes the courteous and chivalric aspects of the knight over the religious aspects to help reinforce the role of the knight in feudal society from a cultural perspective rather than the personal perspective illustrated by the *Ancrene Wisse*. The sacrificial nature of both Christ-knight variants presented depicts the importance of the knightly character to be a figure of giving, be it for his lord or his society, and not one of taking as is presented in the Mede relationship.

The Christ-knight presents, at the conclusion of Langland's narrative, an allegorical representation of the feudal system which *Piers Plowman* is attempting to reconstruct against the rising proto-capitalist influence. The Christ-knight is armed in the armor of Piers the plowman:

“The Jhesus of his gentrice wole juste in Piers armes,  
In his helme and in his haberjoun, *humana natura*,<sup>42</sup>  
That Cryst be nought biknowe here for *consummates Deus*.<sup>43</sup>  
In Piers paltok the Plowman this priker shal ryde,  
For no dynte shal hym dere as *in deitate Patris*.”<sup>44</sup> (Langland, *Piers Plowman*,  
XVIII.22-26)

Garbed in such a manner, Christ is all three of the estates at once at their highest capacity: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work are all represented in the Christ-knight figure who serves the Christian King. By presenting the Christ-knight as an ideal figure of feudal society, Langland's aversion to the proto-capitalist influence and atavistic pursuit of an ideal feudal society are presented.

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42. “Latin: ‘human nature,’ which Christ assumed in order to redeem humanity” (Robertson and Shepherd, *Piers Plowman*, 303, note 4)

43. “Latin: the perfect (three-personed) God” (Ibid. 303 ftnt 5)

44. “‘in the godhead of the father’: as God, Christ could not suffer, but as man, he could” (Ibid. 303, note 6)

Following Langland's process of deconstructing the literary chivalric knightly, his disassociating of the knight from the knightly, and his criticism of the behaviors of the fourteenth-century knight, Langland constructs a figure to unify the chivalric knightly figure. The production of the Christ-knight provides a reconstructed model of literary chivalric knighthood, a figure of unified literary and actual presentation where the idealized and the real are the same, and a non-mercenary model for the contemporary knight's place in society. The knights in Langland's *Piers Plowman* serve as a focus point for Langland to approach and criticize the changes he witnesses in the cultural dynamic. Through utilizing knights as a focal point Langland is able to highlight faults in both the construction of the knight (literary and contemporary) and the mercantilism which threatens to undermine feudal society. Langland exhibits an ideal reversion away from the rising mercantile classes and towards the feudal system of England's past. More so than Edward III, Langland attempts to present an idealizing chivalric past which is not yet out of reach but is threatened by the shifting cultural dynamic. Through the Christ-knight figure Langland is able to present a rallying point, a figure of idealized chivalric knighthood which would maintain feudal authority, despite the flaws of fourteenth-century feudalism that he portrays throughout his text. It is distinctly because of the sparseness and ineffectiveness of other knights throughout *Piers Plowman* that Langland's fear of a proto-capitalist society and longing for idealized feudalism is presented in such a striking and impacting manner.



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“AND HARPED AT HIS OWHEN WILLE”: DEVELOPING BARDIC KINGSHIP IN  
THE LAY OF *SIR ORFEO*

For a king in the Middle Ages, there is a constant importance placed by society upon royal legacy. Successful kings are remembered in their military victories or their conquests. It is militant strength which determines a king's legacy, regardless of how they ruled, how fair or just they were. In times of peace, a king's legacy could be made through the production of an heir. King Orfeo, in the Breton Lay of *Sir Orfeo* fulfills none of these guidelines and yet he remains a successful king. The medieval retelling of the Orpheus myth develops a unique method for determining kingly virtue. Rather than concentrating on heredity or military might, *Sir Orfeo* establishes bardic authority, authority derived from a king's musical ability, as an equal source of kingly authority.

*Sir Orfeo* explores the relationship between physical spaces and authority, and how these two concepts combine to influence a king's development. The varied spaces depicted by the author/performer<sup>1</sup> help to facilitate the shifting depictions of what behaviors constitute a good king, namely the king's ability to govern and protect his kingdom, which is a space that functions as a direct reflection of the king. According to medieval understanding, an individual's exterior reflects their interior. A kingdom, therefore, is understood to be the exterior representation of a king. A king is always

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1. The actual author of the lay of *Sir Orfeo* remains unknown. The earliest version we have is found in the Auchinleck Manuscript (NLS Adv MS 19.2.1) which is dated around the 1330s. As it is a lay and was thus performed as a piece of minstrelsy, the text assuredly went through a number of variations depending on the performer before it was written down.

intrinsically connected to his surroundings in that his abilities to perform and define himself are determined by the space he inhabits which means that a change in surroundings enables changes in the king. Orfeo's transition between different spaces in the lay permits a shift in the kingly hero which facilitates development of an alternate style of kingship than that depicted by the traditional militant king.

The lay of *Sir Orfeo* is a medieval retelling of the Greek Orpheus myth. Sir Orfeo is a king who decided he loved the sound of music so he learned to play the harp, resulting in the same supernatural harp playing that the Greek hero, Orpheus, performed. However, little else remains from the original myth other than the harp. Rather than being bitten by a snake like Eurydice, Orfeo's queen Heurodis is threatened and kidnapped by the Fairy King. Orfeo does not rush to the underworld like Orpheus. Instead, he leaves his kingdom in the care of his steward and spends ten years wandering the wilderness and playing his harp before stumbling upon the fairy kingdom. Orfeo infiltrates the Fairy King's kingdom disguised as a bard, earns Heurodis as his reward for performing, and returns to his kingdom with wife in tow, which directly opposes Eurydice's return to hell in the Greek version. After returning to his own kingdom, Orfeo tests his steward's faithfulness; the story ends with the steward's fidelity intact and Orfeo's restoration as a successful king. The narrative departs from the tragic love story depicted in the Greek myth and instead focuses on the development of Orfeo's kingship as one which utilizes bardic performance over military behavior to maintain kingly rule over his inhabited space. This provides a foundation for measuring other depictions of feudal kingship apart from the traditional military methods.

Just as important as the factors which constitute a good king in medieval society is the manner in which the king is afforded the opportunity to rule. Because kings are not often elected but instead born into power, an individual's power must be socially justified. The text questions Orfeo's ability to rule, but not his right, making it doubly important that his kingly status is validated. This unquestioned validation of Orfeo's right to rule is done through his divine heredity. Orfeo is a king because he is a descendant of kings: "His fader was comen of King Pluto, / And his moder of King Juno."<sup>2</sup> Orfeo is the descendent of the gods which have been euhemeristically reduced to a non-deified state. This bloodline establishes Orfeo as divinely ordained to be a king because he is inherently greater than the offspring of non-heroes. Orfeo's heredity answers any questions about his right to rule his kingdom and instead focuses on his ability to rule well rather than whether or not he should rule at all. The text utilizes Orfeo's heroic bloodline in order to question *how* Orfeo rules his kingdom without bringing into question his divine *right* to rule.

Rather than beginning with Orfeo's description, his heredity, or even his wife, the text first describes his musical prowess. The emphasis is immediately placed upon Orfeo's harp as a signifier for who he is: "Orfeo mest of ani thing / Lovede the gle of harping. / Siker was everi gode harpour / Of him to have miche honour."<sup>3</sup> Orfeo, as a bardic king, uses his harp as a symbol of his power and his ability to rule well. The harp is a synecdoche for Orfeo like Sir Gowther's falchion or King Arthur's Excalibur. Orfeo's

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2. "Sir Orfeo." *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 2001. 15-60. Print. 43-44

3. *Ibid.* 25-28

identifying object, however, is distinctly non-violent: it is a symbol of his non-militant kingly authority. His kingly authority is corroborated by the enraptured reactions of those, be they man, beast, or otherworldly, who hear him perform. The effects of Orfeo's performance change depending on the space he is in, but they always establish his power over his audience.

Just as significant for Orfeo's kingly development and the depiction of bardic kingly authority is the spaces in which Orfeo inhabits and performs. Jacques le Goff outlines the differing medieval spaces of wilderness and the court:

For medieval men and women, space was composed of forests, fields, gardens, seignuries<sup>4</sup> and cities – geographic as well as imaginary realities. In each of these places work was done and social practices enacted, yet they were also powerful symbols, objects of fear and desire and subjects of dream and legend. (Le Goff, "Introduction," *The Medieval Imagination*, 13)

Le Goff shows that space in medieval society could be either geographic or imaged realities which means that understanding medieval space requires knowledge of a place's physical as well as notional aspects. Medieval wilderness, for instance, consists of flora and fauna, but also the unknown, which consists of monsters and gateways to otherworldly places. Understanding a space in a medieval text requires understanding its physical composition and its societal reception: what a place is but also what a place means. These societal understandings help to develop the wilderness of *Sir Orfeo* as a culturally dynamic space in what it offers for Orfeo's kingly development but also what dangers it threatens.

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4. Le Goff, Jacques, and Arthur Goldhammer. "Introduction." *The Medieval Imagination*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1988. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 13. Estates

Orfeo's trajectory throughout the text is from one locus of civilization to another. What makes Orfeo unique is the sheer amount of time spent in the intermediate space between the different locus' of civilization, the space which le Goff claims is one of "fear and desire:" the wilderness. The wilderness space is an easily disregarded portion of the narrative, apart from Orfeo being there for ten years, very little appears to happen. However, the wilderness space in this text and other romance narratives<sup>5</sup> is a place of dynamic change and growth in the male<sup>6</sup> romance hero. Ellen Arnold, in the introduction to her book *Negotiating the Landscape*, highlights how the medieval wilderness has often been interpreted, "reflecting medieval metaphors, modern scholars also frequently understand medieval forests as synonymous with wilderness, and wilderness synonymous with fear and isolation."<sup>7</sup> The understanding of the wilderness space is composed as much of the feelings evoked by the space as its actual composition. The two are inseparable to the medieval mind and this is usually where scholars stop when regarding the medieval wilderness space. The modern understanding of medieval wilderness as a place of fear and isolation is a two dimensional approach: fear of danger and isolation were a part of the wilderness experience, but so was action and development. What is presented in Orfeo is a more dynamic interpretation of the wild spaces in the medieval

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5. Breton Lays such as *Sir Gowther* or, to a different extent, *Emarée*, and other medieval narratives, such as Chrétien de Troyes *Yvain: Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Lancelot, ou le Chavlier de la Charette* serve as examples where this dynamic medieval space is presented as necessary.

6. While the wilderness/intermediary space the male romance character inhabits facilitates some degree of change or personal mastery, for the female romance character in the same space, the wilderness is purely transitory (as in the case of *Emaré*). The lack of female activity in the wilderness space hints at a need to present the medieval women in the presence of others for developmental validation more than for male figures.

7. Arnold, Ellen F. "Introduction: Approaching the Medieval Landscape." *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. *Project MUSE*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>>. 23

narrative, allowing for a more nuanced reading of the wilderness and its impacts on the development of Orfeo's kingly identity.

In contrast, the court is a safe place to demonstrate chivalric ability and receive societal validation; it provides witnesses who can corroborate a person's claims or actions. Orfeo's bardic ability is reinforced by his court but only as a performer, not as a king. However, the same rigid structuring of the courtly space which allows for safe societal performance prevents Orfeo's development as a ruler due to his responsibilities as a performer. The court requires performance, regardless of Orfeo's desires. Despite being a king, Orfeo's status as a bard requires that he perform for his court, meaning that, while he is king, he does not have complete agency over his harp playing. The development of Orfeo's bardic kingship requires developing an agency over his own performance, made possible through his time spent outside of the demanding courtly setting.

The wilderness in *Sir Orfeo* provides a unique opportunity for the romance hero to redefine his performance outside of the courtly setting in order to hone his chivalric abilities for the necessary reintegration, and subsequent societal validation, into courtly society. Le Goff states that, "in literature, which along with art is society's primary means of symbolic expression, the antithesis is generally between the forest and the city. But the castle also stands for the city,"<sup>8</sup> meaning that Orfeo's court within his castle is shorthand for the broader civilized medieval society. In this way, wilderness spaces and courtly spaces are oppositional, "all went to the forest to behave as men of nature, fleeing the

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8. Le Goff, "Wilderness in the Medieval West," *The Medieval Imagination*, 58



world of culture in every sense of the word.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the dangers associated with leaving the courtly setting, the wilderness is not inherently positive or negative. It is a different and unique space for chivalric development.

The wilderness is antithetical to the court: a dangerous but freeing space of self-determination and pro-activity. As an individual is validated in the courtly setting through others, the wilderness offers a unique space of pure isolation. The isolation provided by the wilderness allows for a removal of the ever present societal responsibilities of the court and provides a space for development of courtly abilities. Orfeo is able to refine his musical ability by being able to play “at his own will,”<sup>10</sup> allowing him to transition his bardic performance into a method of rule rather than a method of pure entertainment. Orfeo’s performance becomes a tool for garnering authority outside of the traditional kingdom setting.

The romance hero requires that the wilderness be a dynamic but transitory space: because the growth of the kingly or chivalric character must be reintegrated into the courtly for those changes to be finally validated the wilderness cannot be the romance hero’s final inhabited space. The isolation of the wilderness allows for the freedom to exercise new methods of kingship outside of the structured courtly space, but it also lacks the one thing necessary to societal validation in the medieval setting: witnesses. The necessary reintegration into courtly society that the wilderness warrants can be seen in *Sir Orfeo*. Without anyone to see or be ruled by the newly developed bardic method of kingship, the time in the wilderness is non-productive. The wilderness is necessary for

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9. Le Goff, “Wilderness in the Medieval West,” *The Medieval Imagination*, 52

10. *Sir Orfeo*, 271

the development of new methods of chivalric behavior outside of the court setting but cannot itself be the final space for the chivalric kingly figure due to its lack of societal validation.

The court and the wilderness are antithetical to each other but there exist liminal spaces throughout the text which combine aspects of both the wilderness and the courtly space. The first hybrid liminal space encountered in the text is the garden space in Orfeo's kingdom. The garden encompasses the immediate societal validation and the security which is provided by the court but with a degree of the freedom provided by the wilderness space. It is curious that the garden in Orfeo's kingdom, the closest his kingdom gets to the wilderness space, is the space which depicts the lacking kingly authority apparent in Orfeo's court.

Traditionally, the medieval garden, which Laura Howes depicts as a structured pleasure ground, is a space of intimacy and privacy whilst still being within society's view. The garden was a space considered safe enough for women of high authority to be outdoors and act on their own volition in a societally acceptable manner. This opportunity is afforded by the assumed safety of the castle garden space as it is, unlike the standard fortifications and constructions of a castle, is a space developed purely for leisure and discovery: "an orchard that could both produce fruit and serve as a *pleasaunce*... encouraged movement through space, on foot, horseback, or even in a boat, to produce moments of discovery and surprise."<sup>11</sup> Gardens served as places of leisure and pleasure

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11. Howes, Laura L. "Chaucer's Forests, Parks, and Groves." *Chaucer Review: A Journal Of Medieval Studies And Literary Criticism* 49.1 (2014): 125-133. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 126

and of discovery. The garden space has the same effect as Orfeo's bardic performance, creating a source for enjoyment and pleasure. That the garden becomes the point of entry for the Fairy King expresses the initial cracks in both Orfeo's kingdom and his kingly authority before he can transition his bardic ability into a method for rule.

Orfeo's garden provides a connection between the natural world and the court, creating a space which the Fairy King, through his connection to both human violence and the natural world, is able to utilize. Like Heurodis, Orfeo's garden becomes a point which facilitates the need for a development of a new type of kingly identity. The time of year, May, has brought with it the fields of flowers and budding trees which seem to emphasize the peace and safety of the garden space as well as a sense of productivity. The garden's safety is stressed throughout the early portion of the text, making the Fairy King's penetration of the space particularly disruptive; the kingdom is infiltrated where it should be at its absolute safest which utterly undermines Orfeo's authority.

The Fairy King visits Heurdis as she dreams under a tree. While the King's visit is important, it is particularly important that the tree under which she sleeps is "a faire ympe-tre."<sup>12</sup> "The term *ympe*," as Curtis R.H. Jirsa notes, "is almost universally understood to signify a grafted tree of any species (its French equivalent being *ente*)."<sup>13</sup> A grafted tree is, according to the OED, "a shoot or scion inserted in a groove or slit made in another stock, so as to allow the sap of the latter to circulate through the former,"<sup>14</sup> a

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12. *Sir Orfeo*, 70

13. Jirsa, Curtis R. H. "In The Shadow Of The Ympe-Tre: Arboreal Folklore In Sir Orfeo." *English Studies: A Journal Of English Language And Literature* 89.2 (2008): 141-151. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 142

14. "graft, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 5 April 2015.

process usually done to allow a tree to produce fruit when it would not normally be able to. The process is itself violent and the grafted portion of a tree is often the weakest point of that tree and the most susceptible to breaking or infection. The importance of the tree as a locus for abduction lies not in the type of the tree, but in the arboriculture: the importance lies in the process, not the product. This procedure reflects the punishment with which Heurodis is threatened by the Fairy King if she does not readily comply:

“And totore thine limes al  
That nothing help the no schal  
And thei thou best so totorn,  
Yete thou worst with ous y-born.” (*Sir Orfeo*, 171-74)

The Fairy King threatens to violently graft Heurodis; rather than allowing her to remain in her native soil he wants to forcefully plant her in his kingdom. Jirsa interprets the importance of the tree in that the shadow of the tree serves as a portal to the Christian underworld or purgatory represented by the fairy kingdom.<sup>15</sup> However, I read the tree's importance as that of a symbol linked to the text's presentation of Heurodis. The grafted tree, in addition to the violence depicted in its creation, is one which is used to produce fruit, an action which Heurodis does not perform throughout the text (the heir to the throne is Orfeo's steward, distinctly *not* Heurodis' child). This presents the grafted tree as an object connected to Heurodis: the grafted tree is almost a mirror for what could happen to Heurodis but does not. The grafted tree then serves as a representation of the weaknesses of Orfeo's kingdom and his inability to exercise kingly authority. The grafted tree as an opposite of Heurodis highlights the couple's inability to reproduce which

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15. Jirsa, "Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*," 143

results in Orfeo's need to prove his successful kingship through his manner of rule rather than through his ability to produce an heir.

Heurodis is not only a queen in this text but is a representative for Orfeo's kingdom. Laskaya and Salisbury's introduction to their translation of the text notes that "the lay creates a double narrative in which the loss of the queen precipitates the loss of the kingdom, and the private recuperation of the queen precipitates the public recuperation of the kingdom."<sup>16</sup> In this way, Orfeo's loss of his queen is what demonstrates his current inability to rule. This is a loss which occurs in stages, beginning with the initial visit from the Fairy King while she slept under the ympe-tre. Heurodis' response to the Fairy King's threat is to fall into grief and lose her wits, tearing at her face and body. Ellen Caldwell notes that this violent act of self-mutilation "connects her to a tradition of holy and chaste women in the early Middle Ages who disfigured themselves in order to appear unappealing to would-be attackers."<sup>17</sup> This is an act of fidelity to Orfeo but also an attempt to negate threats of violence made against her by the Fairy King; thus, she uses violence to prevent further violence. After the Fairy King's visit, "Heurodis is, thus, raped of her wits as well as threatened with raptus, an abduction the next morning by the Fairy King, and presumably sexual violation as well in the fairy world"<sup>18</sup>. While no harm is done structurally to the kingdom itself, the violent abduction, insinuations of violence, and responsive violence associated with Heurodis' abduction is

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16. Laskaya, Anne and Eve Salisbury, "Introduction: Sir Orfeo." *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 2001. 15-60. Print. 17

17. Caldwell, Ellen M. 2007. "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo." *Papers On Language And Literature: A Journal For Scholars And Critics Of Language And Literature* 43, no. 3 *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 5, 2015). 291

18. *Ibid.* 294

mapped to as an assault kingdom. Heurodis is a stand in for the kingdom itself, “as long as Orfeo possesses Heurodis, he maintains control of his kingdom.”<sup>19</sup> Heurodis then serves as source of the Fairy King's assault on Orfeo's kingdom without any direct military action occurring. The abduction is an act that does not demand a violent response the way a physical assault on the kingdom itself would. Rather than evoking forceful retribution as a physical assault on Orfeo's kingdom would, the abduction of Heurodis causes Orfeo personal slight and requires a different response. The abduction of Heurodis is not only an assault on the kingdom, but it is an assault on Orfeo as a king: Heurodis is “not merely the image of marital chastity, but of political sovereignty. The abduction of Heurodis creates not only a rift in the marriage and the kingdom, but a rape of Orfeo's authority and identity.”<sup>20</sup> The intimate loss of the queen allows for the fairy kingdom to assault Orfeo's kingdom in a manner which undermines his kingly authority on both a personal and societal level.

Because Heurodis is connected to the ympe-tree, her abduction threatens sexual violence and forced reproduction. The threat of sexual violence against Heurodis when grafted into the fairy kingdom is a threat not only of violation to Orfeo's kingdom but is a threat of forced productivity in Heurodis just as a grafted tree is forced to produce fruit. As Orfeo's kingship is defined through bardic authority in part because he has no heir, Heurodis producing a child through sexual violence in the fairy kingdom would be a further disruption of Orfeo's kingly identity.

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19. Caldwell, “Self-Mutilation and Restoration,” 292

20. Ibid. 297

By maintaining the Fairy King as a proper and chivalric king in the taking of Heurodis, Orfeo's later successes in the fairy kingdom will permit both kinds of kingship to be acceptable, rather than suggesting that bardic or militant kingship is better. Heurodis's abduction occurs in stages, which permits Orfeo the opportunity to exhibit his ineffective militant kingly authority. The Fairy King's success despite Orfeo's military efforts exhibits the weaknesses of Orfeo's kingdom, but also suggests that he is not meant to be a militant king. By revealing his plan to Heurodis, the Fairy King tests Orfeo's kingliness. He gives Heurodis the opportunity to tell her husband when she will be abducted, giving Orfeo the opportunity to organize a military response:

Amorwe the undertide is come  
And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,  
And wele ten hundred knightes with him,  
Ich y-armed, stout and grim;  
And with the quen wenten he  
Right unto that ympe-tre. (*Sir Orfeo*, 181-86)

Orfeo attempts to match the Fairy King as a militant king. With an army of a thousand knights surrounding the queen, Orfeo futilely tries to deter the Fairy King's second invasion: "The quen was oway y-twight, / With fairi forth y-nome. / Men wist never wher sche was bcome."<sup>21</sup> The Fairy King tests Orfeo by offering him an opportunity to prepare before taking Heurodis, this is an opportunity for the two kings to meet on equal footing but it also demonstrates that the Fairy King is an honorable chivalric figure. Orfeo's loss of Heurodis is the product of two kings matching their militant kingly authority and the Fairy King emerging the victor. The Fairy King does not abduct

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21. *Sir Orfeo*, 192-94

Heurodis without warning; instead he gives Orfeo the opportunity to prevent his invasion and Orfeo responds. The problem for Orfeo is that he is a non-militant king attempting to match a hyper-militant king by utilizing militant kingly authority. Heurodis's abduction instigates Orfeo's journey into the wilderness which allows him to hone his art and transition his harp playing from a tool solely for entertainment into a facility for bardic kingly rule.

The loss of Heurodis begins Orfeo's calculated withdrawal from his kingdom and transition of his kingly authority away from the failed militant authority and towards a bardic form of kingship. While there are a multitude of reasons why Orfeo may have chosen to leave his kingdom, it would seem that his grief, coupled with the revelation that his current state of rule is not as secure as it should be, would cause him to realize he is not currently fit to rule and facilitate his temporary removal from the kingdom. Despite his exclamation, "Do way!" quath he, 'It schal be so!' / Al his kingdom he forsoke,"<sup>22</sup> Orfeo's exodus from Thraciens was never meant to be a permanent endeavor. Because his kingdom has been assaulted and his wife taken, Orfeo has broken his promise that he outlined earlier in the text, "Whider thou gost, ichil with the, / And whider y go, thou schalt with me,"<sup>23</sup> as Orfeo is unable, due to the manner in which she is taken, to follow her directly to the fairy kingdom. The breaking of his vow facilitates Orfeo's removal from the kingdom due to a sense of grief. As he cannot follow her directly without knowing where she went, he instead removes himself from the one place he knows she is not: the kingdom. Orfeo's grief can be read to oppose Heurodis' own grief after the first

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22. *Sir Orfeo*, 226-27

23. *Ibid.* 129-30



visit of the Fairy King. While Heurodis' grief is a momentary lapse in sanity, Orfeo does not completely lose his wits. Orfeo's reaction is to remove himself from the kingdom which he has failed. Orfeo's actions in grief are, unlike Heurodis', very delicately thought out. He calls together his court:

“Lordinges,” he said, “bifor you here  
Ich ordainy min heighe steward  
To wite mi kingdom afterward;  
In mi stede ben he schal  
To kepe mi londes overal.  
...  
And when ye understand that y be spent,  
Make you than a perlement,  
And chese you a newe king.  
Now doth your best with al mi thing.” (*Sir Orfeo*, 204-08, 215-18)

Orfeo outlines precisely how he wishes his kingdom to be run and by whom; he also creates a contingency plan for his (likely) death. These actions highlight that though he “forsakes” his kingdom, he does not leave it defenseless. This passage demonstrates that, though grief stricken, Orfeo is a good king, aware of courtly conventions, who appoints a good, faithful man to rule in his stead during his extended absence. Orfeo’s method of appointing a new leader is distinctly no-militaristic: Orfeo follows English political custom by requesting a parliament be formed to elect a new monarch.

Orfeo’s exodus from his kingdom begins his sting in the wilderness and his transition into a bardic king. The time spent in the wilderness is peculiar in that it does not, as Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis details, “tell of ‘Orfeo’s long search for Heurodis’; in

fact, there is no search in the entire poem, not does Orfeo ever plan to make one.”<sup>24</sup> Orfeo’s exile is one about penance and self-development, not about immediately reclaiming Heurodis. Louis claims that Orfeo’s discovery of his wife is a product of his penitential suffering: “the ten years he spends in the wilderness constitute a kind of penance, and because of it, Orfeo receives a gift in grace – Heurodis is returned to him.”<sup>25</sup> However, I claim that it is a product of his successful mapping of his mastery over the harp onto his kingly authority. Orfeo’s time in the wilderness is not mere suffering and subsistence living; the wilderness is an active place of self-development for Orfeo.

Orfeo leaves society equipped not as a king but as a pilgrim or a hermit, with only “a sclavin<sup>26</sup>” and his harp. Orfeo's appearance as he leaves his kingdom is in the manner of one who seeks something rather than as one who is simply fleeing, mirroring the hermetic impulse which le Goff associates with the wilderness/desert space: “the medieval forest served as a frontier, a refuge for pagan cults and hermits<sup>27</sup>. Orfeo's journey is not a distinctly religious one but he does leave his kingdom seeking a penance for his actions as well as a way to someday return. The difficulties posed by the wilderness as well as his manner of living there become his, “Into the wilderness he geth / Nothing he fint that him is ays, / Bot ever he liveth in gret malaise.”<sup>28</sup> His journey

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24. Gros Louis, Kenneth R. R. "The Significance Of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile." *Review Of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal Of English Literature And The English Language* 18.71 (1967): 245-252. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 246

25. Ibid. 247

26. Pilgrim's mantle

27. Le Goff, “Wilderness in the Medieval West,” 52-53

28. *Sir Orfeo*, 238-40

into the wilds was never meant to be a permanent endeavor, so Orfeo's physical presentation is, much like a pilgrim, seeking both atonement and self-improvement.

In order to understand what the medieval wilderness provides for the romance figure in their development of chivalric abilities, the wilderness space must be defined. Wilderness is, as defined by Greg Garrard, “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization,”<sup>29</sup> a place beyond easy human contact. Garrard’s definition presents difficulties for medieval texts because the wilderness is, as depicted by le Goff, a place inhabited by humans, just not humans representative of the courtly society: “it should be clear, then, that neither the forest nor the desert was wholly wild or isolated.<sup>30</sup> Both were places on the extreme fringes of society.”<sup>31</sup> To a medieval audience, the wilderness defined as a space not devoid of human contact, but devoid society’s impact. Orfeo’s inhabitation of the wilderness space then requires that he be detached from the courtly society and that any societal depictions (as are created in the beastly court from his harp playing) be temporary.

Orfeo's method of survival is one which does not do any damage to the environment and capitalizes on his non-militant nature: he eats only what can be found on the ground or taken without damage to the trees and bushes nor does he partake in the hunting that is his trade by right of noble birth. Even with no witnesses other than the audience of the text, Orfeo does not participate in the violent behavior that is often utilized by humanity when in the forests, thus demonstrating his intrinsic peacefulness.

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29. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. Print. 59

30. While the terminology is different for le Goff than it is for Howes, for le Goff, the wilderness is synonymous with the forest or the desert space.

31. Le Goff, “Wilderness in the Medieval West,” 56

His time in the wilderness is composed of constant movement and of passivity, which maintains the sanctity of the wilderness space. Orfeo's existence in the wilderness is one which, to use Garrard's terminology, leaves the wilderness as "uncontaminated" as it was when he entered it. By looking at what activities Orfeo does *not* participate in (cutting down trees for shelter, killing beasts for sustenance, or constructing fire for warmth) Orfeo's inherent non-violent personality and his tendency to live and not against the wilderness becomes clear. As this is a text which is trying to establish the bardic form of kingship equal to that of militant kingship, the stresses made on a symbiotic rather than an antagonistic relationship with the spaces around them (namely the wilderness space) become necessary.

Orfeo, as king, must always remain a creature of the court and, despite his ten years spent in the wilderness, his existence as a king, not as a hermit, must be presented. The poet lists the difficulties of the wilderness for Orfeo by directly contrasting them with their parallels in Orfeo's kingdom:

Into the wilderness he geth.  
Nothing he fint that him is ays,  
Bot ever he liveth in great malais.  
He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,  
And on bed the purper biis,  
Now on hard hethe he lith,  
With leves and gresse he him writh. (*Sir Orfeo*, 238-44)

Orfeo's flowers and trees are replaced with snow and ice, his knights are replaced with snakes, and meat and drink are replaced with berries and roots; Orfeo's suffering due to loss is demonstrated through contrasting what he had in the court with its equivalent in

the wilds. Orfeo's time in the wilderness allows him to simultaneously develop in a manner unavailable to him in the courtly setting without losing a desire to remain a part of that same system.

Despite Orfeo's separation from his kingdom and the courtly setting, he carries with him into the wilderness the tool which will allow him to transition his chivalric ability into a tool for kingly authority: "Bot his harp he tok algate."<sup>32</sup> The harp, an extension of Orfeo's kingliness just as much as his kingdom, remains with Orfeo as a constant reminder of his true identity. By carrying the harp with him into the wilderness, Orfeo demonstrates a willingness to suffer and a need to be removed from his kingdom without completely forsaking his courtly identity. Orfeo's use of the harp during his ten years in the wilderness is what facilitates the shift in his art from pure performativity to active rule. In the wilderness, Orfeo can play whenever he pleases. Unlike in the courtly setting where performing is always predicated by outside need or desire (the king would surely be asked to perform by his court just as a bard is required to perform in order to receive what they need to survive), Orfeo's utilization of the harp is not predicated by anything other than personal desire: "He toke his harp to him wel right / And harpe at his owen wille."<sup>33</sup> Orfeo exhibits complete control over his performance that could only be obtained through his time spent in the non-structured wilderness space.

Orfeo's performance in the wilderness displays his developing agency as he gains control of his harp playing, which was impossible in the court. The transitioning of his bardic performance in the wilderness causes the beasts of the wilds to form a temporary

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32. *Sir Orfeo*, 231

33. *Ibid.* 270-71

court around him when he plays. When Orfeo plays his harp he creates a temporary courtly sanctuary by non-violently taming the wilderness:

Into alle the wode the soun gan schille,  
That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth  
For joie abouten him thai teth,  
And alle the foules that ther were  
Come and set on ich a brere  
To here his harping a-fine —  
So miche melody was therin;  
And when he his harping lete wold,  
No best bi him abide nold. (*Sir Orfeo* 269–80)

The beasts and birds of the wilds form a temporary court which behaves in the same way as his own court and the court of the Fairy King but without the societal necessity of performance. The beasts of the wilderness do not require Orfeo to play as the court does, they simply listen whenever he decides to play. Taming wild beasts momentarily with his music creates a group of witnesses who can confirm his right to rule: bardic performance demands the complete attention of those beasts who would never have looked at him otherwise, as evidenced by the immediate dispersing of his collected beast-court as soon as his performance stops. By creating these temporary courtly spaces in the wilderness, Orfeo is able to mold his harp playing into a purely authoritative process. The performances in the wilderness display Orfeo developing an agency over his harp playing which was not possible in the courtly space. For le Goff, the taming of wild beasts as displayed by the “savage” in Chrétien de Troyes constructs a notion that control over wild beasts is the ultimate depiction of control in the wilds:

Yvain also encounters a 'savage,' a hideous, base fellow covered with hair and clad in animal skins but who gives orders to two wild bulls. Thus this savage is master of the forest and not merely a guest because he has tamed the wild beast. (Le Goff, "Wilderness in the Medieval West," 56)

Orfeo is in control of the wilderness as a "master" only when he is performing; not only does he create temporary courtly spaces, but his natural kingly dominance becomes actualized in his performance, regardless of the physical place he is performing in.

What is demonstrated through the lay of *Sir Orfeo* is not only the importance placed on medieval society on witness or community but also the simultaneous use and dangers of isolation. As such, the wilderness is an important but transitory space which facilitates development without the societal pressures of validation through witness. Through his utilization of the harp in the open and non-structured space of the wilderness, Orfeo develops his playing from a passive to an active ability. The degrees of opportunity for the development rather than demonstration of kingly ability correlates directly with the opportunities for isolation provided by the different spaces in the text. The wilderness provides an opportunity for pure development of a skill because it affords Orfeo complete isolation. However, this means that for actual validation of Orfeo's transitioned kingly authority to occur, he must re-enter the societal setting where this transition can be tested. The lay provides a constant reminder that the wilderness cannot be a permanent place if the developing character is to survive (at least in a societal context). To further stress the importance of isolation alongside an end to isolation, Orfeo's time in the wilds concludes with the intrusion of courtly society into the wilderness space, but Orfeo's exodus from the wilderness is not immediate but gradual.

In the reintegration of the bardic king into society, Orfeo unknowingly transitions into what can be assumed to be an extension of the Fairy King's kingdom in the form of the hunting ground, a pleasure ground for the fairy kingdom just as the garden is a pleasure ground in Orfeo's kingdom. Orfeo transitions from the wilderness setting into a hybrid setting which begins the long approach to the fairy kingdom. Howes notes:

perhaps the most significant development in the study of ornamental landscapes is research that proposes much more than walled gardens, orchards, and hunting parks as consciously designed landscapes. That is, lengthy approaches to castles may have been designed to produce particular effects on visitors to these castles. (Howes, "Chaucer's Forests, Parks, And Groves, 126)

Howes's description of the approach to the castle suggests that the hunting grounds and the woodland Orfeo stumbles into as he begins to encounter the Fairy King are as much a part of the fairy kingdom as the castle proper is. Orfeo inadvertently stumbles upon the boundaries of the fairy kingdom after his bardic kingship has been sufficiently developed through his time in the wilderness space. The subtle border between wilderness and the fairy kingdom develops a connection between the world of the wilds and the world of the fairy court.

As Orfeo's bardic authority has been developed but not tested, a space must be created where Orfeo can test this ability and also begin his reclamation of his forsaken kingdom. By introducing the supernatural court in the form of the fairy kingdom, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* presents a space for this to occur. Orfeo's gradual entry into the fairy kingdom provides a simultaneous gradual entry into the world of fantasy:



Forests without fences were managed by their wealthy landowners, but they were not heavily guarded or policed, and so they remained open to all comers most of the time. As one of the least populated spaces of medieval England, woodland could provide a measure of privacy and social isolation, not easily achieved elsewhere, an isolation that can generate strange happenings and significant chance encounters, at least in fiction. (Howes, "Chaucer's Forests, Parks, And Groves, 133)

While the wilderness space is one completely void of any other continuous human presence, the opportunity for chance encounters in Orfeo's unnoticed transition into the woodland from the wilds allows the staggered reintroduction of Orfeo into the courtly setting. The chance encounter between Orfeo and the different representatives of the fairy kingdom facilitate Orfeo's transition back to the courtly but also his transition into the otherworldly. Just as much as the crossing through the rock signifies a transition into the fantastic, the crossing into fairy woodland serves as a signifier for his transition back into society.

Much like Heurodis' removal from the kingdom of Thraciens, Orfeo's removal from the wilderness is not immediate but staggered. Orfeo's reintegration into society comes from four different instances of courtly depiction which he views from afar. He first sees the Fairy King, hunting with barking hounds, he witnesses an army of "ten hundred knightes"<sup>34</sup> marching, and at times he also sees knights and ladies dancing and other sorts of minstrelsy. However, it requires coming across a band of women hunting with falcons, amongst whom he identifies Heurodis, that Orfeo begins his actual return into the societal setting.

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34. *Sir Orfeo*, 291

Parading through the wilderness Orfeo witnesses representations of both kinds of kingship which the text is attempting to illustrate: the military and the bardic. The knights, “Wele atourned” and “Ich y-armed to his rightes,”<sup>35</sup> appear before Orfeo in the exact same number that Orfeo had employed earlier in the failed defense of his queen. The knights are marching but Orfeo is unable to tell where they are going: “Ac never he nist whider thai wold.”<sup>36</sup> The depiction of the knights is one which could be assumed to be a training march in full military attire which would mean the actual end to the march would not matter, as it would be just where the march began. However, to Orfeo and his non-militant eye, the army is marching somewhere, he just does not know where. This militant exercise is presented directly before a depiction of minstrel activity. The minstrels appear to demonstrate the same courtly knowledge that the marching knights had in that they come dancing “In queynt atire, gisely, / Queynt pas and softly.”<sup>37</sup> Despite Orfeo not fully understanding the militant behavior, he can identify that the proper chivalric and courtly behavior for both parties is directly expressed. Orfeo witnesses that which he was unsuccessful with (militant behavior) alongside that which he is now utilizing and developing (bardic behavior). The presentation of these two groups of people calls attention to the two competing modes of kingship in the text and provides a lead for the verification of the viability of bardic kingship.

Orfeo witnesses two types of hunts during his time in the transitional woodland: hunting with hounds (venery) and hunting with birds (falconry); instances which

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35. *Sir Orfeo*, 291-92

36. *Ibid.* 296

37. *Ibid.* 299-300

reinforce the importance of the relationship between the courtly figure, violence, and the wilderness setting. The occurrences of these two hunts begin and conclude Orfeo's staggered reintroduction into society and help to prepare him for his entrance into the fairy kingdom. In both types of hunting, the high court to which Orfeo belongs is invoked. Hunting, particularly with birds or dogs, was reserved for the upper classes due to the massive amount of upkeep and free time necessary to participate, in regards to falconry: "training a falcon was time consuming; one needed several days in order to induce it to accept the proximity of man before training it daily to the lure and gradually accessing to free flight."<sup>38</sup> The first hunt, that of the Fairy King and his entourage, is a depiction of venery and has been unsuccessful. The final hunt, of the ladies and Heurodis, is a depiction of falconry and has been successful. The different types of hunting not only help to introduce Orfeo again to society but also help to emphasize the importance of wilderness and the symbiotic relationship between the court and wilds which the text presented earlier. When hunting with hounds, the objective is to use dogs which have been raised in captivity to track and dismember the target. It is necessary for the dogs to be domesticated in order for the commands issued by their handlers to be obeyed. The use of a hunting dog takes form in two different ways: the dogs either corner a terrified and exhausted animal to allow the hunter to make the kill or the dogs themselves will kill the chosen prey through violent ripping and tearing, often resulting in dismemberment. When the dogs are not the direct killers, they were often rewarded with "the emptied skin

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38. Smets, An and Baudouin van den Abeele. "Medieval Hunting." *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*. Ed. Brigitte Resl. New York, NY: Berg Publishing, 2007. 59-80. Print. 59

of the animal, where bread, blood, and chopped intestines were devoured by the pack.”<sup>39</sup> The process of hunting with dogs parallels the taking of Heurodis. She, too, was offered two choices: she could either be cornered and taken to the fairy kingdom or she could be ripped apart and brought to the fairy kingdom in pieces. The Fairy King’s fruitless hunt displays the texts transition of the measurements of success. Due to Orfeo’s development in the wilderness, the instances of hunting reinforce the notion that success will come through symbiotic, rather than violent, behaviors.

A more symbiotic alternative is depicted in the process of falconry. While the use of dogs is inherently violent, the use of birds is less so. In falconry, the prey is killed almost instantly and is left almost entirely intact. The hunting bird is taught to preserve the integrity its prey and is rewarded when they return the beast to the hunter; the dog, however, is rewarded by taking part in the killing itself. Furthermore, birds are trained through positive reinforcement rather than violence. Whereas a hunting dog is punished for performing poorly, a hunting bird will only respond to rewards for their successes, creating an intrinsically more positive relationship between hunter and bird. While the process is still itself a subjugation of the wilds for human pleasure (both animals are often starved prior to a hunt to force obeisance) hunting with birds represents a more positive relationship between society and the wilds. That the women are successful while the men are not lends itself to the text’s reinforcement of the importance of non-militant behavior and the benefits of non-violent relationships between the king and the spaces they inhabit.

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39. Smets and Abeele, “Medieval Hunting,” *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, 61

While the appearances of these different courtly depictions help to facilitate Orfeo's gradual re-entry into the societal setting, it is the reappearance of Heurodis that spurs Orfeo out of the passivity of the wilderness and back into action. When Orfeo recognizes his wife amongst the women in the wilderness, he breaks the vow he made as he left how court, "Never eft y nil no woman se."<sup>40</sup> Just as his departure from the societal space is marked by his separation from his wife, Orfeo's reintegration into society is predicated on his chance encounter with Heurodis. By recognizing his wife amongst the hunting women, Orfeo discards the isolation provided by the wilderness and, donning again his pilgrim's clothes and his harp, he returns to courtly society. Orfeo's encounter with Heurodis is not predicated on his recognition of her from afar on from his recognition of courtly activity, "'Parfay!' quath he, 'ther is fair game; / Thider ichil, bi Godes name; / Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!'"<sup>41</sup> It is a successful courtly endeavor which brings Orfeo out of his time in the wilderness and close enough to actually recognize his wife among the women. Orfeo's departure from the wilderness is as completely voluntary as his descent into the wilderness was, emphasizing that the wilderness is a space of complete individual agency for the male romance figure. By acting on his own volition to exit the wilderness, Orfeo depicts that not only has he suffered enough for his penance to be complete but also that his reconstruction of bardic performance as a source of kingly authority is complete.

After crossing through the rock (a signifier that he has crossed into the land of the otherworld, similar to Lancelot's crossing of the river) Orfeo sees the castle of the fairy

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40. *Sir Orfeo*, 211

41. *Ibid.*, 315-17

kingdom, a castle which demonstrates to the fullest the purely militant nature of the Fairy King and his kingdom. The closer Orfeo gets to the Fairy King, the more substantial the barriers of society become. Orfeo transitions from the imperceptible barrier between wilderness and woodland to the physical barrier of the boulder: “In at a roche the levedis rideth, / And he after, and noughte abideth”<sup>42</sup>. Unlike Orfeo's own kingdom, which is presented is not detailed in its physical depiction, the fairy kingdom is depicted in very clear physical terms, terms which help to define the castle of the Fairy King as a purely military structure. The castle's location is stressed:

He com into a fair cuntray  
As bright so sonne on somers day,  
Smothe and plain and al grene –  
Hille no dale nas ther non y-sene. (*Sir Orfeo*, 351-354)

Ben Weber comments about the odd depiction of the lands surrounding the fairy kingdom. Its incredible flatness is “not a common feature of Classical *loci amoeni* or underworlds”<sup>43</sup> and, thus is depicted in such detail for a distinct purpose. Weber attributes the flatness to the exegetic tradition, that the otherworld is an antediluvian flat world which precedes the “Earth's decay brought on by the catastrophe of the flood”<sup>44</sup> and renders the fairy kingdom as a sort of paradise space. However, the specifics of the flat land would also play a part in the depiction of the fairy kingdom as ideal, but militant.

The castle itself is located in a strategically defensive location. The lack of any hill or dip in the land means that any attacker would be clearly visible from quite a

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42. *Sir Orfeo*. 348-49

43. Weber, Ben. "Smothe And Plain And Al Grene': *Sir Orfeo's* Flat Fairyland." *Notes And Queries* 58 (256).1 (2011): 24-28. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 24

44. *Ibid.* 26

distance. What this means is that any siege upon the kingdom would be noticeable at such a distance that counter-measures could easily be erected. Additionally, the depiction of the castle is presented as an ideal military stronghold:

Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,  
Riche and real and wonder heighe.  
Al the utmost wal  
Was clere and schine as cristal;  
An hundred tours ther were about,  
Degiselich and bataild stout.  
The butras com out of the diche  
Ofrede gold y-arched riche. (*Sir Orfeo*, 355-362)

The depiction of the castle of the Fairy King is of supernatural beauty and depicts, from the outside, an ideal kingdom. Howes expresses the importance of the land outside a kingdom:

Perhaps the most significant development in the study of ornamental landscapes is research that proposes much more than walled gardens, orchards, and hunting parks as consciously designed landscapes. That is, lengthy approaches to castles may have been designed to produce particular effects on visitors to these castles. (Howes, "Chaucer's Forests, Parks, and Groves, 126)

The fairy kingdom's surrounding flat, open land would be designed to produce a sense of openness and aggression. The castle is the designed to evoke in the onlooker a sense of both might and dread in its perfect physical and military depiction. The fairy kingdom is both beautiful and terrible in its otherworldly presentation.

The castle is massive, royal, and made from gems or gem-like stones (similar to the crown of the Fairy King) which constantly reflect light so inside it always appears sunny. The castle and the glade, then, are in a permanent May, mirroring the time of year

in which Heurodis was taken. As a proper courtly figure, the castle in the Otherworld reflects the Fairy King as a kingly figure. The kingdom, an extension of the king, presents a distinctly militant and distinctly wealthy monarch. The depiction of the castle juxtaposes utilities of combat alongside presentations of wealth: the buttresses which extend from the moat are gilded and the towers with strong battlements are clear and shine like crystals. The Fairy King's castle is at once welcoming in its splendor and utterly immune to military force. The display of such wealth on the outside of the castle (where the most damage is to occur should someone actually try to assault the keep) demonstrates the Fairy King's confidence in his kingdom's own martial ability to protect the castle without relying on the defensive structures themselves. The fairy kingdom is, on the outside, the ideal representation of the military model of kingship in its grandeur and its might.

Even with its staggering military presence, Orfeo is able to easily infiltrate the Fairy King's domain. Despite all the defenses erected against a military assault, the fairy kingdom is proven to be completely susceptible to a non-military approach. Orfeo, following his time in the wilderness and the transitioning of his music from an art of entertainment to an art of kingly utility, is able to demonstrate a non-militant sensibility and gain entrance into the fairy kingdom. When asked by the porter what he would do in the kingdom, Orfeo, disguised as a wandering pilgrim, responds, "Parfay!' quoth he, 'ichan a minstrel, lo! / To solas thi lord with my gle, / Yif his swete wille be."<sup>45</sup> Because Orfeo is approaching as a bard, a distinctly non-militant persona, there is no perceived

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45. *Sir Orfeo*, 382-84



threat in the fairy kingdom: to a kingdom founded completely on strength of arms, the presentation of anything does not seem like a threat.

The fairy kingdom provides a space distinct from Orfeo's own court whilst still maintaining the importance of the courtly space so that he may put his bardic kingship to productive use. By composing the opposing court with fairies, creatures which, as depicted by Tara Williams, present "a form that is particularly intense (due to their connection to magic) and that balances fear with fascination (due to their own status as simultaneously anthropomorphic and otherworldly)"<sup>46</sup> the lay develops a courtly society which is at once parallel to Orfeo's own whilst still distorted. This then allows for Orfeo to exercise his newfound courtly authority simultaneously within and outside of the traditional courtly setting. Orfeo enters into a space which is designed to mirror his own courtly setting, allowing his newly developed bardic authority to be tested in a validating space outside of his own kingdom. This is significant in that it allows his return to his own kingdom following the recovery of Heurodis to be predicated on validating his inherent kingly virtue and exercising an already proven method of kingly authority rather than testing that authority in his own kingdom. Due to his successes in the fairy kingdom, Orfeo is able to return to his own kingdom as a proven successful bardic king.

Upon entering the fairy kingdom, Orfeo encounters the tableau of the dead, a sprawling menagerie of humans caught in the final moments of their deaths which illustrates the difference between Orfeo's non-militant court and the Fairy King's hyper-

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46. Williams, Tara. "Fairy Magic, Wonder, And Morality In Sir Orfeo." *Philological Quarterly* 91.4 (2012): 537-568. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 538

militant court. The depictions of the do not seem to be caused by the fairies, but by the violence of humans:

Sum stode withouten hade,  
And sum non armes hade,  
And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,  
And sum lay wode, y-bounde,  
And sum armed on hors sete,  
And sum astrangled as thai ete;  
And sum were in water adreynt,  
And sum with fire alforschreynt.  
Wives ther lay on childe bedde (*Sir Orfeo*, 391-99)

The fairy kingdom has collected, in their dying moments, all the gruesome deaths which would mar the appearance of the human court and removed them, bringing them to the fairy kingdom to put on display. Notably, while these deaths have been caused by human hands or present aspects of human life in the Middle Ages, the threat which the Fairy King made against Heurodis is mirrored in the dismembering depictions seen in this passage. The tableau, then, becomes a kind of museum depicting the horrors that human society causes – at once highlighting, to the fairies or wanderers who pass through, the unattractive aspects of humanity whilst removing those aspects from the romanticized kingdom. This depicts a representation of the two varying kingdoms and the two varying methods of kingship each kingdom represents. Orfeo's kingdom does not present these images of violence because they have been moved and put on display in the fairy kingdom.

The tableau of the dead presents all the aspects of the romance narrative which are usually cut out, highlighting the reality of courtly behavior and the problems inherent in

that structure as well as evoking a sense of morality not seen in other parts of the text. As these moments have not just been taken from the human courtly setting, but have been taken to be displayed as art just as a tapestry would, the tableau further reinforces the Fairy King's military identity. The tableau of the dead is used to illustrate the differences between the two kings: "the gallery is a moral spectacle in two senses: it reveals the moral code of the fairies and it encourages a moral reaction from readers"<sup>47</sup> and from Orfeo. The forceful removal and the savoring of these incredibly violent moments stresses the militant style of the Fairy King: one cannot be a militant king, with all the glory and wealth that entails, without also bearing the weight of the outcome of all that violence.

Amongst the depictions of violence, Orfeo identifies his queen asleep beneath an ympe-tree. Williams highlights that Heurodis, included amongst all of the presentations of the dead, is deliberately on display:

She appears asleep under the tree, as she was when the Fairy King first approached her, rather than in the more active and defensive position she assumed before being kidnapped. Because Heurodis is not frozen in the position in which she was taken, we can conclude that the fairies determined her state – past as aesthetic display and part as reward for obedience. (Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*, 545)

The understanding then is that the victims are not merely taken in their final moments, but deliberately positioned into those moments, further emphasizing the Fairy King's relishing of the suffering of the mortal world. What this does for the establishment of two different kinds of kingship is to present the reality, not the romancing, of militant

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47. Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*," 541

kingship. The text does not present militant kingship as a negative, but it does present the reality of such a style of kingship which other romance texts do not. By highlighting the difficulties and the non-ideal in military kingship, a space is opened for other kinds of kingly authority, such as Orfeo's bardic kingship, which is not present in most kingly narratives.

Orfeo's response to the tableau of the dead is surprisingly calm. He does not respond with outrage or disgust or fear nor does he shy away from the display. Orfeo's only response (save for his recognition of Heurodis by her clothes) is to move on "when he hadde bihold this mervails alle."<sup>48</sup> The proper kingly response, as demonstrated by both the Fairy King and Orfeo, to the gruesome realities of life is acceptance. Orfeo's response or marvel rather than fear demonstrates that, though such horrors are not on display in his kingdom, he is aware of the realities of life. This prevents a reading where bardic kingship could only be successful in a world without violence. The bardic king acknowledges violence without making it a core of his identity. Through this behavior it can be seen that proper kingship, be it militant or bardic, requires an acceptance of one's surroundings and the realities of the world beyond what is depicted in the romances. The acceptance of these facts by both kings lends itself to a need for awareness in the kingly subject. Because this text comments on the standards of the romance genre through the inclusion of the non-romantic tableau and Orfeo's response suggest that the ideal of bardic kingship extends beyond the romance genre.

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48. *Sir Orfeo*, 409

While Orfeo's entrance into the fairy kingdom serves as the first extension of bardic performance as a utility for kingly authority, the interaction between Orfeo and the Fairy King establishes the form as valid. Throughout the encounter between the two kings (though the Fairy King does not know that he is speaking to a king) proper chivalric kingly behaviors are depicted by both figures. The entire conversation is predicated on the fact that the two individuals are proper kingly figures with complete understandings of the court system. As Orfeo is in another king's kingdom, he presents himself in submission to the Fairy King by requesting permission to practice his art, "yif thi wille were."<sup>49</sup> Though Orfeo garners the proper permissions, the Fairy King's response remains aggressive and militaristic, suggesting that, should Orfeo have been of a vaguely combative mind, this would have been the end of his journey:

“Sethen that ich here regni gan,  
Y no fond never so folehardi man-made  
That hider to out durst wende  
Bot that iv him wald ofsende.” (*Sir Orfeo*, 425-428)

The only way in which Orfeo is able to succeed in his endeavors is in the utter absence of anything militaristic in his manner of behavior; through his time in the wilderness, Orfeo has transitioned away from the military response which failed him in his own kingdom. Having essentially passed the test of military response by responding with meekness to the Fairy King's threats, Orfeo is able to perform his art in the fairy kingdom and invert the power dynamics of the court system away from the military.

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49. *Sir Orfeo*, 419

Orfeo's bardic performance in the court of the Fairy King finalizes the bardic kingly authority which his time in the wilderness established. Through performing, Orfeo garners the same response to his playing that he had from both the people of his own court and from the beasts of the wilds:

That al that in the palays were  
Com to him forto here,  
And liggeth adoun to his fete –  
Hem thenketh his melody so swete. (*Sir Orfeo*, 439-442)

The inhabitants of all three places Orfeo inhabits respond the same way to his music which exhibits the inherent authoritative qualities of his music. Orfeo started out as a king playing for his nobles' entertainment. He did not need to garner kingly respect because he had not been challenged. When he played for the wild beasts, he was only able to control them whilst playing. This began his transition from an entertaining bard to a ruling one. In this way, the wilderness acts as a temporary space which helps develop the ability without immediate validation. The performance in the fairy kingdom is then the culmination of this development in that it entertains, it garners attention and the respect of those listening in an authoritative manner, and it yields a tangible result in the reclamation of his queen.

This reclamation is a point of contention between the two kings and helps to establish the two methods of kingship as equal. Following Orfeo's performance, the Fairy King presents to Orfeo the romance standard of the rash boon, a gift promised by the king

which he immediately regrets because of how the receiver of the boon is able to utilize it.

The Fairy King responds to Orfeo's playing, saying,

“Minstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.  
Now aske of me what it be,  
Largelich ichil the pay;  
Now speke, and tow might asay.” (*Sir Orfeo*, 449-452)

Orfeo, due to his inherent position as a king is able to recognize what has been offered to him and he requests Heurodis, “that ich levedi, bright on ble, / That slepeth under the ympe-tre.”<sup>50</sup> What results from this is a dialogue utterly predicated on courtly understanding as well as a meta-textual understanding of the romance genre. At first, despite the previously granted boon, the Fairy King denies Orfeo's request, not out of greed or a desire to keep Heurodis for himself, but because the scraggly, wilderness-marred Orfeo would be a bad fit for her:

“A sori couple of you it were,  
For thou art lene, rowe and blac,  
And sche is lovesum, withouten lac;  
A lothlich thing it were, forthi,  
To sen hir in thi compayni.” (*Sir Orfeo*, 458-462)

The Fairy King's initial refusal is predicated on the medieval romance customs that a beautiful woman should be with a man of equal physical appeal. He does not refuse to give Orfeo because she was a queen and he is, by all appearances, a minstrel but because he is dirty and poor looking. Were the Fairy King less of a courtly figure, his refusal would have ended the conversation; he has his military power at hand, meaning he can

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50. *Sir Orfeo*, 455-56

reinforce his decision with a military display. Furthermore, if the Fairy King were less honorable, he could have added Orfeo to the tableau of the dead. Because the Fairy King is an honorable figure, he does not act upon his militant abilities and Orfeo's bardic kingly authority is rewarded. The conversation establishes both kings as knowledgeable of the mechanics inherent to courtly kingly behavior and therefore allows Orfeo to come out the victor without disrupting the texts' display of militant kingship as viable.

Orfeo is given permission to take Heurodis with him and departs the kingdom without the caveat that constrains Orpheus in the original myth. By taking Heurodis, the ideal of bardic kingship is finally established in the narrative as an alternative method of kingly rule alongside militant kingship. By utilizing performance rather than force to achieve his goals Orfeo is able to mirror the Fairy King's initial infiltration of his kingdom and restore his position as a king capable of rule. Both kings employed subtlety when claiming Heurodis from the opposing kingdom and yet both still maintain proper chivalric behavior in their dealings with the other kingdom; there both methods of kingship are equal. The development of two kinds, rather than a single kind, of kingly authority requires that they both be presented as proper: bardic kingship cannot be seen as distinctly better than militant kingship and militant kingship cannot be depicted as flawed. The lay of *Sir Orfeo* presents bardic kingship as a legitimate alternative to militant kingship; both are equally useful methods of developing feudal kingly authority.

At this point, Orfeo's quest for his queen has been completed and, if the objective of the text is interpreted to be a story of loss and reclamation, this should be the natural end of the narrative. However, as the text can be understood to be attempting to instate a



style of kingship as an alternative to purely militaristic rule, the final moments of the text become crucial. On leaving the fairy kingdom and returning to the domain of mankind, Orfeo devises a test for his steward. The text employs another standard romance trope by utilizing the same style of test usually reserved for lovers. Upon entering his realm, Orfeo leaves his wife with a beggar and enters his kingdom disguised once again as a minstrel. Orfeo the king is not recognized by the people of his kingdom; only his harp is identified as belonging to their wayward ruler. Orfeo approaches the steward and requests assistance, which the steward agrees to, providing anything he can in the name of his king Sir Orfeo. When the harp is recognized, Orfeo lies, claiming he found the harp in the wilds and that the owner had been ripped to shreds by lions (a similar fate to prey hunt by dogs or to those who were seen dismembered in the tableau). In claiming the death of the king, a disguised Orfeo officially signifies the end of the contract established on his leaving the kingdom: that on his death a new king would be appointed. If the steward celebrated the death of Orfeo, this would have proven his infidelity. The steward's reaction is instead, utter sadness:

Adoun he fel aswon to grounde;  
His barouns him tok up in that stounde  
And telleth him how it geth –  
“it is no bot of mannes deth!” (*Sir Orfeo*, 549-552)

This reaction verifies not only that the steward has remained faithful to Orfeo but that Orfeo, from the outset of the narrative, has born an inherently kingly knowledge and that

his time in the wilds has helped him to transition his art to mirror his innate kingly authority.

The development of the harp from a tool for entertainment to a tool for kingly authority and the simultaneous transition of Orfeo from an unsuccessful military king to a successful bardic king requires that from the beginning of the text, Orfeo is himself a rightful king. He does not become a good king through the text (he is always a good king) but his methods for successful rule are challenged and adapted. By demonstrating the steward to have been the proper mediator for Orfeo's throne during his ten year absence, Orfeo's core chivalric kingly knowledge is established. The validation of the steward also helps to fill a gap in Orfeo's kingly authority in that it provides an heir to his throne.

Orfeo is without children at the end of the narrative, a normally problematic kingly issue. However, by having the faithful steward become the heir to Orfeo's throne: "And sethen was king the steward,"<sup>51</sup> Orfeo is able to conclude the narrative as a proper king with the future of his kingdom secured. This is complicated, however, as noted by Oren Falk, "for a medieval audience, Orfeo's lack of an heir of his flesh effectively undermines all his other achievements."<sup>52</sup> Yet the utilization of the steward as an heir does not, as Falk suggests, "gloss... Orfeo's personal and political defeat with euphemistic varnish"<sup>53</sup> but places further emphasis on Orfeo's kingdom as an extension of his own kingly worth by making his successor a member of the court and not a member of his

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51. *Sir Orfeo* 596

52. Falk, Oren. "The Son Of Orfeo: Kingship And Compromise In A Middle English Romance." *Journal Of Medieval And Early Modern Studies* 30.2 (2000): 247-274. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. 248

53. *Ibid.* 248

own bloodline. A barren wife would be a problematic but real part of medieval life, a reality which would be a surprise if it were included in a medieval romance except, thanks to the tableau of the dead, *Sir Orfeo* is a lay which presents a surprising amount of the non-romantic. While Orfeo's family line ends with him, his kingdom perseveres, ruled by a proven ruler following Orfeo's death. Falk's interpretation of Heurodis focuses on her presence as a marital figure however, her role throughout the text stresses her presence as a political symbol first and a wife second, allowing the opportunity for the heir to be a product of the kingdom and not a product of the queen without undermining Orfeo's kingly authority. Because of Orfeo's divine parentage (a necessity when the origins of the story are taken into account), the continuation of his direct family line could be problematic in a monotheistic society. The institution of the steward as Orfeo's heir rather than one of his own offspring allows for the opportunities I have depicted while halting the problematic deistic bloodline of Orfeo himself.

Heurodis as a queen and thus a representative of the kingdom cannot be ignored. With Heurodis as the motivating force for the narrative, the quest for reclamation of her becomes a quest for reclamation of Orfeo's kingdom and his kingly authority. Through the highlighting of Orfeo's faults as a bardic king attempting to utilize militant kingly authority, the Fairy King's taking of Heurodis and the grief which follows allows Orfeo the opportunity to momentarily relinquish control of his kingdom and to enter the wilderness to develop an alternate method of kingly authority. The practicing of this authority in the fairy kingdom allows the juxtaposition of the two kinds of kingship, demonstrating that neither bardic nor militant kingship is better. Through the successful

return of Heurodis to the kingdom and the successful testing of his steward, Orfeo is able to achieve the societal verification necessary to prove his chivalric character in the medieval court.

Orfeo's movement in the text demonstrates the importance of the wilderness as a temporary or liminal space that facilitates but does not finalize chivalric kingly development. The wilderness as a space provides an opportunity for pre-established chivalric virtues to be demonstrated outside of the courtly setting (thus verifying that it is an inherent virtue and not something put on display solely in the courtly setting) and to refine or transition these values into alternate uses. It is imperative that the chivalric figure return to society following their time in the wilderness to put these developed virtues to functional use. Through the use of the different medieval spaces of court and wilderness in *Sir Orfeo*, the bardic kingly authority is developed as an alternative to the traditional militant method of kingly rule.

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