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The Anglicisation of The *Lais* of Marie de France (1100-1350)

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The Anglicisation of The Lais of Marie de France (1100-1350)

Spanning two centuries, seven languages, and fifty-two texts, the Breton lay corpus is one diverse in theme, provenance, and repute. It cannot be overstated how vast and rich this body of work is in symbols and motifs relating to metamorphoses, enchantments, and faery fortunes; yet it continually concerns the distinctly human fixation with love found, thwarted, and regained. This dynamic is perhaps best illustrated by Marie de France in the lay of *Guigemar* in which a noble knight pursues and mortally wounds a rare white hind with the antlers of a stag¹, whose folkloric appearance symbolises his crossover into a magical otherworld. Guigemar is cursed by the hind—gored by his own arrow, his wound is fated to be incurable, except through an experience of love and anguish:

*‘Jamais n’aies tu med[e]cine
Ne par herbe ne par racine
Ne par mire ne par pociun
N’avras tu jamés garisun
De la plaie ke as en la quisse
De s[i] ke cele tu guarisse
Ki souffera pur tue amur
Issi grant peine e tel dolur
Ke unkes femme taunt ne suffri;
E tu ref[e]ras taun pur li,
Dunt tut cil s’esmerveillerunt
Ki aiment e amé avrunt
Un ki pois amerunt après.’(1.109-21)*

‘Never will you find your remedy, nor herb nor root, nor doctor nor potion, nor will you have any healing to the wound in your thigh until, for your recovery, one suffers for your love so great a pain and anguish that no woman has ever suffered; and you the same for her, such that all will marvel at it, those who love, have loved, or who could love yet.’

Only through evenly matched heights of pleasure and pain will the accursed injury be healed, and balance be restored to human and faery realms for the wrong Guigemar has committed. The proximity of apparently opposing states —king and outlaw, human and beast, wife and concubine— are continually exposed by the lays; this too can be said of the texts set within entirely non-magical worlds. ‘Amur’ Marie later qualifies in *Guigemar* ‘*es plai[e de]denz cors, /E si ne piert nient defors. /Ceo est un que lunges tient, /Pur ceo que*

¹ ‘une bise od un foïn;/ Tute fu blanche cele beste,/ Perches de cerf out en la teste’(1.90-2): a hind with a fawn; the beast was completely white, the antlers of a stag it had on its head.

de nature vient' (1.483-6); 'love is an invisible wound within the body, and since it has its source in nature, it is a long-lasting ill'. By the same token that the love depicted in the poems is activated in the fires of suffering, that suffering is tempered by the sweetness of love. The concomitance of love and suffering as conducive to healing and transformation—to the successive experiences of isolation and unification—relates differentially to the themes of vagabondage, loss of identity, and the *rite de passage*. It is in their vagabond pursuit of that which has been lost—love, status, or even meaning itself—that the lays reinvigorate *amur*, reinstate identity, and proliferate new meanings. In both their metapoetic aspects and the *aventures* they depict, the lays connect recovery and revelation to the bringing together of outwardly opposing states, with just one such example being the equity of love and suffering as a narrative proponent of transformation.

This variety of distinct states is, however, not limited to the thematic or narrative content of the lays. Although this thesis will explore these aspects, its primary focus is on how the process of anglicisation introduces Englishness to originally French materials and what the resultant mixture of that process can teach scholars about the persistent qualities of the form. To do so, it will examine the continuous development of gendered and national identities as political and social categories in a selection of Anglo-Norman and Middle English lays. It aims to observe how the *Lais* of Marie de France underwent an anglicisation from the twelfth century onwards, through a literary process that laid claim to certain nationalising mythologies. It will explore the proximity and the contingency of successive French and English cultural modes; and it will also explore the lexical and literary ruptures between the two. From this jumping off point, it will investigate how the very language of the text drives the various iterations of sexuality and nationhood depicted in the *Lais*. It is, for example, through the ambiguity of language that the spectre of liminality can thrive and persist beyond the body of the text, as the very sense of the *lai* is adopted into English.

The fourteenth-century Middle English lay corpus is produced by the transformative meeting of two distinct cultures and one that, I will argue, uncovers, rather than obscures, the meanings of its Anglo-Norman forbears. The anglicisation of *Le Fresne* in *Lay le Freine*, for example, is demonstrative of coincidental residues left over by the transliteration process. Like many of the Middle English lays, it stores, textually and

spectrally, the traces of its past hosts in its verbal form. This is just one such echo of the *aventure* of the Anglo-Norman *Lais*.

Aventure, an ever-present term in lay scholarship, will be used to refer to the surplus that language inevitably alludes to, as ‘a discontinuous medium filled with obscurities, gaps, or holes’ (Bloch, 35). A common component of the genre, it appears 39 times across Marie’s twelve original *Lais*, thrice in *Lay le Fresne*, and four times in *Sir Orfeo*. Frequently deployed by Marie in particular to bookend each lay, *aventure* expresses the dualistic nature of that which is *before* and *beyond* the written text. The word, which on the one hand preserves a variety of meanings, can also confound the reader, lead them astray, and perhaps in doing so authorise them to gloss the text with their own suggestions. ‘Gloss’ in fact, as explored in Chapter 4, demonstrates this dualism. This word, meaning both to clarify and to obscure, grants permission to later readers of Marie’s *Prologue*² to seek meanings old and new.

In its bookending of the lays, the essential word *aventure* reveals the boundary, the finite limit, of the text as an assemblage of words and by extension alludes to the meanings beyond the word itself; that is, the living component of the story that cannot be expressed by the written word alone. As such, Bloch explains, *aventure* represents a ‘desire for wholeness [and] integration’, in addition to ‘a constant awareness of the partial and contingent [...] nature of linguistic expression’(35). For Bloch, this is ‘a pervasive, agonizing oscillation between the attempt to master words and the recognition that words master us’ (36). As such, building on Bloch’s work on the term *aventure*, the present thesis will consider how the poetic form of the lay assimilates to English society and culture between the first quarter of the twelfth and end of the fourteenth centuries.

The lay form represents an intermediate genre in this period, integrating critical traces of orality and *aventure* which both assert and unsettle twelfth-century ideas of chivalry. The form, content, and structure of Marie’s *Lais* specifically make room for the multiple possibilities offered by liminality. In their approach to identity, the *Lais* situate themselves as tales of medieval liminality and marginality, and centralise the role of

² ‘[P]ur cels ki a venir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient/, que peüssent gloser la letre/ e de lur sen le surplus metre’, l.13-6.)

metapoetics. I aim to observe the interlinking and simultaneous syntheses of both gender and national identity in the lay's development. While doing this, I will also examine how an incipient sense of nationhood can be both interrogated and affirmed by the later interpretations of the lay form as it is adopted into English. I will discuss the chivalric genre as representing, in the lays, a space where medieval ideas about gender can be undermined and redefined.

While the Anglo-Norman *Lais* tend to scatter institutions of power into disarray, the Middle English lays typically use the same institutions to restore social stability. Although projecting a far more critical eye on these social constructs, the Middle English lays distance themselves from earlier conventions, and instead foreground love as a call to order, or as a stabilising influence on political and sexual life. While abandoning the fidelity of translation, the Middle English lays thematically resolve themselves into marital and social unity. In this way, the initial thematics of Marie's *Lais* - extramarital love, infidelity, and liminality - are actually in opposition to their later English counterparts. Almost none of Marie's *Lais* end in marriage or a submission to a system of social control, and often the developments of the central figures escape the poet herself, as in the case of *Bisclavret* and *Lanval*. This restructuring of the *Lais*' conclusions, ostensibly parallel to their anglicisation, is fairly easy to trace in their direct Middle English versions. For example, the very naming of *Sir Launfal's* Dame Tryamour, previously anonymous in *Lanval*, positions the character's *raison d'être* as a test of love, a test of fidelity, rather than a challenge to the homosocial Arthurian monarchy of Marie's earlier work. Likewise, the way in which *Le Fresne's* feminine recalcitrance is transformed into an allegory of political fertility reverts its impetus for union from individual to societal harmony. It is the observation of this thematic transition that will underpin my argument that the lay genre, while literally undergoing a process of transliteration in its English versions, modifies its original source texts.

i. Research Questions & Thesis Statements

How does the form of the lay change as it passes from French into Middle English? How does Marie's dual-naming of particular proper nouns and her acknowledgement of her role

as translator work to authorise further translation? What trace elements of this translative passage —narrative, formal, textual, or material— remain in the fourteenth-century lays? How can this process be understood as liminal? That is, how does it undertake the rite of passage and the corollary experience of marginalisation? How are marginal figures (the concubine, the foreigner, the minstrel) constitutive of the lay form's liminal character? And what can the transference of these marginal characters from individually to societally unifying drives tell scholars about the making of a fourteenth-century English literary canon?

The process of anglicising the lay, I hypothesise, goes far beyond a translation. To anglicise the form is to turn it into a medium accessible to English speakers and to imbue it with the fourteenth-century trends in English literature, including nostalgia for the minstrel tradition and the demand for texts that reflected increased literacy among the lower nobility and middle classes. In substituting the courtly twelfth-century culture of Marie's *Lais* for English fourteenth-century traditions, these texts transform the image of love as a cultural and replace it with an image inspiring unification and harmony, which then becomes integral to later conceptions of the marriage institution, for example. It is this shift in content as well as language that underpins the transliteration process.

I conceive of the lays in two groups; first, Marie's own texts, which interpolate Breton, oral sources and transfer to the written form a sense of orality and silent suggestion. I believe Adorno says it best in referring to the concept of non-identity; *the signifier cannot exhaust the thing signified*³. The literary sense that Marie's texts achieve—that is, the sonic and narrative qualities of the lay, which extend beyond the text itself, —inform this thesis', and also the later lays', understanding of *la letre* as a limited medium.

The second group of lays that this thesis concerns —the English *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Lay le Freine*—seek to displace the French-ness of the material they inherit, while capitalising on its lexical prestige, as is the aim of the *translatio studii*. I believe this movement is part of a nationalising campaign that can be observed not only in the lay but in medieval English romance at large at this time. Certainly, the *Auchinleck Manuscript* and many of the manuscripts in the Cotton Library (British Library) contribute to a body of

³ '[T]he concept does not exhaust the thing conceived' (5, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*).

literature that, drawn from older, more reputable texts, moves towards rebranding and rebooting stories for English audiences, and which work to retroactively assemble a canon of English literature.

Sturdy bridges remain, however, between these two groups of lays (French and English). For example, they share an interest in bringing the margins into the centre, in the suffering brought about by love, and in the [re]union of the couple, albeit for the sake of varying political interests. The English texts, which place the domestic couple at the centre of a harmonious societal sphere, for example, stand in opposition to the courtly extramarital romances of the French ones, the protagonists of which tend to dismantle structural rigidity, and in doing so tend to recode social bonds.

With a primary focus on the form's transmutation, this thesis aims to show that the changes the lay undergoes are both *produced by* and *reflective of* the literary and social movements of the late Middle Ages. This transformation —and I here mean a literal restructuring of the lay form itself— stages a rich interplay between twelfth and fourteenth-century literary conventions.

ii. Theoretical Concepts & Methodology

This thesis diachronically approaches the lays in order to observe how the original lays are adopted into Middle English to serve varying political and social aims. My methodology has involved considering the lay form as a disseminator of historical and social consciousness. It seeks to examine how the construction and renegotiation of medieval identities are entrenched in political life. Moreover, it calls upon the discipline of manuscript studies in order to affirm the material aspect of the anglicisation process; namely the manufacture of a nation in vellum and ink, consciously and otherwise. I will consider the form as a producer of social and political history by examining the language of national and historical consciousness in Marie de France's writing as well as in a selection of later English lays. It will involve unpacking how liminality, the rite of passage, *aventure*, and metapoetics play into and undermine sovereign-subject relations. Hence, it will also consider the form as a disseminator of medieval gendered and national identity.

First, I must situate the lay genre within the continuum of Anglo-Norman and Middle English romance, as an umbrella category that evades conclusive definition. As a

shorter literary form, the lay is quite economical in its story-telling. As such, it attenuates much of the national rhetoric that could be found in Wace's *Brut*, for example. However — and this applies to Marie's *Lais* in particular— the genre does take stylistic cues from romances and chronicles. As such, implicitly or explicitly, it can serve as a witness to chivalric anxieties concerning social, sexual, and national institutions. John M. Ganim writes that '[medieval romance has] a peculiar political dialectic, involving fantasies of race, gender and power', defined by 'an obsession with origins, as one would expect of a genre of doubtful legitimacy'. He continues, stating that the romance form 'is imagined as indigenous, national and local, as a form of history before historical consciousness takes shape'(32). And he adds:

'The polarities of romance take on the dichotomies of gender itself. Romance [...] directly reveals the inscription of [English] history, both its actual social existence and its imaginative reality. [...] These generally masculine virtues [of chivalry and heroic combat], however, are counterpoised to a set of more unquieting qualities.'(33)

By embodying such imaginative realities, the lays discussed in my thesis transcend clear definitions and nationalistic agendas. They foment and unpack a sense of nation-building in a way that not only intersects with gender, but produces, regulates, and manipulates it. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that the lay is a sub-genre that falls within the broader 'romance' definition, carrying its own symbolic and political associations, as well as its own historical literary significance.

It must also be acknowledged that producing historically accurate texts does not appear to be the primary goal of the author of the lays. Ostensibly, that poetic form is intended to entertain; originally, to be performed in the court or dining hall, and later to be read and enjoyed by whichever monk, merchant, or literary enthusiast happened to come across or own the lay manuscript at the time. This is to say that any textual or formal elements generating national consciousness, be they related to satire, fabliaux, folklore, or courtly love lyrics, remain firmly in the realm of literary fantasy. Likewise, any interpretation of a national historical past —the preminent example would be the proto-historical tales of Arthur— should be handled as a reverie and never as faithful testimony,

offering an adequate representation of its moment of production rather than an accurate depiction of the poetic past it evokes.

ii.i *Aventure & The Lay*

Marie's lay form has been characterised by its intensity, brevity, and focus on romantic and familial conflict. In the introduction to their modern translation of the *Lais*, Burgess and Busby suggest that this characteristic brevity echoes earlier medieval love lyrics 'by concentrating on one particularly critical event or brief sequence of events in the life of the protagonists' (*The Lais of Marie de France*, hereby "*Lais*", 26). It focuses heavily on changes in the intimate personal lives of the characters, rather than the progression *of* or reintegration *into* the poetic society.

As a transitional genre, the lay has been identified as a later, more 'literary' form of lyric that has departed from its musical and aural predecessors. Burgess and Busby suggest that 'the *lais* in some ways represent a transitional genre between the earlier [occidental] love lyrics [...] and the romance which develops and transforms these motifs at length' (26). The translators comment on the origins of the lay as a 'love-lyric [that] first blossoms in Provence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries'(21), migrating north to the British Isles in the middle of the twelfth century. They note that, as such, Marie is writing 'at a time when this sort of lyric is at the height of its popularity'(21). More to the point, during this period, 'the sudden proliferation' of texts concerned with recuperating some semblance of a national-historical past were, to Whalen, an exercise in *translatio studii*, or 'the transfer of knowledge from previous generations to future ones'(Poetics, 37). As such, the nostalgic lay form, in harking back to a mystical and fabulated Breton past, operates within a poetics of memory.

However, the lay form can be further distinguished from its contemporaneous analogues by the important term *aventure*. Bloch emphasises the liminality of the lay's use of *aventure*, which 'refers to the material of the tale, that which lies outside of its formal telling, and also carries the unmistakable resonance of orality', or 'the imagined wholeness of voice and body joined'(27). Marie's *Lais* convey a 'desire for wholeness, integration, fullness' in addition to 'a constant awareness of the partial and contingent, fragmentary and

fragmenting, nature of linguistic expression'(35). For Bloch, this is 'a pervasive agonizing oscillation between the attempt to master words and the recognition that words master us'(36). The *aventure* of the lays is the medium through which the events are both contingent upon and contained within lived experience. This term then, alongside references and 'vocabulary that [are] associated with the act of remembering', operate in the *Lais* to construct an 'architecture of memory' (Whalen, *Poetics*, 4) and recuperate a shared cultural past. As such, the anaphoric use of *aventure* reflects a 'consciously developed poetics of memory'(6), or mnemonic register, that 'perpetuate[s] the memory of adventures'(Lais Prologue, 41). *Aventure* is a multivalent tool that Marie calls upon to reiterate both the metapoetic medium of the *Lais* as well as the way in which they represent the shared cultural memory of the Bretons, '*les contes... [d]unt li Bretun unt fait les lais*'(Guigemar, l.19-20, 'the stories... from which the Bretons composed their lays').

Bloch importantly notes the ambivalence of the medieval term *aventure*, 'which on the one hand concretises, fixes, immobilises that which is imagined to be beyond language, experience, and the body' but also serves to indicate that its meaning is inherently 'uncontrollable, risky, undisciplined, [and] excessive'(29). As such, it can be said that *aventure* conveys a liminal mode, providing a sideways glance into the 'as of yet inexpressible'. Rather than reinstating characters into their societal positions, the lay glimpses the interstitial, the momentarily unstructured nature of the protagonists' lives. Here, they stand at the threshold of before and after, a narrative gap that permits the continued ambiguity and unknowability of their position even after the body of the text ends. Moreover, Bloch notes the curious temporality of *aventure*, derived 'from the Latin *ad + venire*' which 'carries the valence of an advent' while also referring 'to the source of a tale, to the past from which the tale comes'(28). As such, the *aventure* of the lay conveys a temporal liminality, compounded by both anticipation and retrospection. Taking a cue from Theodor Adorno's idea of non-identity in *Negative Dialectics*, my understanding of *aventure* is that 'the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived'(5). The *aventure* of the poem will always exceed and supersede the physical text; its representation in a written form cannot render down the effluence of its meaning. The lay is a momentary assembly of the fragmentary nature of *aventure*, as a singular performance combining sound, image, and body that can never be fully replicated. This momentariness, this ephemerality, is

attuned in the content of Marie's *Lais*, bookended by the term *aventure*, in order to convey a continued potentiality. It is in doing so that Marie interweaves not only her content and form within a liminal mode but also the structure of her lays, which can be read as literary experiments in liminality.

Bloch indicates that *loïd*, the earliest extant utterance resembling the word '*lai*', can be found in the marginalia of a ninth-century religious text from Ulster. Here, it refers to the song of a blackbird, from which 'the word came to mean a poetic genre specifically associated with such songs'. He further posits the term's connotations to 'praise' or 'lament' via potentially Germanic, Latin, and Irish roots. Considering the misstep of conflating aesthetic similarity with direct lexical relation, Bloch concludes that,

'In spite of the etymological murkiness surrounding the origin of the word *lai*, of this there can be no doubt: the *lai* is linked to sound, to music, to song, and to poetry, words with song.'(29)

Like *aventure*, the aural quality of the *lai* exceeds its physical form. Its surplus of sense exists in the sound and in the silence that cannot be contained by the written word alone. The sonic component of the '[l]ayes that ben in harping' (*Sir Orfeo*, l.3) trace their passage from the Breton minstrel tradition to the stanzaic practice of their later English counterparts. In their metrical and musical aspect, both Anglo-Norman and Middle English lay forms should be invoked aloud, with the voice as an active presence, if not participant, in their telling.

In addition to their spoken quality, the identification of the lay genre must also acknowledge narrative content, in particular its narrative structure of separation and reunion. It typically depicts 'a journey of descent followed by ascent and a corresponding resolution of the hero or heroine's identity, purpose, and place in the world' (Laskaya and Salisbury, *The Middle English Breton Lays*, hereby *MEBL*, 1). All of the extant lays composed in Middle English are thought to have been written between the late thirteenth and the early fifteenth century. It is generally accepted that they include the earlier *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Lay le Freine*, all found in the *Auchinleck Manuscript*, dated to the 1330s, as well as a contemporary text of *Sir Launfal* in *Cotton Caligula A.ii*. Similarly, Geoffrey Chaucer's references to the 'old gentil Britons' in the *Franklin's Tale* are thought

to be inherited⁴ from the *Auchinleck Manuscript*, or at least from the fourteenth-century ‘literary environment and linguistic milieu’ (Wiggins, *The Auchinleck Manuscript Online*) that it was central to, as well as his representation of *merveilleux celtique*, or Celtic wonder.

However, A.C. Baugh suggested that the lay form’s qualification depends on its own acknowledged relation to Brittany or to Marie de France herself. Specifically, he writes that a lay can be labelled as such when,

‘depends mainly on whether it says it is one (e.g., *The Earl of Toulouse*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay le Freine*), or has its scene laid in Brittany (*Sir Degare*), or contains a passing reference to Brittany (*Sir Launfal*), or tells a story found among the lais of Marie de France.’ (*A Literary History of England*, 196).

This self-conscious declaration, in a form so concerned with its own national prehistory and potential illegitimacy, would appear to presage its own involvement in the production of that nation. However, Laskaya and Salisbury make an important note about the

⁴ It was first theorised by Laura Hibbard Loomis that Chaucer read and was inspired by the *Auchinleck Manuscript* which, in fairness, was produced around the time of his birth (c.1340) and in the same London area. Cross-examination of his Franklin’s self-professed lay (*The Franklin’s Tale*) with the *MS Auchinleck’s Lay le Freine* may ‘attest to close familiarity with the type of language and traditions represented in [the] *Auchinleck Manuscript*’ (Wiggins):

‘Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse aventures maden layes,
Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge,
Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe’ (*The Prologue to Franklin’s Tale*, 1.709-12, Fragment V)

‘In Breteyne bi hold time
This layes were wrought,
so seith this rime.
When kinges might our yhere
Of ani mervailles that ther were,
Thai token an harp in gle and game,
And maked a lay and gaf it name.’ (*Lay le Freine*, 1.13-18)

The ‘myth’ that Chaucer was directly inspired by his reading of the *Auchinleck Manuscript* is, however, a theory built upon circumstantial evidence and one which remains unsubstantiated. Despite the doubtfulness of Loomis’ theory, Wiggins points out that the manuscript can provide some insight into the ‘kind of literary culture and literary language with which Chaucer grew up and was influenced by and which can be seen transformed and refracted in his own writings’. She reminds scholars interested in researching Chaucer that the *Auchinleck Manuscript* is a ‘valuable [resource] for understanding the development of English literature because it offers an insight into an English vernacular literary culture which preceded and was influential upon Chaucer and his generation’ (*The Auchinleck Manuscript Online*).

‘interchangeability’ of Briton and Breton as well as their sister term ‘*Bretaigne*’, which is used to mean both Britain and Brittany in the lays.

‘The facts of rivalry between France and Britain for Brittany, the claims of both on its sovereignty, and its strategic importance in the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), infuse a seemingly innocuous poetic act with political motive. The "matter of Britain" ... dominated by French writers ... since the twelfth century, was ripe for English reclamation in the fourteenth century. *The Middle English Breton lays are part of an agenda for reinstating a cultural heritage.*’ (2, emphasis added)

As such, while certain medievalists have likened the romance writer’s role to that of nineteenth-century authors who intentionally and conventionally disseminated nationalist ideologies, I will continuously adhere to the central tenets of Barthes’ *Death of the Author* in my discussion. More so, I will be arguing that these lays not only predate the contemporary ‘author’ phenomenon but that they evade the control of their so-called ‘creators’ entirely, anonymous or not. This is an idea pre-established by Bloch in *The Anonymous Marie de France*; however, it is always worth repeating his claim that Marie’s ‘words escape human intention to which they remain indifferent’(45). The metapoetic attributes of the Middle English and Anglo-Norman lays contribute to their sense of ‘authorship’; as a title that inherits from the Latin *auctoritas*, the term would seem to presuppose a sense of power and control over the text. However, it is the text’s self-conscious acknowledgement of its own written production, as a medium open to misinterpretation and misrepresentation⁵, that generates its metapoetic quality.

I wish to address here one further question related to how I will overcome the theoretical anachronism of talking about both nationhood and gender in the late Middle Ages. It will be necessary to avoid such anachronisms in my discussion since the lays I have chosen predate contemporary manifestations of the nation-state. In a post-Brexit England, ‘nationalism’ and ‘national identity’ carry specific meanings tied not only to empire and geopolitical borderlands, but to an extremely contemporary idea of globalisation that has become coterminous with disunity, division, and distrust of

⁵ “*Si gangleür u losengier/Le me volent a mal turner;/Ceo est lur dreit de mesparler*” (Guigemar, l.16, ‘if liars and deceivers wish to turn on me; it is their right to misspeak’)

international institutions. Medieval national identity, or the lack thereof, must be considered in accordance with Agamben's commentary on the *Magna Carta (1215)* which, as a declaration of rights, transformed nationhood and 'must therefore be viewed as the place in which the passage from divinely authorised royal sovereignty to national sovereignty is accomplished' (1979). Specifically, Agamben explains the physical body's subjection to nationhood, writing that the '[c]orpus is a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties'(1977). English "national" identities in the early Middle Ages are, as such, pinioned between the material and the divine, the subject and the sovereign. My research will employ Agamben's ideas to examine how national identity in the twelfth century manifests as unstable and oxymoronic. I wish to expand these ideas of 'gendered nationalism', not as a hierarchical or dialectical allegory as such, but rather as a complex, biopolitical, radical unravelling and reforming of identity.

ii.i. The Lay Form

Constance Bullock-Davies and Shearle Furnish, as many others have, highlight the difficulty in categorising the lays as a distinct form. Theorising that the unifying aspect of the lay genre had been lost even by the time it reached Marie, Bullock Davies' *The Form of the Breton Lay* posits that the defining characteristic of the original corpus was its technical form.

From references to how Gottfried von Strassborg's Tristan comes 'flying in'('fliegen in', 21) with his melody, she compares this melody to 'penillion' singing. This Welsh musical tradition 'reverse[s] the usual method of singing [or cantillating] to accompaniment'(23), as the vocalist's melody is subsidiary to that of the harp player's, rather than the other way around. Citing evidence from texts containing 'descriptions of the making and performance of [Breton lays]'⁶(19), rather than from lays themselves, she suggests that there was a technically demanding way in which the 'Bretons/Britons sang to a harp accompaniment....that invariably provoked comment'(23).

⁶ The French romance of *Horn*, Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan.

She does acknowledge the discomfort in reconciling this theory with the lack of evidence testifying to her theory in the writing of Marie who, she says, ‘never expressly mentions singing as one of their necessarily constituent parts’(27) and only once⁷ refers to the lay ‘as a complete musical performance in Guigemar (29); ‘*de cest cunte ke oï avez/ fu guigemar le lai trovez,/ Quë humm fait en harpe e en rote:/ Bonë est a oïr la note*’(1.230-2)⁸. She says that, originally used to commemorate a local event or unusual happening, the ‘strictly local audience would know the circumstances which led to the making of lai’(27) so that the melody alone would conjure up the memory of the aventure. By the time Marie was writing, however, ‘the *aventure* and melody had ceased to be one inseparable experience’; ‘the making of a Breton lay no longer spray out of the immediate present’(28) and the performance aspect had been lost.

From Bullock-Davies’ research supports three important points of this thesis. Principally, she affirms that, for all of the uncertainty surrounding the form’s categorisation, the ‘language in which the [lays] were sung was... unimportant’ and that ‘whatever the original language of a lai may have been, translations of it were equally valid’(21), as far as being categorised as a lay. Secondly, in testifying that this earlier, musical form of lay had gone ‘out of fashion’ by the time Marie was writing, she highlights that poetess’ impulse to preserve that which might otherwise be lost; ‘she was consciously performing a service to posterity by collecting some of the *aventures* before they became completely forgotten’(28-29). Finally, in testifying to the existence of earlier versions of the form which were characterised by musicality, Bullock-Davies’ research allows me to make my own claims about the interstitial nature of Marie’s writing. Marie de France, as an intermediary instrument between the alleged Breton sources and the Middle-English heritors of her lays, captures the genre’s formal transformation as it moves from the aural and into the literary.

An issue in Bullock-Davies’ research for me, however, is the understanding of the poetic form as static. Firstly, it is worth remembering throughout this thesis that Marie’s

⁷ It should be noted that Marie does allude to the musicality of Chevrefoil writing that ‘*[P]ur les paroles remembrer/ Tristram, ki bien saveit harper/ aveit fet un nuvel lai*’, ‘to remember the messages, Tristram, who knew how to harp well, made a new lay’, l.111-13.

⁸ ‘Of this account that I have heard, was the lay of Guigemar was composed, which men made on harps and on rotes: the melody was beautiful to hear’.

claims to Breton sources are ostensibly just that: *claims*. There are no Breton texts that can verify the truth of her statements, since none have survived from this time. Secondly, the idea that the lay has an original, musical form that univocally degenerates over time is wholly opposed to this thesis' hypotheses that the genre undergoes a process of adaptation from which new meanings are generated and old ones are recovered. Certainly, residues of aurality *have* been left on the lay form⁹; but in a corpus with no ostensible overriding characteristic, not any individual lay nor text can be allowed to dominate claims about the origin of the form itself. If not through origins, nor theme, nor technical form, how, then, can the lay be critically discussed and how can conclusions be drawn about its distinguishing characteristics?

In *Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays*, Furnish addresses the awkwardness of the Breton lay label, which can be confusing in that 'it may seem to suggest that [this group of texts] are consistently derived from or inspired by Breton or Old French sources... [and are] little more than translations or, worse, misunderstandings of a multimedia heritage'(83). Commonalities in the lay corpus appear incidental and are not exclusive to the form as 'an integrated form within Middle English romance in general'. These shared features include thematic content pertaining to 'the relationship... to ancient bardic performance', elements of Celtic fairy lore, the development of 'courtly themes' (84), and Arthurian material. These aspects do not, however, characterise the corpus at large which, it should be noted, does not share formal or structural features such as a common metre nor a narrow time period of production.

Importantly, Furnish claims that these lays are 'not so much about national or social history... as about their own literary heritage, their appropriation and recuperation of old poetry into new'(117). They share a distinctive structural harmony, characterised by balance and rhythm. Typically, by the end of the lays, the protagonists have been returned 'to the same condition as at the beginning: to home, to heritage, or family'(114). To explain this, he provides an interesting structural model of *rota fortunae* for understanding the

⁹ This has been thoroughly demonstrated by Howard Bloch in *the Anonymous Marie de France*; 'the lai is linked to sound, to music, to song, and to poetry, words with song. ... most of all the word *lai* in Old Provençal designates some equivalent of song, poetic genre, or performance: a melody or a musical air, a melody played upon a string instrument and accompanied by sung words, a sung melody, a type of lyric composition distinct from the *canço*, *descort*, *vers*, *dansa*, or *sirventes*'(30).

concentric narratives of the Middle English lays. The first generation of lays in this language are *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degare*, the three lays of the *Auchinleck Manuscript*. Each tests 'a different form of authority or cohesive social structure' and 'present an anatomy of the powers of eros to integrate, preserve, or heal the human community'. Furnish points out that their general similarities in plot structure as well as their 'length, verse form, and putative Breton sources'(96) accord with the Anglo-Norman lays. The second generation of the Middle English lays, Furnish suggests, witness 'the precedence and influence of simple erotic love and of fraternal fidelity in the formation of social bonds... [upholding] the proprietary of private love' (105). The protagonists' misdeeds — upholding an oath to have sex outside of wedlock or breaking an oath to conceal the identity of one's lover — are committed in a moment of *demesure*. In Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*, as Dorigen laments her husband's absence, she promises herself to another. As Launfal rejects the advances of Arthur's queen, he breaks his vow of silence. The *Franklin's Tale* is resolved by the releasing of both Aurelius and Dorigen from their debts, preserving both the marriage institution and the social bonds between men, as squires or lords. In reflecting and critiquing the conventions of the lay form, they develop 'a contrapuntal or alternating rhythm'(98); this can be observed in *The Franklin's Tale* in dual-love, interweaving love-trials, firstly for Dorigen and then for Aurelius; as well as in the 'parallel but contradictory vows'(97) that Dorigen makes each of the men. Parsing through the revolutions of Fortune's Wheel in *The Franklin's Tale*, Furnish writes that 'devotion, fidelity, compassion, and fraternity are the expressive emblemized' which are a 'manner common to the English tradition'(101). *Sir Launfal*, too, participates in this episode cycle of reflective storylines, 'a pattern of oaths and lies'(104). The first third of the lay is characterised by falsification and the breaking of oaths (Sir Launfal lies to Arthur about his father's death, the Mayor scorns Launfal for his poverty, Launfal breaks his oath to his lady); the second third sees Launfal restore his prestige through his tournaments with Syr Valentine and the performance of valiant acts; the final third sees him protected only by the sworn oaths of his fellow knights and stages the punishment of previous lies in Dame Tryamour's blinding of Guinevere. Each of these stories interrogate the extent of

social obligation in a social structure and, having resolved this, result in the subsequent restoration of order.

Furnish's ideas are particularly important to the latter part of this thesis, in the Middle English lays. Understanding how the English mode of writing is not necessarily one promulgating ideas of nationalism, but one typified by specific structural trends will help to identify the instances of the form's anglicisation. Moreover, Furnish's ideas of social cohesion and the return to previous structural harmony will also inform this thesis's discussion of, firstly, the rite of passage in the Anglo-Norman lays as an impulse toward individual resolution; and secondly, the Middle English texts tendency toward societal cohesion over the individuality of its predecessors.

ii.iii. Liminality

Examining Marie's lay form as a genre stretched between medieval nation-states, situated somewhere between the literary and the oral, and torn between private and public, will be key to my discussion of liminality and marginality. It is as such that I argue that the lay form represents a transitional genre that integrates critical traces of its own orality and *aventure*. In depicting internal rifts of the self, the lay unsettles and circumvents the presupposed chivalric qualities of the twelfth-century medieval canon. Conceptually speaking, the origins of the critical term '*liminality*' can be located in the works of both van Gennep and Turner in their anthropological research into rites of passage. In a 2018 paper, Haydon explains van Gennep's rite of passage theory of liminality, the essential phases of which include separation, transition, and incorporation:

'[Firstly], the subject experiences a sense of detachment, possibly symbolic, to signify their removal from their previous fixed state; in the margin phase, the subject becomes ambiguous, lacking the conditions of their previous state and not yet possessing the new; in the aggregation phase, the subject enters into a stable state again, but new.'(24)

The transition phase is characterised by liminality in that the subject - epoch, person, or place - enters into the position of being 'betwixt and between' states. The term has subsequently been coopted by literary theorists to describe 'the indefinable and the

interstitial, the as-of-yet inexpressible complexities of certain in-between concepts and ideas' (Downey, quoted in Haydon, 31). As such, Haydon identifies the 'threshold person' as 'ambiguous' in that 'the liminal phase removes anything considered socially normative in terms of structure, such as behaviour, hierarchy, and aspects of space and time'(26). Thomassen notes that the 'playfulness of the liminality' is simultaneously 'unstructured and highly structuring'(20). During the liminal phase, 'the most basic rules of behavior are questioned, doubt and scepticism as to the existence of the world are radicalized'; in the same instance, 'the formative experiences and the reformulations of being' permit the subject to occupy a 'new structure and set of rules that, once established, will glide back to the level of the taken-for-granted' (20).

These instances of liminality —whether they be moments, epochs, people, places Real or otherwise— can be noted by their suspension of the 'order' that comes before and after them. I do not wish to reach a conclusive definition of liminality; attempting to affix this slippery term within a structure it inherently exceeds would not further my investigation. However, for the sake of practicality, I here offer a pragmatic definition of the term that I will employ throughout this thesis. Liminality describes that which is indiscrete from categorisation, unattached from both before and after, and witnesses the rite of passage. I only alter from past attempts to define the term in one aspect, one inherited from the concept of *aventure*; that the trace of liminality can persist beyond its physical, social, or temporal limit. That is to say that liminal *things* - texts, bodies, times- can retain the spectral residue of liminality, the potentiality of alternate outcomes. More to the point, this thesis is interested in examining how the transitional, the interstitial, the 'betwixt and between'(24) that liminality alludes to permits the rejection and reconfiguration of medieval hierarchies.

Marie uses such liminality as a literary device, opening passages through which her characters can imaginatively reconstitute their relations with community and gender. The form, content, and poetic structure of her *Lais* make room for the possibility and potentiality warranted by the liminal phase. Moreover, in their questioning of Arthurian, English, and monolithic ideological identity, the *Lais* situate themselves as tales of medieval liminality and marginality.

In their translation, Burgess and Busby note Marie's lack of concern with the characters' reintegration into their poetic society, contrasting her lays to the work of Chrétien de Troyes who has the primary concern of '(re-)establishing a balance between love and chivalry and the reciprocal duties of individual and society' (*Lais*, 27). They summarise this contrast succinctly, writing that while the 'adventures in the *lais* are events which usually bring about a fundamental change in the lives of the protagonists, [the romance] often serves to bring out potential or confirm and strengthen something already present'. It could be said that Marie's lack of concern with societal reintegration would eliminate her lays from the category of liminal, or the rite of passage as defined by Turner. However, the way in which her writing processes the individual, from social separation to (re)aggregation, affords her the space to explore the elusive configurations of late medieval gender, as well as her characters' fragmentary obligations to "nationhood". Marie observes and balances cultural tensions and, without ever explicitly unpacking or dispelling them, permits them to briefly exert their unexplored potential. The questions Marie foregrounds—certain in-between conditions and their haunting proximity to previous and anticipated states of being—linger beyond the aggregation phase. Verbal deceit is variously punished in her authored *lais*; Lanval and Bisclavret, for instance, could have been slaughtered at the hands of their kings in parallel narratives. Similarly, *Le Fresne* is happily concluded with a fortuitous natal reunion that fails to fully obscure the more likely—and much darker—outcome of a tale of infant abandonment, and near-infanticide. These questions are the unspoken apparitions of uncertainty, the simultaneous potentiality of other, and Other, textual outcomes; a concept I will refer to throughout this thesis as *the spectral*. The spectral is the residue of liminality, the grain of lowliness central to the sacred status and the subject's memory of the rite of passage.

ii.iv. The Ban

'[H]e who has been banned [...] is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable' (200, Agamben quoted by Evans).

Whether it is in the case of Le Fresne's abandonment, Bisclavret's transfiguration, Orfeo's self-exile, or Lanval's escape, the outcast protagonist is a recurrent figure in the lay genre. Both Anglo-Norman and Middle English forms of the lay employ the idea of the wolf's head, *caput gerat lupinum*. This phrase, meaning 'may he wear a wolf's head' or 'let his be a wolf's head' in Latin, refers to an English medieval decree that meant that, as a wolf, an outlaw may be harmed or killed by any citizen with impunity.

The earliest extant exemplification of *caput gerat lupinum* appears in the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* (twelfth-century); 'for from the day of his outlawry he bears a wolf's head, which is called *wluesheued* by the English'(338, Blud, citing Liebermann's translation)¹⁰. However, as Blud importantly points out, 'while the *wluesheued* clause is often cited as an Anglo-Saxon source, the laws of Edward were not codified until after his death, when they were recorded in Latin by an anonymous writer, probably around the 1140s'. Blud suggests that the recording of the expression in the *Leges Edwardi* was in 'keeping with the Anglo-Norman claims of legislative conservation' and as such 'may appear to be a genuine inheritance' but may instead be a 'false memory of Anglo-Saxon law reinforced by Anglo-Norman iteration'(338). This is to say that by linking the phrase, if apocryphally, to Edward the Confessor, the Anglo-Norman legal system could maintain that it had conserved the pre-conquest judicial system. This was a claim made after the time of William the Conqueror, likely seeking to consolidate his claim to the throne and strengthen his claim as the successor allegedly chosen by Edward the Confessor¹¹. The conceptual conflation of outlawry and the wolf's head was further confirmed in the legal writing of Henry Bracton in the thirteenth century. Bracton stated that 'after the proclamation of outlawry, 'henceforth they bear the wolf's head and in consequence perish

¹⁰ "lupinum enim caput gerit a die utlagationis sue, quod ab Anglis uulfesheued nominatur' in the original Latin.

¹¹ 'The so-called *Leges Edwardi Confessoris*, written about 1130 to 1135, [Bateson] writes, 'presents itself as the result of an inquest concerning the Anglo-Saxon law which William the Conqueror undertook in the fourth year of his reign... [which] attributes to Norman institutions an Anglo-Saxon origin'(80-81, Constable).

without judicial inquiry'¹²(Susan Steward, 40-1). As such, while is believed to have been passed into English law at the time of Edward the Confessor, greater evidence shows that it was used to describe the state of outlawry after the Norman Conquest (Blud, 328), persisting well into the fourteenth century.

This outlaw figure is doubly exiled from both divine and profane law and thereby holds the exclusionary status comparable only to that of a monarch. In some of the lays, these wolves-heads are also literally monarchs, as in the case of *Sir Degare* and *Sir Orfeo*, and work to bring outlaw and king into even closer proximity. According to Blud, the period during which Marie composed the lays witnessed an increasingly conflated concepts of outlawry and exile with the idea of the wolfshead (334). Bodies coded as such float 'outside the political order [while also being] constitutive of [that order]'(336). As a rite of passage, the exile's 'zone of indistinction'(340), its paradoxical suspension outside of and against the sovereign realm, is a form of spatial and corporeal liminality. It is also one iteration of the lay's *aventure*; the outlaw decree simultaneously seizes and relinquishes control.

It is an attempt to concretise, in the word, that which exists outside of language. Like *aventure*, the idea of abandonment, the ban, participates in a poetics of memory as it calls forth the archaic laws and customs that the lay inherits from its from its Anglo-Saxon and Germanic sources. In fact, Blud writes that 'Marie's wolf-man exile is ... both an archaism and an allusion to contemporary jurisprudence'(334). More than simply the authority to order and punish, banal lordship (*seigneurie banale*¹³) was the medieval practice of exercising public and private power over a population's territory. Note here the significance of exacting power over a *population's territory*, rather than the *territory's population*, given that it is when the individual is cast from that external threshold that they are released of both social obligation and physical protection. As the contract that

¹² This passage continues: 'they carry their judgment with them and they deservedly perish without law who have refused to live according to law. This is so if they take to flight or resist when they are to be arrested; if they are arrested alive or give themselves up, their life and death will be in the hands of the lord king.'(40-41, Susan Stewart).

¹³ '[Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, t]he town as a whole turned itself into a lordship; the rural banlieue (which it provided for itself by putting under its feudal jurisdiction or 'ban') was contemporary with the evolution of the lordship toward what is known as *seigneurie banale*, which was itself founded on a highly developed exercise of the 'ban'(Le Goff, 74, parentheses added).

relinquishes the contractual, the ‘ban’ is that which designates the sovereign’s jurisdiction *as an inside against an outside*.

The term’s origins in the Latin *bannus*, meaning prohibition or jurisdiction, can further highlight similarities between its thematic associations and the invocation of *aventure* in Marie’s work. In medieval England, *ban*’s sister term, *banns*, was the legal proclamation of an impending marriage for the function of its potential impediment. In other words, it serves to exclude certain individuals from the domestic *inside* of marriage, while also presaging the union, or reunion, of betrothed couples. It precariously suspends affianced individuals in a [liminal] space, anticipating simultaneously both union and separation. While the *bann* stands, the identity of the bride, like the outlaw, anticipates a separation from her patrimony, the past from which she comes. In the same instance, it propels her forward towards a union; one that would restore the stable domestic structure previously thrown into question by the *bann* as the notice of her marriage. The liminality of these parallel figures, bride and outlaw, invoke past and future stability while existing in a zone of indistinction between the two. As such, the wedding is to the bride what the return from exile is to the outlaw. The exile story divests the outlaw of all preordained hierarchies while inscribing him with the pre-destiny to return, to rejoin, or to rewrite the structure of his past.

Like *aventure*, *bannus* and its various iterations activate a threshold position, whether that position is temporal or spatial. Unlike *aventure*, its paradoxical imposition *is* articulated; as a verbal or written decree, the ban is that which is imagined to be *within* language. *Aventure* is, in some ways, the outside to the ban’s inside; not literally, but in the sense that it can escape the ban’s imposition of language as a territorial unit. The ban can both produce and demarcate the liminal phase in the lives of the lays’ protagonists, but only *aventure* can persist before and beyond the text in ‘the fantasy of [the] unarticulated’.

This discussion of the ban presupposes the ideas of national sovereignty in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Here, he locates the body of the oxymoronic ‘sovereign-subject’ as the site where democracy plays out, writing that the corpus (human body “is a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties” [original emphasis] (1977). While in the twenty-first

century, nationalism and national identity carry specific meanings inextricably tied to empire and geographic borders, Agamben indicates that the idea of national identity transformed after the *Magna Carta*. As a declaration of rights, the *Magna Carta* ‘must therefore be viewed as the place in which the passage from divinely authorised royal sovereignty to national sovereignty is accomplished’(1979). This text tells us, therefore, that the physical body is where national sovereignty and bare life are mutually produced, providing the subject with physical protections while implicating them in the law of the realm¹⁴.

Moreover, the etymological ties between ‘nation’ and the Latin “*nascere*” (to be born) ‘[close] the open circle of man’s birth’(1979). As such, the body is the site through which national sovereignty and bare life converge, both in the form of physical protections and the subjection to the law of the realm. National identity in the late Middle Ages, therefore, can be seen to be contentiously pinioned between the material and the divine, the subject and the sovereign.

For Ruth Evans, ‘[*Sir Orfeo*] stages the political and sexual meanings of abandonment [by] actively disclosing what sovereignty would rather repress’(200). This divestiture is that the threshold of the ban [jurisdiction] is semantically and geographically reliant upon a paradoxical yet constitutive outside. Similarly, in Marie’s *Lais*, the broad categories of nature and culture, — otherwise defined as human and animal, subject and sovereign, human and Faery, — are continually pushed to the edge of their semantic range. They are challenged and negotiated on their literal and metaphorical thresholds. In relation to the sovereign and the ban, I propose that the construction of national identity in *Sir Orfeo* occurs at the borderland; at that point in which ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ appear to collide and reconstitute themselves anew.

Expanding this, Barbara H. Rosenwein describes the ‘ban’ in relation to the exemptions and immunities that also ‘arose within the same political, social, and religious

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida also considers the duality of constructing subject-hood in relation to space in relation to his ideas of hospitality, or the host and the guest. ‘Thus, in the ‘destruction’ of the word, there can be seen an essential ‘self limitation’ built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one’s own and the ‘stranger’, between owning one’s own property and inviting the ‘other’ into one’s home’(51). ‘The phenomenon of hospitality necessarily contains the concept of the ‘other’ or ‘foreigner’ within it since hospitality requires, *a priori*, a concept of the ‘outsider’ or ‘guest’(52). (From *Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of hospitality*).

milieux' in early medieval Europe. She argues that the immunities and exemptions instituted by organisations of power 'are rich and polyvalent sources'; poised to serve 'social and political strategies far beyond their surface meanings'. These bans and borderlands, immunities and exemptions implicitly serve to designate the edge of political and social inclusion; as such they were constructed around networks of domestic and monarchic negotiation. Medieval European monarchy 'gained [power] largely by manipulating fluid alliances among aristocrats'(6). Rather than apparently imposing the power of monarchy over all subjects, such medieval institutions shared in their network of power in order to foment the hierarchies on which they were built and deter those that threatened them. The ban, as the physical exemption from political life, the exclusionary yet integral status, is far more complicated than what a contemporary definition would have us believe. More than just a monolithic before and after, an outside and an inside; the ban is the point at which those categories become not only interdependent but contingent.

ii.v. Anglo-Norman, Middle English, & *Translatio Studii*

Anglo-Norman describes the language used by the French populations who were installed as the ruling class after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Notably and increasingly, it became distinct from continental French, taking on its own idiosyncrasies by virtue of its diaspora and its mingling with the English spoken by the masses and by the lower bourgeois. Of course, from this lexical stratification, it could be assumed that for the entirety of the timespan this thesis concerns, this variant of continental French dominated as a language of authority over the English-speaking subject populations. However, by 1362, English as the most commonly spoken vernacular had replaced Norman as the language of administration. Ian Short rejects the 'sweeping assertion' that 'over a hundred and more years after the Conquest... [Anglo-Norman], the language of a small aristocratic minority could have had such currency and continuing vigour as to have penetrated through into the lower strata of the indigenous population'(467). Instead, he suggests that Anglo-Norman rapidly lost its status as a true vernacular language during the 12th century. Similarly, William Rothwell urges scholars to recognise that the legal register of Anglo-Norman in medieval England was 'in a state of perpetual development... [and] is simply the product

of the semantic development of everyday vocabulary to meet the requirements of a new society' (23). Spontaneously adapting to the cultural admixture of native and invading island inhabitants, the resultant Middle English springs forth as a language of convenience.

Translatio, of course, refers to the transfer or translation of materials, while *studii* refers to the pursuit of knowledge. Most typically, this refers to the translation of exemplar Latin texts into vernacular languages. It describes the movement by which these languages inherit their authority from a network of past texts¹⁵. By making claims about a text's classical provenance, writers could legitimise the works they produced. The notion of *translatio studii* is most commonly traced to Chrétien de Troyes in the prologue of *Cligès*;

‘Par les livres que nos avons
Les fez des anciens savons
Et del siegle qui fu jadis.
Ce nos ont nostre livre apris
Qu’an Grece ot de chevalerie
Le premier los et de clergie :
Puis vint chevalerie a Rome
Et de la clergie la some,
Qui or est an France venue.’(25-33)¹⁶

Demonstrating the genealogy of literature from the classic East to the medieval West, Chrétien unifies chivalry and learning. From Ancient Rome to France to England, these stories are passed; and in reverse, the provenance of English and French literatures are attributed to ancient writers and peoples. This reciprocity can most plainly be illustrated, in both content and form, by the passage of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *Historia regum Britanniae* (1136) into English. This pseudo-history purports that Britain was founded by Brutus and traces the ancestry of the British people to Troy.

Just twenty years later in 1155, the Norman poet Wace produced the *Roman de Brut* (1155), a translation and significant expansion of Monmouth's work, and one that

¹⁵ The concept of *translatio studii* is expanded in Michael Lysander Angerer's *Translatio Studii as Literary Innovation: Marie de France's Fresne and the Cultural Authority of Translation* and in Rita Copeland's *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*.

¹⁶ ‘From the books which we possess, we know the deeds of the ancients and of the world which aforetime was. This our books have taught us: that Greece had the first renown in chivalry and in learning. Then came chivalry to Rome, and the heyday of learning, which now is come into France’, (From L. J. Gardiner's online translation of *Cliges*).

consolidated the role of King Arthur and the Round Table as cultural institutions. By the time Layamon had reshaped these materials to produce his own *Chronicle of Britain* (c.1190)— this time in English —, the figure of Arthur had taken up the character of the preeminent English king. While adapting to a new culture and language, these three chronicles cling to the prestige they claim from their past forms, the wars recounted by Virgil and Homer. Here, this inheritance is thematic and as well as textual since it seeks to confer the notoriety of Latin texts onto French and English ones in the same instance in they attempt to claim that British rulers — of legend and of reality—were descended from Greco-Roman kings. The conceptualisation of *translatio studii* shown here reveals two important insights into the relationship between language and culture at the time of Marie. Firstly, that language is hierarchised, with Latin granting authority to French granting authority to English. Secondly, that even in the space of half a century, the cultural authority of Latin can transfer into English, supplanting that lexical origin by the same token that it imbibes its prestige. The ease, availability, and rapidity of *translatio studii*, however, should not be taken to reflect social progress, as it would seem linguistic divisions between subject populations prevailed until at least the fourteenth century. Illustrating the socio-linguistic divisions between the twelfth-century elite and the rest of society, Short cites ‘the bitter resentment and frustration which a member of the English-speaking lower clergy could feel when tantalised with the sudden possibility of crossing the deep gulf separating him from his French-speaking superiors’ (478). Of the English subject populations, Short questions how widespread bilingualism could have been. He browses hagiographic texts in which English figures supposedly ignorant of French and Latin miraculously utter those languages. This, Short says, indicates that to English speakers, Anglo-Norman and ‘the miraculous gift of tongues’ that is multilingualism, was held in high regard as as ‘the key to social and economic success’(479). By the fourteenth century however, Middle English had displaced Anglo-Norman as the language of power and, among other socio-economic factors such as the Black Death and the start of the Hundred Years War, had somewhat restored social mobility in literacy on the basis of a common tongue. Certainty, as this thesis will show, it facilitated a body of Middle English

texts, produced by and for an English people, including those representing the class of lower bourgeois.

Turville-Petre affirms that the growing predominance of Middle English worked to deepen and consolidate a 'sense of national identity by harnessing the emotive energy of the association between language and nationalism'(10). Moreover, he insists on language as a significant category in the early development of medieval national identity as it instated 'an image of a whole nation of English speakers'. Like the cartographers who consolidated the nation's future in their epic past, the dialectical language functioned as a 'living witness to the people's Anglo-Saxon ancestry'. He contrasts this with the beliefs of contemporary European writers that only a standard form of language had the power to 'represent national identity in a way that the multiplicity of dialects could not do'. Turville-Petre notes that although 'modern writers on nationalism often deny that it was possible in the Middle Ages and especially in England to envisage a national language'(20), he places greater importance on 'self-definition'(19); 'whatever the regional variations in the language, it was all thought of as English'(20). Importantly, he identifies how language may have partially given rise to vague nation-states through their necessary systems of exclusion and inclusion, of speakers and non-speakers, which bolsters a sense of sameness and of belonging to a collective group. Turville-Petre also emphasises the importance of English in this period as a nation-building and administrative device, or rather a format through which nationhood can be transmitted and disseminated, particularly among the peasant populations who would've been called upon to form armies in the fourteenth century. 'In the attempts to raise troops', he writes, 'royal propaganda underlined the need for national unity in the face of attack'. Unlike Benedict Anderson¹⁷, Turville-Petre places great emphasis on language as a self-conscious proponent of nationhood. Despite having

¹⁷ Anderson pointedly contrasts the development of medieval English language(s) with 'the self-conscious language policies pursued by nineteenth-century dynasts confronted with the rise of popular linguistic nationalisms'. While Latin, Middle French, and Middle English vernaculars did compete to achieve 'the status of languages-of-power' within medieval Christendom, Anderson insists that this development was 'gradual, unselfconscious, [and] pragmatic' and that '[t]here was no idea of systematically imposing the language on the dynasts' various subject populations'(1836). Rather, he suggests, the establishment of English, in England, as the *lingua franca* was a byproduct of administrative practices, which relied on the use of a common tongue.

‘territory, a history, a set of cultural traditions, a body of legal practices [...], a single economy with a common coinage and taxation, and some concept of shared rights’, the nation lacked a common tongue. As a means to ‘deepen this inter-penetration of centre and region’(8), the appropriation of the ‘language of the ‘loandes folk’” allowed administrative powers ‘to involve a wider section of the population in the political programme of reform’(9). As such, by the 1290s, the association between English populations, their languages, and geographies were deeply entwined.

Despite this, it would be short-sighted to suggest that the *Lais*, —born out of Breton folklore, then reinvented in French, then reimagined in the Anglo-Norman court,— were simply reinterpreted into Middle English by the start of the twelfth century. No, their re-entry into the English literary canon is evidently far more haphazard and relates closely to the multilingualism of Marie and her contemporaries. For example, readers of *Bisclavret*, *Laüstic*, and *Chevrefoil* will observe Marie’s idiosyncratic double-naming, in which she lists the title of her work in both ‘*franceis*’ and ‘*engleis*’(1.5-6, *Laüstic*). Similarly, in both *Chaitivel* and in *Eliduc*, Marie offers two titles. The alternative name for *Eliduc* is ‘*Guildeluëc ha Guilliadun*’ (1.22). In *Chaitivel*, the ‘*Quatre Doels*’(1.233), the Four Sorrows, is equally faithful to the subject matter—‘[*c*]hescuns des nuns bien i afiert/ kar la matire le requiert’, (1.234-6). It is in my view that Marie, in translating and arranging the stories she herself has heard, authorises further rewritings and glossing of the text. The acknowledgement that these stories exist in both French and English analogues specifically legitimise further translation. Moreover, this stylistic curiosity is manifest twofold in *Le Fresne*, in which the title character and her twin sister Le Coudre, are symmetrically rendered in English as Ash and Hazel, deepening ‘the inquiry into the profoundly disorientating phenomenon of a twoness that is simultaneously a oneness’(Bruckner, 947). For Bloch, this ‘double naming in her imposition of titles’ participates in the ‘doubling implicit in the process...of translation’. In other words, it is through the betrayal¹⁸ and the

¹⁸ ‘Then too, *traire* also signifies “to translate,” “to transmit,” or “to transform” and is the term for that which any author does in extruding or drawing one text from another: ... As translation, *traire* implies the transformation of the same into the other; Indeed, given the fact that Old French, even though written, was intended for the ear (to be either recited or read aloud), there can be no difference between the words *traire* and *trahir*: “To draw or shoot” and “to betray” stand as proof of the treacherousness of a homophonic lack of difference in the sound of a word that can also mean “to differ.”’(Bloch, 44)

play of *différance* incurred by the translation process that Marie can launch a two-pronged approach to her project of *reassemlage*.

The most outwardly manifest variable in my research into the lay form has been language, with one body of texts (Marie's *Lais*) in Anglo-Norman and the later (the *MS Auchinleck* lays and *Sir Launfal*) in Middle English. Evidently, however, with even a cursory perusal of the lay corpus, this linguistic divide cannot be so clearly drawn. It is resisted by a number of the form's qualifiers, but most simply by the convenient imperceptibility of *Bretaine* (Britain) and *Bretayne* (Brittany), a trick capitalised on by the *Lay le Freine* poet, as is discussed in Chapter 4. This discussion of Anglo-Norman and Middle English, which will prove particularly relevant in the later chapters of this thesis, reveals three key components of the relationship between the two languages. Firstly, it affirms the hierarchy of the languages, in which authority is denied derivative texts, as is the case of *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*. Secondly, it acknowledges the contingency of the languages, in which texts claim the prestige of their lineage through literary *translatio*. Thirdly, it exposes the proximity of the languages, in which the doubling of words and concepts —so susceptible to misapprehension — works to foster textual multivalence and proliferate meanings.

iii. Unlearning Medievalism

The lay scholarship that has been produced in the past two hundred years is wide-ranging, often contradictory, and at times frustrating to parse through. This sub-genre of romance has fuelled much debate on the topics of form, anteriority, and authorship. This is particularly obvious in the case of *Sir Launfal* and its relationship with its source texts, *Graelent* and *Lanval*. Similarly, the matter of the emergence of national consciousness in the late Middle Ages and of post-medieval influence on conceptions of English nationhood is fiercely contentious ground to cover in a single literature review. In fact, any one individual lay or theme could be permitted to dominate this review, eclipsing other equally valuable contributions to the field. For the sake of maintaining momentum, however, I have narrowed down this section to a selection of essential works on the themes of anglicisation, material culture, and the lay form. Each text, I hope, will help to set the

theoretical parameters for this discussion and prevent academic pitfalls that would otherwise limit this thesis' applicability and continued relevancy.

Medieval Literature as Monster (1995) by John M. Ganim, for example, helps to dispel the fallacious ideas that medieval identities were entirely primitive, local, and essential. This text repudiates the idealisation of medieval Englishness that has been used to uphold certain ideas about nationalism in the modern era. Of medieval literature, the nineteenth-century French philosopher Hippolyte Taine wrote,

‘[i]t is impossible to translate these incongruous ideas which quite disconcert our modern style. [...] Articles, particles, everything capable of illuminating thought, of marking the connection of terms, of producing regularity of ideas, all rational and logical artifices, are neglected. Passion bellows forth like a great shapeless beast; and that is all. It rises and starts in little abrupt lines; it is the acme of barbarism.’ (*The History of English Literature*, Taine, q. in Ganim, 28)

According to Ganim, Taine identifies in medieval poetry ‘disruptions of narrative logic’ and uncontained ‘expressions of “passion”’ and believes that it reflects the period’s barbaric, and primitive quality. Any reader of Marie de France, initiated in medievalism or otherwise, would recognise these claims to be groundless. Other claims, however, are not so manifestly disprovable. *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (2004) by Kathy Lavezzo, *The Significance of the Medieval Theory of Authorship* (1988) by Alastair Minnis, and *England the Nation* (1996) by Thorlac Turville-Petre help to negotiate the minefield of discussing nationhood before nation, a topic which continues to frustrate scholars. While acknowledging that criticism of medieval literature is no longer characterised as inherently incongruous with modernity, for example, Kathy Lavezzo posits that,

‘The idea of “England” as the protagonist of a gripping national tale of precocious birth in the Anglo-Saxon period, maternal nurturing and plucky survival during the Norman Conquest, and triumphant dominance in modernity is a teleology that no longer holds.’ (xiii)

This idea paradigmatically serves this thesis by emphasising the importance of considering one’s own contemporary and internalised nationalist rhetoric in order to, as Lavezzo

expresses, reject the ‘oppressive myths of a monolithic and predestined English nation that have been promulgated by nationalist projects’ (xix). Only by grounding research in historical reality can this thesis hope to understand the political, economic, and social drives underpinning folkloric fantasy and storytelling tradition.

On this topic, critical writings such as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Jacques Le Goff’s *Medieval Civilization* (1988), for example, provide a network of vocabulary with which to tackle the historical contexts that feed into the lay form. Shearle Furnish’s *Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lay* (2007) and Constance Bullock-Davies’ *The Form of the Breton Lay* (1973) will round out this literature review with an evaluation of existing ideas surrounding the term ‘lay’, as a distinct—or more accurately, *indistinct*—poetic form.

One theorist notably absent from this literature review is Howard R. Bloch whose *Anonymous Marie de France* is likely one of the most accomplished and comprehensive pieces of scholarly work on the lay subject. Since much consideration has been made for Bloch’s writing in this thesis, it seems repetitive and unnecessary to include his book here, other than to mention its continued relevance. What should be highlighted at this early stage is the importance of material culture and manuscript studies in discerning the visual and aural elements of the lay tradition. In this field, Jessica Brantley’s *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms* (2022), Helen Deeming’s *An English Monastic Miscellany* (2015), and Andrew Taylor’s *The Myth of the Minstrel Manuscript* (1991) have been illuminating—*literally*, in their analysis of miniatures and decorated initials and *textually* in their supply of the language of manuscript analysis.

By evaluating this selection of texts, this review seeks to provide a basis for understanding the critical models that have equipped this thesis with interrogative tools and situated it within an ongoing field of theoretical and material study. In particular, they have proved indispensable to an investigation of nation, as a modern and medieval ideological construction and as a practical geographic limit. Beyond critical theory, those writers considering the multi-media manuscript experience of lay poetry have, I hope, helped to situate this thesis’ claims within the demonstrable, tangible features of the texts it concerns.

iii.i. Nationhood Before Nation

It seems appropriate to begin by addressing two of the earliest and most enduring hurdles this thesis faced in its development; firstly, the issue of discussing textual evidence of nationhood, or of national identity, before that nation manifestly exists; and secondly, the importance of overcoming the post-medieval fantasies that may otherwise threaten the historical integrity of my interpretation.

Ganim sheds particular light on the aforementioned 'fantasies of race, gender and power' inscribed within the study of medieval literature by subsequent generations of scholars. He traces the origins of English national consciousness and the romantic forms that were simultaneously and somewhat symptomatically produced with a 'deep suspicion of [their] parentage':

'On one side, romance is imagined as indigenous, national and local, as a form of history before historical consciousness takes shape. On the other side, the origin of romance is imagined as identical with the origins of fiction itself, and these origins are described with the imagery of otherness, which, in the eighteenth century at least, meant a version of orientalism.'(32)

The alienating and often disconcerting forms and features of medieval literature labelled by Taine's *History of English Literature* as 'the acme of barbarism'(28) were, Ganim points out, the invention of Romantic scholars and as such were seen as 'an excess of imagination' that 'could come from only one place— the East'(35). Ganim indicates that a case could be made to suggest that certain literary historians of the eighteenth century, including Percy, Hurd, and Warton, reinvented a Middle Ages that was very much concerned with both 'a national past and a strangely exotic alterity'(38). Specifically relating this to the interrelated but vastly different studies of medieval Englishness and British medievalism, he notes that while in France 'medieval studies [were] institutionalised [in the nineteenth century] as a national defence program [...] the antiquarian and folkloric underpinnings of British medievalism were entirely absent, and a more formalist and historicising agenda was developed'(38). He relates this agential development to the way in which 'the exotic

otherness' encountered by the British during their imperial advances 'could not help but be turned on the strangeness of even local and indigenous customs of the colonizers themselves'(38). Medieval texts, as Ganim observes, resist the strict binaries of the fantasies placed upon them by post-medieval works. However, it remains that modern medievalists can better evaluate literary and theoretical sources by tempering their conclusions with the awareness that medieval and post-medieval writings are influenced by the social and political contexts from which they emerge.

Lavezzo's book *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* addresses the complexity of understanding a topic so deeply entrenched in post-Enlightenment national sentiment. Despite the modern term 'nationalism' only seeping into the wider lexicon in the late eighteenth century, she suggests that there are medieval literary artefacts that express the earliest imaginings of an English national community. She indicates that the difficulty in talking about national identity in the Middle Ages is in part due to 'the general tendency of post-Enlightenment Western intellectuals' to view this period as 'a time during which only universalist [...] social structures existed'(viii). Lavezzo critiques Anderson and Kohn who, she indicates, overemphasise the structural differences between modern nationhood and pre-modern monarchies which often ruled over subjects dispersed throughout geographically unfixed territories. She says that this 'insistence on the lack of medieval precedents to the nation' works to generate a 'myth of a universal sacral West' that elides the medieval political and social systems that 'anticipate the nation-state and the nationalist discourses of modernity'(viii). In line with Lavezzo's thinking, my thesis is not concerned specifically with the 'national and imperial impulses' that work to reify 'Victorian fantasies of a late medieval golden age'(ix). She suggests that foregrounding an awareness of these reimaginings of the past can serve to dismantle 'contemporary national fantasies [that] continue to mobilize medieval scholarship'(xi). She emphasises that the 'scholarly quest' to locate an authentic medieval Englishness is 'doomed to failure'(xiii). Most significantly, Lavezzo's work can better equip modern theorists with the language and tools to understand how English romances imagine, anticipate, and seed a sense of nationhood

while enabling them to navigate through the lexical quagmire of post-medieval fantasies of race and gender.

Moreover, Lavezzo notes the limitations of discussing nationalism based on its lexicography. She locates the term's first appearance in the English lexicon in 1804, but notes that the earlier Latin term *natio* had definitions pertaining to 'breed, stock, and race [which] testify to the deep biological and racial structure that often underlies national feeling'. She says that the 'notoriously slippery meaning of "nation" demonstrates how words hardly secure meaning and identity', instead suggesting that 'we need not prove the codification of a concept in a language in order to analyze that notion' given that any attempt to fully codify such a charged term would be 'an impossible desire'(xvi). Much like Giorgio Agamben's identification of the Latin *nascere* (to be born) that contentiously ties medieval man to his place with an imagined political community, Lavezzo's discussion locates the subject's nationhood on the linguistic and geographic borderlands of the term.

'Coterminous with the various fantasies of sameness, union, and wholeness that nationalism entails are fantasies of difference, the construction of others whom the nation is "not" and whom the nation surmounts.'(xvi)

Rather than enshrining a nationalistic medieval past, or completely abandoning the endeavour to imagine a medieval English nation at all for fear of becoming entangled in a linguistic nightmare, Lavezzo's introduction is optimistic about the future of the field. She notes that '[a]s critics writing about nationalism within a discipline whose origins are themselves nationalist, we can perhaps never fully escape our own implication in nationalist discourses of England'(xix). However, she affirms that the textual depiction of "England" in the Middle Ages resists 'those oppressive myths of a monolithic and predestined English nation'(xix). As such, she calls upon theorists 'to open up the old binaries that govern thinking on the relationship between pre-modernity and modernity'(xix) and to reimagine, not only, medieval structures analogous to the nation-state, but also the field of scholarship itself. By resisting such binaries, the study of the lays can be situated in relation to the anticipation of the nation-states that had not yet fully

emerged as clearly defined wholes charged with post-medieval national ideology. While Lavezzo does not write specifically on the lays themselves, her mode of thinking about the relationships between past and present as contingent upon language will be relevant to this discussion.

Medievalist Alastair Minnis urges theorists to not fall prey to teleological fallacies in his 1988 text *The Significance of the Medieval Theory of Authorship*. Rather than adopting modern literary concepts which he suggests 'have no historical validity', he affirms that the medieval scholastic endeavour should be more concerned with a process of unlearning certain tacit assumptions of the present. Although Minnis does not completely reject the function of modern theory as a tool for interrogation and analysis, he does ask, '[i]s it not better to search again, in a different range of medieval writings, for a conceptual equipment which is at once historically valid *and* theoretically illuminating?'(1, [emphasis added]). In this text, he makes a point that I hope to honour throughout this present thesis, writing,

'while we cannot re-experience the past, we can recognise the integrity of past experience and apply the resultant information in evaluating our present experience of the past'(7).

Minnis concludes that 'the strangeness (what some would call the 'alterity') of late medieval literary theory will to some extent free us from that 'blind modernism' which obscures our view of the past'(7). The distorted 'window', or sideways glance, into the past that medieval texts provide must be considered in relation to the culture of their time. Moreover, to extrapolate this metaphor, it is of paramount importance to not misconstrue the window itself for the vision it frames.

That is to say, that our only hope of discussing Middle English texts with any form of historical validity is to operate with both the awareness and consideration of our own political, personal, and post-imperial presuppositions as modern medieval scholars. It is with these considerations in mind that I hope to situate this present thesis within a body of scholarship that seeks to unlearn and un-teach as it univocally learns and teaches.

iii.ii. Nation as Language & Literature

A discussion of incipient English national identities cannot be staged without mentioning Benedict Anderson's 1983 book *Imagined Communities*. In this critical text, he relates the construction of Englishness to the development of its language. He says that early English was produced through

‘a slow fusion between [the] language of a foreign ruling class [Norman French] and the Anglo-Saxon of the subject population... This fusion made it possible for the new language to take its turn, after 1362, as the language of the courts— and for the opening of Parliament¹⁹ (1835).

This process enabled early English to overtake Norman French as the language of the courts by the middle of the fourteenth century, functioning as both an administrative and literary medium. Anderson emphatically notes the difference between this development in language and that of English in the nineteenth century. In line with the rise of print capitalism, the latter was ‘systematically’ imposed on the population by dynastic families to give the language ‘a new fixity... [which built] an image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation’(1838). Despite ‘that common element in nationalist ideologies which stresses [the association of languages] with particular territorial units’, he indicates that early English rather appeared ‘as a gradual, unselfconscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development’ that incidentally elevated vernaculars ‘to the status of languages-of-power’(1836). Anderson pointedly contrasts the development of medieval English language(s) with ‘the self-conscious language policies pursued by nineteenth-century dynasts confronted with the rise of popular linguistic nationalisms’. While Latin, Middle French, and Middle English vernaculars did compete to achieve the status of languages-of-power within medieval Christendom, Anderson insists that in this development ‘[t]here was no idea of systematically imposing the language on the dynasts’ various subject populations’(1836). Rather, he suggests, the establishment of English, in

¹⁹ The Pleading Act of 1362 required the courts, which had previously used Legal French, to use Legal English. Among other pieces of documentary evidence, the Pleading Act ‘has come to the form the essential historical context for the revival of English as a literary language during the fourteenth century: the phenomenon that produced the vernacular “greats” of Langland, Chaucer, Gower, and their successors is thus conventionally explained in terms of a great linguistic shift among the secular elites (whether gentle or bourgeois) that provided the market and audience for Middle English literature’(751, Ormrod).

England, as the common tongue was a byproduct of administrative practices, which relied on the use of a common language.

Anderson's writing here can inform part of this thesis by way of his understanding of how the supplantation of English as the nation's language of power was a process of convenience rather than intentionality. By Anderson's estimation, the incidental imbrication of Anglo-Norman and Middle English was the inevitable byproduct of diaspora and assimilation. Part of this idea is the acknowledgement that Middle English and Anglo-Norman should be conceived of not as discreet mediums, language isolates, but as interconnected tongues. While storytellers, writers, and manuscript compilers may have set out with the intention of producing literature with a specific national agenda in mind, the languages themselves can regardless retain their hybrid capabilities and their shared linguistic heritages.

Contrastingly, Thorlac Turville-Petre posits that the development of the English language in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries *did* operate as a nation-building device. He figures language as a medium through which unifying ideologies can be transmitted and disseminated, particularly among the peasant populations who would have been called upon to form armies in times of international conflict. Unlike other apparatus that can be said to unify a people, he indicates that the use of a common tongue consolidated national consciousness 'by harnessing the emotive energy of the association between language and nationalism'(10). He writes that by the 1290s, 'the association between language and nation was well established' and as such could be called upon by writers of the time to invoke a sense of commonality and unification.

In relation to literature of the 14th century, he notes that many writers in this period wrote historical texts that shaped England by developing and disseminating an ideological consciousness of its mythic past. Many of these writings both confronted and concealed the fabulous, untidy imaginings of a constructed past, contentiously contradicted by its historical reality.

Importantly, with regard to the controversial discussion of nationhood in medieval England, Turville-Petre notes that 'modern writers on nationalism often deny that it was possible in the Middle Ages and especially in England to envisage a national

language'(20-21). While acknowledging the broad variations in culture and dialect within the land, Turville-Petre suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the 'self-definition' of this centralised and centralising tongue, given that 'whatever the regional variations in the language, it was all thought of as English'(21). He indicates that this intentional and incidental deployment of language among the subject populations, alongside the dissemination of English cartography among other cultural practices, later gave rise to an ideological nation-state.

Turville-Petre writes that Matthew Paris argued that 'the configuration of the land, the characterization of its people, their religion, laws and customs [...] meshed to form the nation of the present day'(1). He explains that map-making allowed the readers of Matthew Paris' chronicles 'to visualize the nation as land'(2) and to understand how its population is contained within it. In addition to delineating geographical borders, cartography also lays claim to the history of the lands. For example, the *Abbreviatio Chronicorum* (1255-1259) traces Britain's lineage from its mythic founder Brutus, through Arthurian and Anglo-Saxon legends, to the Normans and Henry III. Turville states that through this attachment to a constructed version of history 'the Normans holding their lands in England *became* English, with ancient rights confirmed by English law' (emphasis added, 6). As such, the mythological history of the people 'became entwined with the history of the land, so that identity was defined through legal succession that expressed the providential design working upon the nation's history'(6-7). Although both emphasise the significance of a common voice in the medieval emergence of an English imagined community, Turville-Petre's discussion differs from Anderson's 'gradual, unselfconscious, [and] pragmatic' development of the language. He instead suggests that England the nation was a political device, 'founded on a series of myths and loaded interpretations of the past'(6). Turville-Petre highlights an aspect of medieval society in the 13th century that will be ever-relevant to my discussion; he notes the question mark over the national identity of the ruling class and nobility and the debate over what it meant to be 'English'. Between an imported ruling class and the popularity of foreign marriages among the nobility, the 'myth of racial purity' was a test that 'no one in England was in a position to pass'(6). As such, at the beginning of

the thirteenth century, the fabulous history and ideological constructions of identity were ‘insubstantial ground on which to build a nation’(8). Even though England (the geographical area) shared common coinage, taxation, and systems of administration even before the creation of the Domesday Book, its lack of a national language prevented centralised powers from unifying it into a recognisable medieval state.

By the fourteenth century, the growing body of work that reflected the ideological and cultural milieu of the time begins to emerge in the form of literature. The intentional and coordinated development of such artefacts —culminating, for one, in the *Auchinleck Manuscript*— highlights the role that the transmission of written and aural texts had in producing a nation constructed around a shared, if apocryphal, literary history. It is this association between language and nation that will be evaluated in my discussion; as Middle English supersedes Anglo-Norman as the *lingua franca* of England and its literature, it reserves residues of its past— textually, thematically, and lexically.

Le Goff further speaks to the incipient European nations emerging in literature through the high Middle Ages, albeit more broadly. In this area, his book *Medieval Civilization* is an essential resource that tracks the socio-political movements that transformed and arguably instituted cultures of nationhood in Christian Europe. Le Goff highlights how these proto-nations, states of population control, were internally and externally constructed in relation to one another. He qualifies his claims by acknowledging that medieval political history is complicated by the fragmentation of these populations, among which power relations were vertically and horizontally ‘entangled’:

‘People in the Middle Ages did not always know which of the many lords, the Church and individual churches, the towns, princes, and kings they were subordinate’(96)

It is only through a myriad of ‘advances, retreats and metamorphoses’, both geographical and social, that areas vaguely resembling modern nation-states were formed. Among the states, including France and England, that ‘consolidated themselves before the eleventh and the fourteenth century, even the strongest had neither a secure dynasty nor clearly delimited frontiers.’(97) It is this dynastic insecurity that is particularly relevant to the

discussion of the Middle English lays, which seek, at least peripherally, to establish a body of work in both an English language and an English voice. Le Goff, in fact, makes this link between the conscious production of a national identity and of a body of national literature. He explains that '[b]ooks became tools rather than objects of worship, and like any tool they came to be mass-produced, objects for manufacture and retail'(81) that deployed specific, although diverse, political and social ideologies among the subject populations of medieval Europe. More than to the lay itself, this observation relates to the study of the lay in its material form. It must remain in mind that the key manuscripts which form the basis of the majority of manuscript research in this thesis are commodities; they were commissioned to be purchased by those with an extremely high level of disposable income. They are luxuries and as such the ideas that they relay may only glimpse the upper layer of society, the aristocratic and bourgeois classes with the means to purchase them and the education to read them. Further, Le Goff's writing explores how the book production industry, albeit one still limited to those with financial means, was one undergoing a transformation that made literature more accessible to a wider subsection of society.

iii.iii. Manuscript Culture

Brantley's work on miscellaneity has served this thesis as a guide for understanding the unification of seemingly unrelated texts in one manuscript container. While she discusses the role of miscellaneity in relation to the 14th century MS Harley 2253, her research is applicable to both the *MSS Harley 978* and *Auchinleck* as the most prominent manuscripts in my own research. Containing works in Middle English, French, and Latin, the Harley 2253 is a trilingual miscellany that 'has been treated piecemeal because it cannot be unified by any familiar analytical categories; language, subject, or form'. In one example, Brantley relates the book's use of macaronic poems to an impulse towards intentional miscellaneity.

'What a macaronic poem does *in parvo*, the trilingual miscellaneous manuscript itself does at a larger scale, and indeed the general culture of medieval Britain can be distinguished by its striking and productive conjunction of languages'. (188)

While I consider the *MS Auchinleck* as more of an anthology than a miscellany — it has the overriding interest in Middle English literature and as such in producing an English canon, linguistically if not thematically— I still believe that these impulses relate to its contents. For one, like the H. 2253, it contains ‘ordering principles that emerge [from] symmetry, mirroring, and opposition’(191), such as in the case of the *Orfeo*, *David the King*, and *Sir Tristrem* romances, all found alongside one another. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the *MS Auchinleck*’s gathering of three symmetrical images of harp-playing minstrels in these three texts works to bring to the fore a figure that might otherwise be lost to the dominance of other themes if paired with alternative texts. The physical construction of the manuscript, as such, highlights the minstrel’s significance within the canon of English literature it self-consciously compiles.

Brantley reiterates Turville-Petre’s suggestion that ‘the Harley 2253 creates rather than asserts a place for the English nation in literary history’(188). She explains that these claims can only be made by considering the manuscript as ‘an aesthetic whole’, as a deliberate miscellaneous variety that serves as a codicological model for the later ‘framed story collection’(192) such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.

For the *MS Auchinleck*, this model is clear; as a collection, it seeks to compile and restore texts in line with the incline in a literate English reading population in the fourteenth century. It is therefore framed by a political drive, if not a narrative one. Conversely for the *MS Harley 978*, the sense of miscellaneity prevails in that its contents cannot be unified by an overarching theme, language, or form. The *Lais* found within it do have unifying features; besides their purported poet, the *mise-en-page* makes them subtly distinct from the rest of the manuscript and calls attention to their thematic continuities. Yet the manuscript’s blend of satirical, religious, historical, medical, and musical work makes it difficult to understand as a collective, without prioritising the significance of one text over others, which has typically been the case for its famous *Sumer Is Icumen In*. Attention must be paid, therefore, to the *MS Harley 978* as a miscellaneous container if this thesis is to understand the roles the *Lais* play within it. In this regard, Deeming’s *Manuscripts and Medieval Song Inscription, Performance, Context* has served as a critical resource on

understanding the *MS Harley 978* as one collating a motley selection of prose, poetry, and music.

Containing the earliest and most comprehensive version of her *Lais* and arguably the closest extant representation of what they may have looked like at the time of their first composition, the thirteenth-century *MS Harley 978* is critical to the study of Marie's work. Despite their temporal displacement from their twelfth-century source, investigating their inclusion in the *MS Harley 978* can shed light on the way in which the *Lais* may have been read, transmitted, and received by readers, albeit eighty years after their initial entry into literary circulation. Deeming evaluates the various codicological features and pieces of textual evidence that could point to the provenance of the book. For example, the calendar provides obits of a number of Reading monks 'which would have had no practical use except at Reading or one of its dependent priories'. This might suggest an ecclesiastical setting for the manuscript's production. However, the hand used in the *Lais* is more suggestive of being produced by a professional scribe, 'perhaps from one of the workshops that had begun to spring up in Oxford, to serve the needs of the scholars'(121). It is for its varying scribal hands and visual compositions that Deeming concludes that the manuscript as a whole was most likely assembled, if not written, at Reading Abbey, a process that 'could have been facilitated by one of the monks of Reading who studied at Oxford in the thirteenth century, and who may have commissioned or purchased booklets from the booksellers while they were there'(122). She points out that rather than 'consciously intended as a collection', the miscellaneous Goliardic, musical, and lay verse contents of the *MS Harley 978* are the product of 'accidental compilation', with a 'final arrangement [that] was not necessarily envisaged by any of those involved in its production'. It is for this reason that it 'does not readily lend itself to interpretation as the product of a single, conscious design'. As with Brantley's discussion of the Harley 2253, ascribing an organisational model to manuscript miscellanies seems to reveal more about the compiler than it does about the scribes and poets that produced the individual leaves. It is such that claims about the intertextual dynamics of the *MS Harley 978* are more deeply rooted in reception than in production.

Deeming concludes that, as a unit, it most likely was produced by a 'small group of educated enthusiasts, with interests in collecting and preserving literature and in recording and cultivating music'. She comments on how, regardless of its organizing principles, the miscellaneous contents nevertheless are what generate the reading experience of the *MS Harley 978*. Importantly, the musical contributions in the manuscript '[cast] light on the networks of interchange in which music and other forms of knowledge moved around'(140). The *Lais*, as the textual inheritors of Breton lyric poetry and minstrel song, would have been received, at least by readers of the *MS Harley 978*, alongside this selection of musical and non-musical pieces. While this thesis will not be foregrounding the manuscript's contribution to polyphony, the importance of understanding the lay as a form inherited from musical lyric will be discussed in relation to *Sir Orfeo* and Marie's *Laüstic*. Regardless, Deeming's musicological perspective on the manuscript contributes to connecting Marie's *Lais* to their reception, since their inclusion in the *MS Harley 978* points to their ongoing relationship with song.

One such iteration of this relationship —one that will feature most prominently in the discussion of *Sir Orfeo* and *Chevrefoil*— is that encapsulated by the theme and form of the minstrel lay. Andrew Taylor's *The Myth of the Minstrel Manuscript* (1991) compiles manuscript research on the subject. Albeit chiefly dispelling claims about minstrel provenance, Taylor's essay supports this thesis in grounding the idea of the minstrel lay within material research and cultural history.

It has been suggested that the majority of medieval minstrel manuscripts have been lost or destroyed largely due to their purported use, to be carried around in the pocket or wallet of a minstrel. Most likely these texts would have existed, if they did exist at all, in the form of scraps and fragments of parchment, which were 'almost as ephemeral'(73) as the spoken word itself. Fragments, scrolls, single leaves, and scraps have the lowest chance of surviving to the present day. Furthermore, the few extant artefacts even remotely worth considering as legitimate pieces of minstrel manuscript cannot make up a large enough sample size to begin making generalisations or verifications about how such texts were produced or used. Such is the difficulty of making these claims.

Going from town to town, performing songs and telling stories, *jongleurs* before the time of Marie would have 'been obliged to memorise their material without any recourse to a written text'(46). However, it has been suggested that, by the start of the twelfth century, this practice had evolved. *Manuscrit de jongleurs* were thought to be commissioned on behalf of the minstrel so that they could learn 'poems by heart and... refresh [their] memory'(45) between performances. This of course presupposes literacy on behalf of the minstrel; a borderline impossible assertion to prove with such an absence of manuscripts convincingly attributed to minstrel use.

Citing a 'disregard for probability', Taylor says that the impulse of past scholars to attribute certain texts to oral, presumably illiterate, storytellers reflects the 'desire to move beyonds the words on the page and recapture lost voices' ;'through its leaves the lost oral world is recovered, and the dead performer sings once more'(53). It would therefore seem that this avenue of research is trapped at an impasse, between being able to prove, or equally disprove, the material existence of such artefacts. This is not to negate the prominence of the figure in the literature itself; certainly, it appears notably in the text of *Sir Orfeo*, as well as tangentially in the *Lais* of Marie de France, which interweave ideas of literature and musicality in ways that could be said to invoke the minstrel tradition.

None of the key texts discussed in this thesis are contained within a manuscript that could possibly be related to minstrel use. The *MS Auchinleck* is far too extravagant in quality; its frequent illuminations and ornamentation, as well as its size, impede a minstrel manuscript classification. Similarly, the two most watertight hypotheses about the provenance of the *MS Harley 978* would likewise deter any scholar from labelling it as such, although the debate over whether it was copied by the monks of the Benedictine Abbey of Reading or by professional scribes remains ongoing. Regardless, it is ever important to consider the aural and literary contexts from which these texts emerge. The impulse to attach the minstrel's ephemeral song to material artefacts does not solely belong to the nineteenth-century scholars who made unfounded claims about manuscript provenance. As stated, the *Lais* themselves work to memorialise Breton minstrel lyrics, as Marie recounts the tales allegedly told by her aural predecessors. In this sense, the minstrel is the medium of dissemination, the progenitor of, and, in some cases, the thematic

material upon which certain medieval texts are produced. What Taylor's manuscript research adds to this discussion is the idea that the minstrel is as much a figure of fantasy as it is of historical reality. These claims, albeit unsubstantiated, assert the renown of medieval minstrelsy as a font of aural transmission. Moreover, they invite contemporary scholars to reconsider minstrel status not as a 'hermetically sealed'(73) identity, but as one that remains open to discussion and debate.

iv. Structure of the Thesis

The present chapter, which is entitled *Introduction: The Anglicisation of The Lais of Marie de France (1100-1350)*, aims to establish the scope of this research. As its name implies, it introduces the primary focus of this thesis as the translative, transformative processes through which Marie's Anglo-Norman lays are integrated into English. Besides relaying its research questions, defining its theoretical parameters, describing its methodology, and hypothesising about the thesis' conclusions, this introduction reviews existing scholarship in the field of lay studies.

This chapter will endow the ensuing ones with a research framework; specifically, the theoretical concepts, methodology, and hypotheses pertinent to the discussion. It will provide an explanation for how this research uses the concepts of *aventure*, the ban, liminality, and *translatio studii*. It will situate the essential terms 'Anglo-Norman' and 'Middle English' within their political and social contexts in order to support the study of the registers and connotations of each lay and how the genre moves through language and takes on new meanings.

Besides theoretical perspectives, it will also touch upon the discipline of manuscript studies which ground the thesis in materiality. Most importantly, however, this section seeks to produce a working definition of the 'lay' itself as a literary mode. A literature review of past scholarship on the subject of the lay and its neighbouring concepts will preface this research and, hopefully, explain its relevance.

The first chapter, *Liminality and Marginality in Marie de France's Bisclavret, Le Fresne, and Lanval*, investigates the twelfth-century form of courtly writing.

A lengthy and wide-ranging section of the thesis, it considers what the known provenance of the *Harley 978* manuscript may reveal about the reception of the *Lais* in the

hundred years after their composition. It is particularly interested in the traces of orality preserved in Marie's *Lais* and begins to consider how this aspect is coeval with the politics of silence. Furthermore, it considers how paleographic and typographic aspects of the *Harley 978* manuscript gloss the lays with new meanings, as Marie seems to foretell in her *Prologue*. This chapter is, importantly, integral to understanding critical aspects of the lay genre and in many ways fertilises the soil from which the ensuing chapters sprout. Its interest in the significance of a botanical economy as a constitutive aspect of the Anglo-Norman form, for example, reemerges later in Chapter 3's claims about how, in *Lay le Freine*, this is converted into agrarian imagery perhaps better suited to fourteenth-century readers.

Following on from this, *Chapter 2 Sir Orfeo: Liminality, The Lay, and the Limit of The Word* also relies on Chapter 1's discussion of the ban, marginality, and exile in *Lanval* and *Bisclavret* in order to investigate its titular outlaw-king and his rite of passage. It evaluates how the thirteenth-century figure of Sir Orfeo, firstly, memorialises the alleged Breton sources of the lay form, the wandering, harp-playing minstrels; and secondly, re-codifies the form's metapoetic aspects by re-situating the minstrel figure at the centre of the oral form, as both the medium and the subject.

Chapter 3 The Latent Lai in Lay le Freine: Memories of Marie investigates the translation of Marie's *Le Fresne* into the Middle English *Lay le Freine*. This is a particularly remarkable instance of anglicisation and is unique among the Middle English lay collection for its faithfulness to its source. Due to this affinity, the *différance* that arises out of the translation process is made more legible. For example, I will question why the botanical register critical to Marie's work —demonstrated critically in *Le Fresne* with the line '*en la Codre ad noiz e deduiz; freisne ne unke portë fruiz*'(l.339-40)— is lost in its fourteenth century analogue. I will explore how Marie's courtly pleasure gardens are adapted in *LLF* and how this transfers the significance of plant life from individual to societal drives. Moreover, I consider the play of language at work in *LLF*, as Marie's *Bretaine* (Brittany) is imperceptibly converted into *Bretaine* (Britain).

In contrast to such as close translation, *Chapter 4: The Lanval Analogues* explores how Marie's *Lanval* is adapted into Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* by way of the

intermediary texts *Graelent* and *Sir Landevale*. As part of investigating this anglicisation process, it relies on the genealogy of the text to draw conclusions about *anglicising* as distinct from *translating*. Following this, it will situate the text within its fourteenth century context, which saw a rise in the production of Arthurian literature in Middle English. Subsequently, it will address what the postpartum life of *Sir Launfal*'s manuscript container, the *MS Cotton Caligula A.ii*, indicates about the reception of the text and its relationship to the tradition of *translatio studii*. It will consider the social implications of transforming the *Lanval* figure from 'foreign man... in another land') '[h]ume estrange... en autre tere', l.36-7) into an English knight. Ultimately, it will reconsider the influence of the rite of passage in this iteration of the *Lanval* myth and, returning to the theories I proposed surrounding this in the Introduction, will evaluate the residue of liminality left in the Middle English analogue.

In the conclusions of this thesis, I aim to describe the extent of the influence that anglicisation process has over the lay form as it is presented in *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Lay le Freine*. It will evaluate the role of liminality and the rite of passage as, I have argued, a constitutive aspect of Marie's lay mode. By considering the transition phase as a modal, formal, and textual aspect of her *Lais*, I will look at, firstly, how the Middle English lays concern incorporation— returns to structural harmony, to origins, to the past; and secondly, those aspects of Marie's writing which are not incorporated and which haunt the text.

The crux of researching the lay form in many instances is not the gaps in the scholarship as much as the sheer copiousness of academic writing on the subject. Throughout this process, the texts that fail to deliver convincing arguments have been equally useful as those that do deliver them. With regards to manuscript studies, a worthwhile avenue would perhaps be a comprehensive overview of the disparities between various nation-building materials, although this task would be, admittedly, a mammoth one that would require collaboration between multiple areas of expertise and fields of study. Overall, however, I do believe that this literature review will aptly preface this thesis as an overview of the current thinking in regard to manuscript culture, nationhood, and the lays. In conjunction with the previous subsection on critical terms and theories, I hope that this

review grounds this thesis within an academic continuum; relating not only to the lays but to the ideas that surround them and which are essential to the study of their anglicisation.

For the following chapters, this examination of relevant theoretical concepts will facilitate the consideration of *what* —language, content, theme— comprises the form of the lay, but also *why* these attributes comprise it; what political and social milieux does the lay form arise from and how do such circumstances negotiate the lay as a sub-genre as it is transmitted. Hopefully, this will allow us to avoid pitfalls that, although superficially appealing, might weaken the conclusions this thesis draws.

For example, I intend to adhere to the critical applications of theoretical terms such as ‘liminality’, the modern use of which will be examined in Chapter 2. Moreover, that chapter will expand upon an idea introduced in this subsection, the spectre of liminality as the reminder of the alterity which, albeit un-potentiated, haunts the subject. It will consolidate the practical definition for liminality that has been introduced in this introduction, using ideas such as the *bannus* to express the liminal experience. This definition depends on the idea of the trace of liminality, as the spectral residue which persists beyond the liminal phase— the alterity and *anguisse* experienced during transition which threatens the structure of post-liminal incorporation in the same instance it sanctifies it. My definitions thus far incorporates the concept of *aventure* as a core principal of the lay mode, as relating to metapoetics, memory, and the physical limit of the word. Under the scrutiny of this thesis, however, this definition will be continually re-examined to find exception and exemplum. After all, such definitions place Marie’s writing at the hierarchical centre and measure the Middle English lays against her.

Chapter 1: Liminality and Marginality in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, *Le Fresne*, and *Lanval*

Without the evidentiary support of extant texts composed in the Breton language from the eleventh century, the Breton provenance of the lay form is difficult to research. Marie cites her own sources in her *translatio* as the '*les contes...dunt li Bretun unt fais les lais*' (the stories... from which the Bretons composed their lays, l.19-20). Likewise, the naming of the *Bisclavret* and *Laüstic* tales have been etymologically tied to Breton origins²⁰. This type of lay, characterised by its Celtic 'technical form'²¹ (21, Bullock-Davies) rather than by a specific language or word pattern (25), can be materially linked to the thirteenth century by the earliest estimation, in the form of the *MS Harley 978* (dated 1260-65). Bullock-Davies explains how the *Lay of the Coast* — from the thirteenth-century *Strengleiker* commissioned by Haakon IV of Norway (r. 1217-1263)— claims to have been composed by the instruction of William the Conqueror. This detail, albeit unsubstantiated with material evidence, would suggest that 'Breton lays were already in being as far back as the tenth century' (26) and notably were popular among Norman baronial courts. There is little textual testimony to suggest that lays were widely disseminated before the time of Marie, and their interest in commemorating local happenings appears to '[bear] the marks of belonging to a small, integrated society such as the various pockets of Celtic peoples in Britain and France' (Bullock-Davies, 27). Yet, in the absence of evidence, neither can the contrary be proven, although clearly they were heard by many and praised by more ('*mult oïz... e...loëz est de plusurs*', l.5-7, *Prologue*) throughout Brittany, Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia by the time of the thirteenth century. Neither is it possible to ascertain whether and to what extent the form of the lay was modified from its aural, Celtic source texts by the twelfth century's revival of neo-Celtic storytelling traditions. This is the condition of handling materials that qualify their prestige through claims to aural *translatio*. The Breton

²⁰ Matthieu Boyd evaluates the Breton etymology of the name *Bisclavret*, explaining how it has variously been translated to 'diseased wolf' or 'wolf-diseased-one' from *bleiz + claffet*. (1) He links its use in the *Lais* to the early Breton and Irish conventions of 'naming warriors after animals', particularly dogs and wolves. With this consideration in mind, he points out the irony of a laying which a woman married to 'a man named Manwolf or Madwolf or Wolf-frenzy... is then shocked to discover that in this case his name is not conventional but literal' (2). *Bisclavret*'s curious naming could be attributed to the surplus of meanings that Marie sequesters in her writing. For Boyd, the name is 'situated within a network of associations that... [point] to the existence of medieval Breton oral literature' (3).

²¹ Citing Gottfried von Strassburg's description of the Breton lay in *Tristan*, Bullock-Davies suggests that 'the distinguishing characteristic of a Breton lay was neither its subject-matter nor the language in which its songs were sung. What differentiated it from other kinds of *lais* and musical compositions was its technical form' (21). From the reference to how the lay came 'ringing in', she posits that the Breton form described by Gottfried may have been characterised by unusual singing techniques similar to the old Welsh penillion singing.

labelling of this lay romance, therefore, should be related to its likely nativity and not to the form it takes at the height of its popularity.

For the sake of the practical applicability of such research, this chapter's hypotheses relate definitively to the lays produced by Marie de France in the twelfth century, at the peak of the form's popularity. These twelve texts are found in the *MS Harley 978* which dates from the 1260s. Of course, Anglo-Norman lays attributed to Marie have been uncovered elsewhere. The MS S, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouv. acq. fr. 1104: contains 9²² lays, not all of which are complete. Three lays can be found in the MS P, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 2168 (late thirteenth century), including an attenuated version of *Yonec*. Two further versions of the *Lanval* and *Yonec* lays have been found in other manuscripts, namely the *BL Cotton Vespasian BX.iv* and the *MS Q, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr 24432* (fourteenth century). The exclusivity of the *MS Harley 978* is thus achieved in its inclusion of *Eliduc*, *Laüstic*, *Chaitivel*, and importantly the *Prologue* that so vitally informs the collection on the whole. The preservation afforded by the intact manuscript and the numerousness of its contents are, therefore, not the only practical reasons for choosing it as a primary focus of this thesis. The metapoetic elements introduced by the *Prologue* and by the manuscript's various musical items participate in the synthesis and transmission of a textual form concerned with the transformation of the aural into the literary. It is as a result of these material considerations that this chapter is able to demonstrate its central hypotheses; that is, that Marie's *Lais* occupy a liminal moment in the transition away from the Breton aural tradition and into a written form. In her cataloguing of the lay, she generates a mode for creating and disseminating the form as a cultural artefact, as a witness to an evanescence that, like her characters, escapes total apprehension. The poet's work echoes its own oral traditions, emphasising both the 'toldness' and the alleged truth of the *aventures* depicted. The *Lais* '*ke dit marie*' (1.3, *Guigemar*) retain trace aspects of aural tradition through a concern with the ambiguity of words and the ephemerality of speech. They precisely articulate the ancient form's obscurity not to construe its meaning, but to endow that meaning with resilient relevancy and interpretive stamina.

²² The lays found in this manuscript are *Guigemar*, *Lanval*, *Yonec*, *Chevrefoil*, *Milun*, *Le Fresne*, *Equitan*, *Les Deux Amanz*, and *Bisclavret*, the last two of which have sustained damage.

The central figures in the tales of *Bisclavret* and *Lanval* are driven to transgress the unstable courtly boundaries of public and private, and, in doing so, question or completely reject the monarchic structures through which these symbolic borders are policed. *Lanval* in particular works to de-centre the [national] self and throw Arthurian authority into question, creating rifts in the outward hegemony of the foreign state by inverting chivalric gender conventions and exposing the courts' pretence to chivalry. While *Bisclavret* does incite his own reintegration into the courtly society, the lay tightly weaves this shift within a homosocial continuum in a way that energises and reinstates sovereign-subject relations. Although each of these texts have previously been interpreted as an interrogation of women's power in medieval society, to read them as simply misogynistic fails to acknowledge how the protagonists' marginalised positions (as foreigner, monster, or outsider) work to feminise them.

For example, *Lanval*'s abandonment of his *cheval* is twinned with his subjection to a new monarch, as his otherworld lady rescues him from the clutches of certain death and permits him to occupy a conventionally feminine role. In doing so, her mystical appearance in the narrative complicates the tendentious power relations held by women in the Arthurian court.

The lay of *Le Fresne* witnesses a journey from structural unity to disunity and back again; an ordeal precipitated by the *communitas* of feminine speech. Often read as a judgement of women's pernicious speech and favourable silence in medieval society, the meaning of the lay transforms when considered as an exploration of the recalcitrance of feminine silence as a means of surreptitious, yet radical social reformulation.

This chapter seeks to establish theoretical parameters for the rest of the thesis. It begins by evaluating the concept of 'liminality' in relation to the study of literature and material culture to investigate the ways in which the lay form can be understood to represent cultural transition. It interrogates this liminal form on two levels; firstly, in a material sense, on the manuscript's folio, in its Gothic book-hand, and in its paleographic conventions; and secondly, as an exercise in *translatio studii*, as the *aventures* of the *Lais* are received, innovated, and transmitted by Marie.

The central third of this chapter bridges the distance between literary and oral traditions, which it relates to the narrative and thematic content of Marie's *Prologue* and

Lais. The introduction of the [meta]poetics of silence and ideas of a feminine *communitas* in *Le Fresne* will return this discussion to the threshold of the liminal realm. Surveying bodies, spaces, and speech, it determines to understand how the diverse instances of liminality work to synthesise narratives invested in the rite of passage and how this relates to the form's aventure. Through nakedness, monstrousness, and genderless-ness, it interprets the role of the liminal in the lay as a means of social regeneration. Specifically, the discussions of *Bisclavret* and *Lanval* pursue analyses of how Marie transposes the individualistic drives of her characters onto liminal figures as a means of dynamic sexual expression, generating excess in ellipsis (Bruckner, 957).

In subsequent chapters, the *Lais* of Marie de France will serve as a measure against which all ensuing lays are judged. This is not to say that she originates the form, not that other texts that may fall into the category of lay merely mimic her style. However, it is undeniable that the name Marie has become synonymous with the literary form in contemporary scholarship. How, then, were the *Lais* received and disseminated in Marie's time? How can the *Lais* and their manuscript container illustrate the liminal passage from one literary convention to another and how do they emerge from this rite, transformed?

1.1 The *Lais* & Their Manuscripts

The body of literature that Marie produced influenced notable works in the ensuing decades and centuries, including the *Franklin's Tale* and *Sir Launfal*, which testifies to the popularity of her work at the time it was first circulated. It would seem that this transmission, this *translatio*, from aural to literary, occurs for the *Lais* at a critical moment. Up until the twelfth century, monasteries throughout Europe were the epicentres of learning and teaching and by extension, monastic scriptoria were the sites in which new literatures were forged. After the twelfth century, the universities, intellectual guilds, and commercial ateliers began to overtake scriptoria as the dominant producers of manuscript literature. Many of these secular workshops would have been located in city centres and as such were 'products of an urban micro-culture' (Nichols, 35). Perhaps this change was precipitated by the booming European population which exploded from 42 million to 73 million between the years 1000 and 1300 (59, Le Goff), an increase that presumably also resulted in significant growth in reading populations and in turn generated a commercial

incentive for book production on a national and even international scale. 'Books', Le Goff explains, 'became tools rather than objects of worship, and like any tool they came to be mass produced, objects for manufacture and retail'(81). This cultural transition and the commercial ventures it brought about culminate, for English literature at least, in the *MS Auchinleck*; by the start of the fourteenth century, claims to a decidedly English literary canon could be made. It is unmistakable that this later manuscript was produced commercially, likely on behalf of a specific commissioner, an 'aspirant middle-class citizen, perhaps a wealthy merchant'(Pearsall, 13).

Contrast this material aspect with the *MS Harley 978*. The debate over whether the Harley was copied either by monks of the Benedictine Abbey of Reading or by professional scribes in Oxford is a continuing one. The parchment codex, likely produced between 1261 and 1265, has been housed at the British Library since 1753 as part of the historically significant Harley collection. Manuscript scholar Andrew Taylor (*Textual Situations*) believes that the manual was produced by no more than four hands, possibly even by three. Regardless of whether it was fabricated in an atelier or a scriptorium, it is known that two scribes copied the lays within it; the first of which, Hand A, worked only on folios 118r. to 120v., with the remaining text pertaining to Hand B. Notably, this second hand copied the *Fables* of Marie de France which are also found within the same manuscript. Unlike the *MS Auchinleck* which speaks forth its political identity, the provenance of the *MS Harley 978* is not so easily revealed in its miscellaneous literary contents.

However, the *MS Harley 978*'s miscellany is significant and unique for a number of reasons. From Goliardic verses to a treatise on hawking, musical pieces including the thirteenth-century rota *Sumer is Icumen In* to medical and incomplete calendrical works, the codex is so eclectic and miscellaneous as to complicate an overarching investigation of its collective composition. Its variety and obscurity do, however, pose an obstruction to generalised claims about manuscript provenance which might otherwise allow some interesting paleographic details to be lost in a codex with a more dominant thesis. A more critical and curious eye must be focused on the manuscript to uncover its surplus meanings ('*le surplus*', 1.16, *Prologue*).

For example, it has been theorised that the manuscript was commissioned by an unknown ‘William of Winchester’, based on the note on f.160v. ‘Ord.li. W. de. Wint’, possibly meaning ‘ordo libri W. de Wintonia’, or ‘book order/list of William of Winchester’(Taylor, *Textual Situations*, 93) in modern English. The identity of this potential commissioner remains speculative, a figure equally as elusive as the *noble reis*²³ for whom the *Lais* were originally composed²⁴. Moreover, the miscellany includes works produced in Middle English, Old French, Latin, and of course Anglo-Norman. Outside of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France’s MS S (NAF 1104), it copies the largest collection of lays in any language. Most significantly to this study, *MS Harley 978* is the only manuscript containing the twelve complete *Lais* of Marie de France. In their copying of the *Lais*, Hands A and B use a Gothic script that is relatively legible, employing pen-flourished initials to designate the incipit of each individual narrative. This script is abbreviated throughout with popular scribal *sigla*, including the symbol that Adriano Capelli lists as mark V; resembling ‘an S lying on its side’, it indicates an omitted ‘*ur*’ or ‘*tur*’ element, or less commonly ‘*er*’ or ‘*ter*’(16-17). For example, it is used in the introduction to *Guigemar* on f.118v, l.12 in which ‘*pur*’ (for) is abbreviated, or suspended, through a *p* with the sideways *s*-mark superscript.

Between folios 118r. and 160v., the two lay scribes variously use Capelli’s abbreviation mark IV, ‘which consists simply of a wavy line, sometimes very pronounced, almost like the letter *u*’, that can signify the omission of the letter *r* or ‘a syllable which contains an *r*, such as *re*, *er*, *ar*’. He says that by about the 13th century, the symbol could also indicate an *a* syllable. Hands A and B frequently use this superscript *u* to signify the omission of *a* and *r*-related syllables in the *MS Harley 978*. Capelli notes that by the 14th and 15th centuries, this waved line *sigla* had developed into ‘a broken horizontal bar, or two heavy dots closely spaced’, particularly for Gothic scripts (16). This shorthand can first be observed in the *Lais*’ folios on line 7, f.118r, in which Hand A places the *u* symbol between *q* and *n* of ‘quant’ to contract it into ‘qnt’. Moreover, macrons, —horizontal lines

²³ ‘noble king’(l.43, *Prologue*).

²⁴ Burgess and Busby name ‘two possible candidates’, the most convincing of which being Henry II who is ‘known to have had contact with contemporary poets [to Marie] such as Wace and Benoît de Sainte-Maure’(*Lais*, 12).

hovering above letters to signify abbreviation—, are used throughout. The macron can be observed on the first folio of the *Lais*'s prologue;

*'Custume fu as anciens,
[...]
Es liures ke jadis feseient
Assez oscurement diseient
Pur ceus ki a uenir esteient
e ki apendre les deveient,
que peüssent gloser la letre
E de lur sen le surplus mettre'* (f118r, 1.9-16)

Taylor relays this sentiment in modern English as '[t]he ancients had the custom [...] in the books that they made/ To speak quite obscurely/ For the sake of those who were to come later /[... who could] add surplus to their original sense'(16). Alongside the suspension the final two letters of 'surplus' with a ligatured pen flourish, this passage omits the *n* of 'oscurement' and replaces it with by the commonly-used flat abbreviation line over the second *e*.

As such, the impression of the manuscript is interesting in that it situates the text between clarity and obscurity. Although scribal abbreviations and symbols were widely known and used in the 13th century, for contemporary medievalists their use undoubtedly contributes to a certain level of bewilderment when encountering the text. Despite the relative legibility of this specific Gothic script, its use of shorthand necessitates a prerequisite knowledge of manuscript culture, or else the work would be quite impenetrable for the modern eye. The superscript macron contracting *oscurement* may simply be a practical choice, saving the scribe valuable ink, parchment, and time. It should be mentioned that such abbreviations are a typical aesthetic feature of texts written in Gothic script, which are commonly justified on both the left and the right. Brantley explains that this practice in Gothic manuscript books 'is part of a literate culture... that always takes a visual, rather than an oral form' and had the added 'effect of excluding the uninitiated readers who could not make sense of them'(56). Regardless of intention, I do believe that the use of special characters and shorthand participates in the ongoing negotiation between concealment and exposure prevalent throughout the *Lais*. This tension

is further imparted by the argument Marie puts forward in the *Prologue*, which relates to the production of meaning through *revelation*; a process that does not accept meaning to be self-evident, but rather one that unearths meaning from obscurity and glosses (*gloser*) it with surplus significations that uncover the hidden secrets of the text. Scribal sigla, specifically, are not perhaps '*les deveient*' (l.14, *Prologue*) ('the customs' or 'duties', from *deveir MED*) that Marie suggest later scholars must learn to make their own sense of obscure texts. However, it does undeniably demonstrate her claim in material terms, as the *MS Harley 978*'s use of contractions and suspensions requires scholars to decipher its text in order to extract its meaning. Together, the narrative content and material aspect of the *Lais*' prologue work to generate a dual-pronged challenge to the scholar; one that walls the text within a fortress of obscurity, then directs our gaze towards shrouded entry-points and incites us to trespass beyond its surface layers.

To Andrew Taylor, Marie's claim about the ancients who '*oscurement diseient*' (recounted obscurely) can also be applied to the 'syntactic and lexical fluidity' of her work. He builds on Augustine's assertion that 'what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure' (*Textual Situations*, 103), suggesting that certain omissions in the *Prologue* '[license] us to read beyond the surface... to add surplus to [the text's] meaning' (104). For some, this claim could be seen merely as a self-motivating affirmation for the medievalist who delves painstakingly, and often seemingly fruitlessly, into the obscurity of manuscript study. For such-minded people, the medieval codex would be an incomplete puzzle that perpetually infuriates and dissatisfies. Yet, with such precision and clarity Marie - or perhaps the scribe - self-referentially glosses the *Prologue*, introduces within it the critical thematics of '*taisir ne celer*'²⁵(l.3), imagines later interpretations of the text's subtleties, and in doing so dispels the cloud of such short-sightedness. Considered accordingly, the materiality of the *MS Harley 978* would present a multi-faceted cypher, ever-escaping the gaze of total comprehension, and as such maintaining a never-since-achieved level of interpretive tantalisation.

The *Prologue* defers a singular and immutable interpretation in favour of a multivalence that can encompass the *Lais*' pre-textual origins and postpartum vitality.

²⁵ The *AND* lists the meaning of '*taisir*' as 'to keep quiet about, leave unmentioned', 'to fall silent, cease to be heard', while '*celer*' can be translated as 'to conceal [the truth], hide'.

Containing tales composed both *from*²⁶ and *for* memory, the manuscript designates the passage through which traces of the adventures can be passed from those who first put them into circulation to the future generations; ‘*que pur remembrance les firent /aventures qu’il oïrent/ cil ki primes les comencierent/ e ki avant les enveierent*’ (‘that for memory were composed from adventures heard by those who first began them and who first [perpetuated]²⁷ them’, 1.35-8). Through this self-perpetuated reconfiguration of an otherwise static surface, the text generates a liminal reading experience; it seizes upon the contingency of revelation and affirms that textual meanings can be *revealed* through the glossing and re-glossing of the *Lais’ aventures*.

1.2 Defining the Liminal

Liminality expresses the period of transition between one state and another. It can relate to time, space, identity, and status. In academic fields including Medievalism, it has conventionally been described in relation to the rite of passage, stemming from Victor Turner’s research into the ritual process. Anthropological examples of liminality include ceremonies, trials, and initiation rituals, although it can also be expressed differentially as nakedness, sexual continence, anonymity, and the absence of property; specifically, the absence of any symbol that would denote the subject’s positioning within a hierarchy. The liminal experience, otherwise described by Turner as *communitas*, is one that passes through a spatial, temporal, psychological, or social transformation; a ‘symbolic milieu that represent[s] both a grave and a womb’(96). This sense of structural separation that emerges from modelessness, from ‘transient humility’(97), is what endows the post-liminal status with sacredness; ‘the liminality of life crisis, therefore, humbles and generalizes the aspirant to higher structural status’(170). The process is innervated by the reversal of roles. By exchanging or inverting hierarchical positions, the post-liminal subject understands that high and low statuses are ‘mutually indispensable’ (*Ritual*, 97) and the pride of ascension is tempered by the experience of lowliness.

²⁶ Marie continually indicates that her lays are built upon her memory of Breton storytelling; ‘[l]es contes ke jo sai verrais, Dunt li Bretun unt fait les lais’(Guigemar, 20); ‘[l]i bretun en firent un lai’(Equitan, 312); ‘ceo nus recuntent lu Bretun’(Lanval, 644); ‘un lai en firent li Bretun’(Les Deux Amanz, 249); ‘[d]unt li bretun firent un lai’(Laiüstic, 2), ‘[d]’un mult anciën lai Bretun’(Eliduc, 1).

²⁷ ‘[E]nveierent’, from the verb *enveier*, can mean ‘to send (forth), dispatch’ as a message, ‘to convey’, according to the *AND*.

The rite of passage should not be construed as synonymous with the liminal phase; in fact, the liminal experience is merely one stage in the triphasic process of the ritual transition. For Van Gennep²⁸, it begins with separation— for the subject, this can be understood as a detachment from their previous status or identity. The polarising forces — social, temporal, physical —that previously held them within their identity are relinquished. Sequentially following this phase, the subject experiences the ‘threshold’ position— they are neither before nor after, high nor low. Finally, the subject crosses the threshold back into a hierarchical position, albeit perhaps not the same hierarchy or the same status they previously held. This reincorporation is particularly legible in the medieval Arthurian romance corpus, in which figures²⁹ that challenge or undermine monarchic authority are either ousted or subsumed.

In recent years, the aesthetic qualities of liminality have transformed, particularly in the realm of internet culture, and a new understanding of the term has emerged as a derivative of its previous anthropological and theoretical application. Lacking somewhat in critical accuracy, ‘liminal space’ is characterised by images representing uncanniness and nostalgia. While this trend’s continuing proliferation of images seems to favour aesthetic affect over critical integrity, there are some common themes amongst them that do capture a modern understanding of liminality beyond the ritual process. Examples can include staircases, doorways, alleys, waiting rooms, and corridors; namely, spaces that serve the primary function of moving subjects into other, more static spaces. Alternatively, images invoking the idea of travel, or places that are interstitial points on a journey, such as petrol stations, car parks, and airport foyers. These spaces are often depicted as dilapidated, gutted of furnishings, or textually drab in a way that is presumably designed to inspire a dream-like quality and simultaneously a sense of dread.

What seems to be retained in the new sense of liminality extrapolated by internet trends is the understanding that the liminal experience is one both extraordinary and ordinary. The lay form, which seeks to memorialise localised, noteworthy happenings,

²⁸ Van Gennep describes this tripartite sequence ‘with primary reference to ritual, in serial terms [as] separation, margin, and reaggregation; he also, with primary reference to spatial transitions, employed the terms preliminal, liminal and postliminal’ (Turner, *Ritual*, 166).

²⁹ Examples from the British medieval canon might include *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

details significant transitory periods in the lives of its protagonists. The characters that Marie, Thomas Chestre, and the *Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* poets puppeteer experience an evolution in their identity or status through the events of the text, the *aventure* of the lay. Formally, and particularly in the case of Marie, they relate to *translatio studii*, a process by which the text itself undergoes a metamorphosis. As an exercise in passing texts from the ancients to future readers, the lays are structurally caught between the prestige they inherit from their sources and the original contributions they bestow upon glosses they later inspire.

Despite lacking in some critical ability, the modern aesthetic's interest in nostalgic appeal does proffer an interesting contribution to the idea of liminal experience as a psychological purgatory. While for Turner, the rite of passage generally precipitates positive social outcomes, endowing post-liminal subjects with sacredness through their experience of lowliness, modern definitions of the term seem more concerned with the sense of anguish and uncanniness that liminal *personae* endure. For many characters in the lays, the threshold experience of liminality is described as unsettling and psychologically disturbing. Variations of the Anglo-Norman anguish (*anguisse/a* (anguish), *anguissuse* (anguished), *anguissusement* and *anguissement* (anguishedly), appear 16 times in total throughout the *MS Harley 978 Lais*— clearly, a recurrent theme. For Lanval, the word appears at the height of his liminality, unattached from both Arthurian and Faery protections;

*'en une chambre fu tut suls,
pensis esteit e anguissus;...
il se pleigneit e suspirot,
d'ures en autres se pasmot'* (l.338-41)

(Alone in a chamber, [Lanval] felt worried and anguished... he lamented and sighed, swooning now and again.)

For *Le Fresne*, the experience of anguish is very much qualified by dread, as the protagonist's mother laments the marginalised position her daughter will surely undergo.

*'cele oï sa dame plurer
durement pleindre e doluser
anguissement li pesa'* (l.102-4)

([the handmaiden] heard her lady weeping, greatly grieving and mourning [her anguish] for some time)

This grief is counterposed by the absence of psychological depth afforded Le Fresne herself, an emotional silence and passivity carried over into the Middle English translation. Diverging slightly, the couple in *Laüstic* convey a sense of anguish that is qualified by an equal measure of pleasure, a feature I elaborate upon in Chapter 3.

*'Delit aveient al veer
quant plus ne poeient aver'
(Delight they took in seeing (one another) since they couldn't have more than that,
1.77-8)*
*'N'unt gueres rien que lur despleise,
Mut esteient amdui a eise
Fors tant k'il ne poent venir
del tut ensemble a lur pleisir'
(Hardly anything displeased them except that they could not meet together for their
pleasure, 1.45-48)*

These experiences of anguish at the prospect of the rite of passage are evidently diverse in the *Lais*. Focusing singularly on the rite of passage as an emotional transformation, as a spatial transposition, or as a transfer from one status to another fails to consider the way in which liminality radically counterposes the structures that come before and after it. An aspect of liminality lost to modern usage is its sacred component, which levels subjects in their experience of *communitas*. In anthropological application, the rite of passage typically refers to the experience of a ritual of status elevation or to a ritual of status reversal (Turner, 167). However, the phrase 'rite of passage' in contemporary parlance, which would seem to describe a unique and ritualistic process, has taken on meanings relating to conventionality and universality.

As such, a potential error in the modern usage of 'liminality' as a term is to label certain attributes of the liminal experience (anguish, transition, dread) as constitutive when they should rather be understood as corollary. All this is to say that in my research, I have tried to foreground the idea that the liminal experience is a ritualistic, not mundane one. While passing through a corridor or a doorway may be considered liminal in that it places

the subject, physically, in a threshold position, the liminal experience Turner describes pertains to the transformational capabilities that the process facilitates, rather than to the process itself. Failing to acknowledge the ritual process as a vital aspect of the liminal experience, I believe, renders investigation into the liminality of the lay form superficial. It is for this reason that this thesis seeks to ground its understanding of the term in its critical genealogy.

1.3 *Aventure* as an Exercise in *Translatio Studii*

The word ‘*aventure*’ appears 39 times throughout the *MS Harley 978*’s twelve lays; it can be found in every single lay, ranging in frequency between once in *Equitan*, ‘*des aventures que oiënt*’, 1.5), and seven times in both *Le Fresne* and *Eliduc*. The word can be variously translated into modern English as ‘event, happening...adventure... 2. destiny, fortune;... misfortune, [and] misadventure’ (*AND*). It occupies a prominent position in the study of the *Lais* due to its commonality and has been importantly described by Bloch as ‘a liminal key to the whole’(26). On a narrative level, *aventure* can be understood to signify the wider story or material which supplies the *Lais*.

To illustrate the semiotic excess that *aventure* conveys, we can look to the shortest lay in the collection, *Chevrefoil*. Within the story, there are events and relationships alluded to which exist beyond those that are presented immediately on the page. The lay recounts a short section of the popular Tristan legend, in which the knight leaves a squared branch on a roadside, encoded with a secret message that only his lover, the wife of his uncle King Mark, will recognise. Upon seeing it, the queen is able to understand ‘*tutes les lettres*’(1.83, ‘all the letters’) carved into the stick, immediately recognising them to be the work of her lover (‘*bien l’aparceut... i conut*’, 1.82-3). Notably, it is not clear in the lay whether Tristan simply writes his name (‘*sun nun*’, 1.54) or an extended message on the squared branch; “*bele amie, si est de nus: / ne vus sanz mei, ne jeo sanz vus*” (‘Beautiful beloved, so it is with us; neither you without me, nor I without you’, 1.77-8). As Bruckner explains, the events of *Chevrefoil* call forth the theme of the *surplus de sen*³⁰; ‘there seem to be too many [words] to fit reasonably on a branch which the queen can read as she passes by on

³⁰ In the *Prologue*, Marie explains how the ancients who obscurely so that those that came later had to learn the ancient’s customs in order to gloss their letters and for themselves add the surplus of sense; ‘*que peüssent gloser la letre/ e de lur sen le surplus metre*’, 1.16, *Prologue*.

horseback'(956-7). Perhaps this message is written out in full, or perhaps it is simply inferred by the queen through the metonymy of the hazel branch that, entwined with honeysuckle, cannot be separated without killing both plants. Through the omission of specificity, the lay generates potentiality. It is this potentiality that energises and proliferates the lay's meanings and alludes to its external vitality.

As such, *aventure* goes much further than simply referencing that which leads up to and follows the text. It can be understood as both the events from which the lay is drawn and as the raw material, the 'lived experience', of the story, unbounded by the textual limitations of literature as the *lettre*. Tristan's message, which goes 'before and beyond the text'(Bloch, 26), can also be applied to the experience of reading the lay itself. Marie provides relatively little context for the romantic tryst represented in the lay. In just four lines, she explains that

*'li reis Marks esteit curucié
vers Tristram sun nevus irié;
da sa tere le cuncea
pur la reine qu'il ama'*(l.11-14)

(King Mark was angered towards Tristan his nephew; from his land, he banished him for the queen who he loved/for his love of the queen)

Marie's *Lais* have been noted for their particularly brief and economical use of language; however, this does seem particularly concise, as to suggest implied knowledge of the Tristan and Iseult story, if not this specific interaction within it. The thwarted relationship is likely known by reading publics both contemporary to Marie and to the modern age, through the popularity of Arthurian cycles in both the eleventh and twenty-first centuries. This assumed knowledge of the story is further attested to in the opening of the lay when Marie explains that '[Tristan and the queen's] love... brought them much pain/ [and] later [their] deaths in a day' ('*lur amur... dunt il eurent meinte dolur/ puis en mururent en un jur*' 1.8-9). This detail invokes the dual meanings of *aventure* as adventure and misadventure, fortune and misfortune, as the sweet and intimate interaction is marred by the immanence of their deaths, left off-page. In equal measure, it partially exposes the postpartum life of *aventure*, which continues outside of the text of the lay.

Burgess and Busby have said that the *Lais* typically account for particularly critical moments in the lives of the protagonists (*Lais*, 26). ‘Critical’ is of course subjective. However, within the wider canon of literature pertaining to the Tristan and Iseult love story, this lay offers only a hyper-focused glimpse into the lives of its characters. Despite varying wildly in register and reception, other prominent Tristan writers including Bérout, Chrétien de Troyes, and Thomas of Britain, lean closer in to the action and the origins of the lovers’ story. When Marie sets out to explain how the lay came to be³¹, she is referring to the way it was composed; ‘*pur les paroles remembrer;/ Tristan, ki bien saveit harper, / en aveit fet un nuvel lai* (‘to commemorate his message (speech)\ Tristan, who was a knowledgeable harper/ had it made into a new lay, 1.111-14). As such, Marie’s representation of the lay of *Chevrefoil* as an effort in collaboration —between herself, Tristan, and Breton storytellers—she ‘envisions an authorizing precedent for her narratives and for the interpretive process itself, co-creating herself and her readers as “authors.”’ (41, Barlow). Barlow suggests that this, as part of Marie’s metapoetry, generates a sense of *mise en abyme*— the text recurs within itself. Rather than definitively concluding the Tristan story, explaining how in fact the lovers meet their end, Marie prefers an evasive ending that leaves questions unanswered and presents a sense of the text within the text. The account she tells is ultimately of the lay itself, rather than of the characters, whose ending is left inexact but fated to misfortune. Somehow, like Tristan’s message —his name carved into the stick— her lay is able to convey meaning beyond its letters.

Aventure, therefore, also alludes to ‘what lies behind the text [and] ‘that which is left behind’; it is ‘the very opposite of the assemblage - the form and structure- that literature represents’(Bloch, 26). The *aventure* of the lay is an attempt to establish a cultural recuperation of the past and recall the ‘contingent nature of lived experience’(42). This relates to the concept of *translatio studii*. Meaning ‘transfer of learning’ in Latin, the term refers to the way in which vernacular texts inherit from the *auctoritas* of their predecessors.

By way of their shared *auctoritas*, newer texts can be ‘ratified’ by following on the from the authority of older texts (429, Ziolkowski). Besides, of course, authority, the

³¹ (*lai que hum nume Chevrefoil... pur quei il fu fet e dunt* (the lay called Chevrefoil... for what (reason) it was made and from where’, 1.2-4)

definition of a text as an *auctoritas* bears some relationship to the concepts of exemplum, memory, antiquity, and veracity. Ziolkowski suggests that definition of *auctoritas* benefits from pluralisation since '[r]ather than being an cultural monolith, medieval *auctoritas* is a vast edifice that was constructed year by year, century by century, by the cooperation and interaction of texts and readers' (423). *Auctoritas* — as the credibility, legitimacy, truth, and authority of a text— is thereby shared by way of a network of texts, one instance of which is *translatio studii*.

Conventionally, the term *translatio studii* concerns texts translated from Latin into vernaculars but has come to be critically applied to the way in which vernacular texts have inherited from a number of courtly languages, including Middle English from Anglo-Norman. Combining techniques of adaptation and innovation, new texts are able to synthesise their own legitimacy and establish themselves within an ongoing discourse. Medieval writers ascribe authority to their work through the exercise of translation or rewriting, greater merit is placed on innovation rather than originality, although the individual flair that writers contribute to older texts is certainly praised, as in the case of Marie's own account³². In addition to the stories themselves, *translatio studii* refers to the transfer of culture and ideas; it is a process that is dynamic, working to preserve old knowledge and adapt it for new contexts and audiences. Referring to *Le Fresne* and its translations into Middle English and Old Norse, Angerer points out that the lays 'become more than simple products of their culture: they become themselves producers of culture and sources of literary innovation' (343). Marie's interest in preserving the lay which she had heard recounted and had found in writing ('*plusurs le me unt cunté e dit / e jeo l'ai trové en escrit*', 1.5-6) figures the *Lais* within the tradition of *translatio studii*, as she uses her aural and written sources to furnish them with '*verité*' (truth, 1.3).

Aventure, *translatio studii*, and 'vocabulary that [are] associated with the act of remembering', operate in the *Lais* to construct an 'architecture of memory' (Whalen, *Poetics*, 4)³³. The poetics of memory can be seen to operate on three levels in the *Lais*. Firstly, this thematic, textual, and formal aspect can be found in the acts of remembering

³² '*quant (un granz biens) loëz est de plusurs / dunc a espandues ses flurs*' (1.5-8, *Prologue*, when [a great thing] is praised by many then bursts forth its flowers).

that are variously littered throughout the narratives themselves. These reveries are explored by Whalen in *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory*. They include but are not limited to; Bisclavret and his wife's recognition of one another despite his transformation; when Iseult sees the hazel that has been distinctively cut by Tristan and 'knew exactly what it signified'(Whalen, 78) in *Chevrefoil*; and when the knight in *Laüstic* carries the physical embodiment of thwarted love with him 'tuz jurs'(l.156). In other words, it is what the *characters* themselves remember of their own lived experience.

Secondly, the poetics of memory operates through Marie's mnemonic devices—namely, the use of synecdoche (the hazel stick in *Chevrefoil*), the use of anaphora ('*Lanval donout les riches duns,/ Lanval aquitout les prisuns,/ Lanval vesteit les jungleurs,/ Lanval deseit les granz honurs*'(l.209-12), 'Lanval gave rich gifts/ Lanval acquitted prisoners, Lanval clothed jongleurs, Lanval did good deeds), and 'the vivid narrative tableau with lively images that will be easily retained in the memory'(101) of the audience. These lexical patterns and vivid descriptions assist in *the reader's* ability to call forth that which they have read.

Thirdly, the poetics of memory relates to Marie's own concern with perpetuating the memory of the adventures, as she records for the future the events that have happened in the past;

*'Que pur remembrance les firent
des aventures qu'il oïrent'*(l.35-6)

(That for remembrance (memorialisation) were composed from adventures that were heard'),

'sulunc la lettre e l'escriture,

vos mosterai une aventure

Ki en Bretagne la Menur

Avint al tens anciënur'(l.23-26)

(As expressed by the text written, I will/present an adventure that happened in the smaller Britain (Brittany) in ancient times).

The last line here succinctly represents the duality of memory; '*avint*' from *avenir* which, like *aventure*, both accounts for past events and anticipates that which is to come, is placed alongside '*al tens anciënur*'. In doing so, Marie knots together otherwise disparate temporalities and calls them forth in the mind of the audience. As such, the anaphoric use

of *aventure* reflects a ‘consciously developed poetics of memory’(6), or mnemonic register, that ‘perpetuate[s] the memory of adventures’(Burgess and Busby, 41). On these varying levels, the poetics of memory bond together the form, style, theme, and content of the *Lais*. It is memory from which the lay is composed; equally, it is memory that the text perpetuates in its transmission. More to the point, it is the ongoing sense of reverie — memory both recalled and propagated— that constitutes the lived experience, the *aventure*, of the lays in and around the text.

Aventure, as such, can be seen to demarcate the threshold of the text and in doing so affirms that there is something beyond that threshold. In addition to comprising part of the *Lais*’ internal narratives, it also contributes greatly to the research into Marie de France’s writing. As a critical framework, it informs the role of cultural transfer and linguistic transmission not only for Anglo-Norman lays, but for the later Middle English ones that dominate the second half of this study.

1.4 Orality, Truth, & The Poetics of Silence

In their translation, Burgess and Busby note the *Lais*’ connection to orality through their association with, yet departure from, musical performance, instead representing ‘a more literary stage in the development of the genre’(25). The literary, as opposed to oral, characteristic of the *Lais* of Marie de France can be illustrated by certain paleographic features of the *MS Harley 978*. As mentioned, its Gothic script which frequently employs contractions and suspensions makes the text somewhat difficult to read, particularly for readers who are less familiar with common scribal abbreviations. Brantley points out in fact that the attenuation of certain words cannot be expressed orally; in modern British English, Dr is pronounced the same as Doctor. This is not to say that contracted words cannot be pronounced, only that the *fact that they are contracted* cannot be pronounced, or distinguished orally from their non-contracted form. Creating distance between the way in which the text is read and the way in which the text is recounted aloud, this aspect situates this version of the *Lais* at a particularly literary stage in its transmission. Moreover, it transforms the sense of orality that Marie claims to inherit from her Breton sources. It has been suggested that contractions and suspensions are a common feature of Gothic script for aesthetic purposes. It is conventional for texts written in this script to be justified on both

the right and the left side which necessitates consistency in line length. Brantley explains how the production of ‘a dense, dark, and often nearly illegible text block’(49), through regular alignment and undifferentiated minims, generates a ‘visual, rather than an oral form’(56). The *Lais* in the *MS Harley 978* are justified on the left and each horizontal line of text measures within 5 centimetres in length. As I have explained, these textual dimensions further remove the *Lais* from the category of oral. The material form and script situate them between the extinct Breton oral sources Marie claims to have used as the basis of her work and the vernacular literatures that they are yet to be transmitted into, such as *Sir Launfal* and *Lay le Freine*. This line of argument relates of course to the theme of *translatio studii* which pervades the collection textually, but also paleographically as the justified Gothic hand confers its exclusivity, prestige, and sense of cultural literacy upon the *Lais*.

This is not to suggest that the theme of orality is not a significant and constitutive aspect of the *Lais*. It has been pointed out that Marie’s sense of orality and *aventure* call upon medieval ideas of women as garrulous and loose-lipped, representing ‘for Bloch, “the reproach against women [which] is a form of reproach against language itself—“that which is said by the mouth”’(Chance, 6). As such, the lay form interpolates the conventionally masculine virtues of chivalry, while reimagining and reforming those traits in line with a recalcitrant sense of femininity. The inability to control or solidify the feminine surplus that language alludes to is mirrored in the *Lais*’ thematic exploration of the protagonists’ resistance to their societal or gender positions. Chance affirms that through a series of literary techniques, including ‘understatement, elision, irony, and hyperbole’, women writers such as Marie encode their works with a ‘poetics of silence’. This ventriloquism permits writers to ‘parasitically undermine hegemonic cultural practices and enable the disempowered to manipulate the conditions of their existence’. For characters including Le Fresne, Lanval’s faery queen, and Bisclavret’s deceptive wife, the omission of language and the compulsion to silence variously affords them the power to circumvent their societal positioning. For other female characters, such as Le Fresne’s mother and Arthur’s queen in *Lanval*, it is their speech that spells their downfall. With these aspects in mind, silence can hardly be ascribed the passivity and disempowerment that it might otherwise represent. The female or *feminised* characters exhibit a “bodytalk” (“resistant doubled discourse”):

one discourse both social and cultural and reflective of repressive gender systems; the other discourse the embodied female voice that disrupts and riots'(9). This dynamic can be observed in the *Lais*, for which silence, or the rather obligation to remain silent, propels its protagonists. Bisclavret by his animal form; Le Fresne by the almost total silence that contrasts her mother's '*mesdit e ment*'(slander and lies, l.87); and Lanval by his faery lover who orders him not to reveal the secret of their relationship to anyone ('*ne vos descovrez a nul humme*'(l.146). In the latter example, Lanval's agreement to the terms ensures that '[n]o man save you will see me or *hear my voice*'(75, emphasis added, '*nul humme fors vos ne me verra/ ne ma parole nen orra*'(l.170-1)), fusing their mutual pledge of anonymity. However, by offering lavish descriptions of the damsel's appearance and speech, Marie welcomes her audience into the privacy of their relationship. Moreover, she transforms the relationship between the faery queen and Lanval into one of reciprocal duty, as she weaves the domestic romance into a tale of obligation and loyalty to a new monarch. As such, the queen's disruptive female voice replaces Lanval's, ventriloquising him to social undermine and supersede Arthur's authority in his own court. The foreign queen 'admonish[es], order[s], and beg[s]'*(or vos chastis, / si vos comant e si vos pri*'(l.144-5)) Lanval not to reveal their secret, further transforming their romantic relationship into one of monarchic duty, invoking liminality through 'a quest for anonymity'(Goodich and Karras, 222) that deprived the knight of his status.

This sense of anonymity is similarly pursued in *Le Fresne*, in which the title character gains a voice only at the precipice of her restoration to her natal rank and status, eighty-three lines from the end of the narrative. Of the faithful, early-fourteenth-century analogue, *Lay Le Freine*, Laskaya and Salisbury say that the character 'has no voice outside of the established social order' and that her access to language coincides with her access to 'kinship, patrimony, and marriage'. While highly convincing, this argument does presume Le Fresne's passivity to be the foil to her mother's perniciousness, a dialectic that implicitly extolls women's silence and denounces their speech. Framed as such, the overt condemnation of the mother's speech is imagined as an indictment of female agency rather than a setup for a shrewd and silent circumvention of the marginal and illegitimate social rank in which Le Fresne finds herself. While the text provides no evidence for the character's political ambition nor suspicion of her parentage, it is undeniable that through

discretion and silence, she inadvertently choreographs her own reentry into the courtly structure. Silently, she places her mantle on the marital bed (*'le paile esgarde sur le lit'*, 1.413) and, as a direct result, she ascends from the marginal, if preferable, the position of concubine to honoured spouse and heritor of her father's lands.

Both Lanval and Le Fresne submit to silence and, each in a single affirmation of their true identity, are able to parasitically undermine the feminised and marginalised positions of their existence with noted success. In each narrative, this compulsion to silence counterposes Marie's own 'duty not to remain silent' (*Lais* Prologue, 41). It is striking, therefore, that a collection that foregrounds, within its first three lines, the authorial compulsion to speak as a 'duty', or a 'gift from God', opts to bind its central figures through secrecy and the need to 'remain silent [and conceal]' (41) (*taisir ne celer*, 1.3). In doing so, Marie masterfully bridges the distance between speech and truth, acknowledging the opacity of silence, 'the paradoxical absence-presence that brings forth, that gives birth to and speaks the poem before us' (Freeman, *Poetics of Silence*, 865). To provide an example, Marie bookends her lays with an affirmation of their oral transmission, pinioning the tales upon their alleged truthfulness while simultaneously centring her own place within them as a storyteller or weaver of fiction. *Les Deus Amanz* and *Bisclavret* affirm their own truthfulness, culminating in the lines 'this happened just as I have told you' (*'issi avint cum dit vos ai'*, 1.244) and '[t]he adventure you have heard actually took place, do not doubt it' (*'l'aventure ke avez oie/ veraie fu, n'en dutez mie'*, 1.315-6), respectively. Similarly, Marie expels doubt in *Lanval*, writing 'I will not fail to tell you the truth' (*'le veir vos en dirai sanz faile'*, 1.63). Ironically, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, and *Le Fresne* are narratively driven by the fallibility of their characters' oral statements, as the deceitfulness of language, the lies told by queens and wives, are what push the protagonists towards misfortune. Equal and opposite to the oath-making made in these lays, the stories within the stories are often characterised by distortion. Lanval's rejection of the queen is twisted when she tells Arthur that 'he had requested her love and because she had refused him, had insulted and deeply humiliated her' (*'de druerie la requist;/ pur ceo que ele l'en escundist/ mut [la] laidi e avila'*, 1.318-20). Since *Bisclavret* disappeared often, *Bisclavret's* wife allows the townspeople to think that he had now gone away for good

(*'pur ceo que hum le perdeit sovent / quidouent tuz communalment/ que dunc s'en fust del tut alez'*, l.127-9) when he cannot recover his clothing and return to human form.

Conspicuously, Le Fresne's mother, in her 'wickedness', accuses her neighbour of wantonness and slanders her; *'par ma grant vileinie/ de ma veisine dis folie'* (l.467-8). This is a provocative choice of language given that, in the close Old French version of the tale found in MS S (NAF 1104), Le Fresne's mother says that she lost her daughter through *'pechié'* (69, Burgess and Kibler) relating her crime more distinctly to a sin, or 'offence against god' (AND). Despite relatively few changes in language, the mother in the Harley version says that the reason for her misfortune was her *'folie'*, a word that carries a similar meaning of 'folly', 'madness', or 'error' according to the AND. The significance of its use in the MS H978, however, is that it is twice used by the mother, who also admits to accusing her neighbour of *'folie'* when she cast doubt on the paternity of her twins. Lexically, this doubling folds together, makes indistinguishable, and equalises the plights of the two women. Framed as such, the double deployment of *folie* represents Marie's ever-evolving concern with duplication and duplicity as a product of the excess meanings language necessarily incurs.

Of course, within the lay of *Le Fresne*, there is a continuous fascination with duality as the conceit of the tale is pinioned not only on twin girls, but on twin boys, twin wives, twin husbands, and ultimately twin marriages at the resolution. Unlike many of the Anglo-Norman lays which end in disaster for extra-marital lovers (see *Equitan*, *Les Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laiüstic*, and *Chaitivel*), *Le Fresne's* centrifugal force is the power of duality which facilitates the resolution of the relations between union and disunion, mother and daughter, lowliness and sacredness. However, the texts convey the idea that language, 'that which is said by mouth', betrays the speaker as much as the listener. Le Fresne's mother uses language to deceive; but her language ultimately deceives her, as her own duplicitous co-conspirator that wickedly turns on her in her moment of vulnerability.

'Kar jeo meïsmes me jugai:

De tutes femmes mesparlai.'

(*'Indeed I have judged/condemned myself the same: of all women I misspoke/slandered'*, l.79-80)

She acknowledges that to speak ill of any woman is to speak ill of all women— including of herself. It implicates her in her own accusation, as her carelessness with words translates to a perceived carelessness with her sexuality. As I have established, this aspect of the lay has been thoroughly explored and convincingly interpreted as a condemnation of feminine speech. However, situated within a collection so intimately concerned with the interrelatedness of speech, silence, and orality, the lay takes on dual interpretations related to the excess meanings and contingent consequences language inevitably alludes to.

1.5 Feminine *Communitas* & Anti-structure

The concept of *communitas* is related to liminality in that they are both characteristics of what Turner calls ‘anti-structure’: ‘*communitas* emerges where social structure does not’(*Ritual*, 126). For the liminal subject, it is part of the radical experience of the dissolution of social norms and institutions that leaves only ‘a generic human bond’(97). It is this momentary elision of structural differentiation that later endows the subject’s new position with sacred qualities. *Communitas* ‘can be grasped only in some relation to structure’(127) and equally, structure cannot function without *communitas*. Turner uses Lao-tse’s chariot wheel to analogise this relationship, saying,

‘The spokes of the wheel and the nave... to which they are attached would be useless... but for the hole, the gap, the emptiness at the center... which is nevertheless indispensable to the functioning of the structure of the wheel’(127).

In my own words, *communitas* describes the way in which subjects experiencing the rite of passage relate to one another and to themselves when all sense of socially produced and instituted hierarchies have fully or partially dissolved. By relinquishing identity as a physically manifest or hierarchically upheld condition, it confers part of that generic human bond upon the status of the post-liminal subject and upon their understanding of their role in society. Notably, Turner indicates that the condition of *communitas* ‘can seldom be maintained for very long’(132) before it gives way to the mediacy of structure, as in the rite of passage. Having used the critical toolbox Turner and Van Gennep provide to interrogate the liminal *form*, this thesis will now look to the text itself for evidence of liminality and *communitas*.

I will argue that Le Fresne establishes its register of *communitas*, or unhierarchised sameness, in the use of the word ‘*meïsmes*’. It is used thrice in close succession at the start of the narrative on f.128r. when the mother realises the consequences of her slander. *Meïsmes*, which can be equated to *même* in modern French, weaves together the concepts of gossip, pregnancy, and lament. The above example clearly relates to orality and vocality through ‘*mesparlai*’ meaning ‘gossip, or misspeak’ from the verb ‘*parler*’(‘to say, utter, pronounce’, *AND*), as does the poem’s first use of *meïsmes*;

‘*La dame que si mesparla
en l’an meïsmes enceinta*’

(The woman who had slandered in the same year became pregnant, l.65-6)

‘*Mut durement en este dolente
A sei meïsmes se desmente*’

(Severely in this pain she lamented to herself, l.71-2)

Recognising her own condition in that of her neighbour’s and vice versa, she experiences the ‘essential human bond’ that they share. She recognises the feminine dynamic tying her to the neighbour’s wife through a continuum of marginal experience. As such, through her lexical carelessness, she experiences a detachment from the previous structure, the previous protections, and the previous power that her status as a wife had afforded her. The repeated use of *folie* and *meïsmes* tie the surplus effluence of meanings generated through the spoken word to the condition of femininity. If feminine speech represents the lack of control in the text, feminine silence and secrecy are key to the circumvention of the marginalised condition of its protagonist, Le Fresne.

This continuum of sameness is reiterated when Marie says that the porter’s daughter suckled Le Fresne herself. This enacts *communitas*, or the experience of sameness, by eliding differences that would otherwise be manifest in a hierarchical structural model. To elaborate, *communitas* to Turner, is the collective experiencing liminality, a passage through which a multitude continuously turns in on itself, ‘a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou’. It sees Self and Other as indiscrete categories and finds itself internally oppositionlessness and unhierarchical. Turner explains that ‘*communitas* is made evident or accessible... only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure’(127). Considered with regard to Victor

Turner's ideas of *communitas*, the poem relates the idea that a woman's status can only ever be exposed at the point of its contact with a man's status; yet their resistance to structure is indispensable to that very structure itself. As subjects experiencing or at least glimpsing liminality, the women of the poem are enmeshed in the collective of sameness (*meïsmes*), as Le Fresne's sexual legitimacy, this time not as a daughter but a lover, draws her into a parallel predicament to her mother. Notably, the fourth time '*meïsmes*' is used in the poem, it is in describing the abbess who 'raised [Le Fresne] herself'; '*ele meïsmes l'ad levee*'(1.227). The abbess, knowing at least partially that she must be of some noble birth, allows Le Fresne to occupy a space of silence for the sake of her safety and protection. She does this by forbidding the porter to tell Le Fresne how she was found in an ash tree and by refraining from telling her about how she came into her care and by hiding the possessions she was found with³⁴.

Le Fresne's silence is contradictory; her power is partially attenuated and yet exclusively afforded through her submission to silence. This contradiction is only made more apparent later in the poem when, now a concubine, Le Fresne's lover is reproached by the knights of his court for not yet taking a worthy, heir-producing wife; 'on the hazel there are nuts to be enjoyed, but the ash never bears fruit' ('*en la codre ad noiz deduiz; freisne ne portë unke fruiz*', 1.339-40). Unprotected by the marriage institution, she is trapped, suspended between social ranks, perpetually on the precipice of potential, yet to be 'fixed' or legitimised with the courtly structure of Dol. As such, the text exposes the hollow footholds that hierarchy grapples with to leverage itself upward; these footholds are *communitas*, the interstitial, existential relations between humans 'without which there would be no society'(Turner, 361).

Only in silence can Le Fresne restore truth. In fact, her silence nurtures the invisible network of power relations that allows both twin daughters to ascend the social hierarchy, rather than being cast out or killed for their questionable paternity. Under the shelter of

³⁴ It is not insignificant that, previously secluded in the abbey, Le Fresne's social and sexual status transforms into a '*suinant*'(1.323) or concubine when the abbess returns some of the personal possessions, notably ones that would allude to both her former and incipient social ranks. Le Fresne takes her mantle and ring '*sun paille... e sun anel*'(1.273), which could possibly be helpful to her yet, '*de ceo li pout estre mut bel*' (1.274). As Turner states, the removal of personal property is one of the way in which cultural transition is ritualised (359). This detail further reinforces Le Fresne's threshold position during her stay at the nunnery. Imbricated in the 'successive experiences of high and low'(Turner, 360), her scarcity of belongings are what allow her to pass through the rite of passage and experience lowliness, while the later retrieval of them restore her status in the post-liminal.

silence and the cover of darkness, ‘*la nuit quant tut fu aseri*’(1.473)³⁵, the women of the poem orchestrate the restructuring of Le Fresne’s societal positioning, and by extension, their own.

Repeatedly, the *Lais* foreground the idea that language is not the faithful chaperone of meaning, but rather its slippery vehicle, perennially in both pursuit and evasion of poetic truth. As such, Le Fresne’s silence is a form of oral liminality; in her total omission of speech, she makes the dialectical opposites of truth and perfidy indistinguishable from one another.

In these internal narratives, Marie ‘recognizes language to be a flawed vehicle, a discontinuous medium filled with obscurities, gaps, or holes’, which is an idea that ‘participates in a long tradition stretching from at least Augustine to the fourteenth century’(35, Bloch). Bloch writes that ‘Marie’s obsession with language is expressed on both a thematic and a formal level’(35). He suggests that Marie shows an awareness that ‘language escapes the attempt to master it, to contain it, and, at the same time, an equally great awareness of the necessity of the struggle for control’(46). The *Lais*’ efforts in cultural recuperation, or remembering of the past, are twinned with the sense that ‘words, no matter how finely they are assembled, are unfaithful, they betray’. He continues, writing that Marie’s ‘doubling of adjectives, nouns, adverbs, and verbs alongside of the double naming in her imposition of titles’ reflects her unavoidable duplicity in the case of translation. As such, he concludes that ‘words escape human intention to which they remain indifferent’(45). One such expression of the attempt to concretise the ‘uncontrollable, risky, undisciplined, [and] excessive’ (Bloch, 29) nature of *aventure* is the dynamic of orality that oath-making poses in the *Lais*. Within the collection, ideas of verbal contract and oath-making collapse frameworks of domesticity and nation-building, weaving together ideas of social obligation. The characters’ oaths variously afford them certain protections and work to politicise their personal relationships. Moreover, this attempted control is compounded by liminality, which exposes the mess of the vertical and horizontal hierarchies in which the characters are bound.

Lanval’s predicament, for example, places him at odds with the Arthurian court which purports to uphold masculine ideals of chivalry and honour. The facetiousness of the

³⁵ ‘When night had fallen’

court is exemplified in Arthur's threat to Gawain and the other barons when they request to stand bail for Lanval. Arthur 'entrusts him to [them] on the surety of all that [they] hold from [him], lands and fiefs'(78), exposing that their relationship is bound to personal property and wealth rather than the social ideals usually assigned to Arthuriana. Comparatively, although Lanval breaks his oath of silence, his maiden still performs her monarchic duty of rescuing him from harm, simultaneously exonerating him. During the trial scenes, in which the accused is both guilty and not guilty and therefore liminal, the central ideals of the court are thrown into question. Moreover, the lay culminates by suggesting that no one in the kingdom heard from Lanval ever again, ultimately fulfilling his contractual silence to his lady. Meanwhile, Carlisle's sense of hegemony is deeply unsettled; although the threats to its authority (Lanval's queerness and his lady's otherworldly beauty) are expunged, they are not subsumed by the Arthurian court. The post-liminal aggregation phase, the period that slips back to the 'taken for granted' (20, Thomassen), is haunted by the questions of the liminal phase. As such, liminality and its unsettling, un-structuring potential supersedes the body of the text and persists in the ambiguity of its conclusions, or lack thereof.

1.6 Liminal Space in *The Lais*

The physical transgression of boundaries and borderlines can convey an unspoken and yet covert transgression of gendered and nationalising social positions. In a literal sense, when the protagonists cross into a liminal space, their statuses as liminal figures can be simultaneously reinforced. Spaces such as Avalon and the faery realm in *Lanval* are singularly transgressed and possess a challenge to the authority of Carlisle, working to throw the totality of the hegemonic society into question. Throughout the *Lais*, feudal and courtly areas such as towers and fortresses work to not only contain female sexuality but to create boundaries and borders to be transgressed, permitting the privacy of sexuality of '*la chambre*' (1.296) in *Bisclavret*, for example, to be breached and made spectacle.

This covert transition can be examined in *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, in which *mal mariées* are held in towers as a means of unsuccessfully preventing them from taking lovers. Through her representation of 'walled towers', Bloch suggests that Marie analogises 'sexual jealousy and the desire for the word'(47). He suggests that Marie's own

anxiety at the thought of ‘misappropriation³⁶... becomes equivalent to the fear of misprision’(47). He specifically cites the lay of *Guigemar*, in which her composition ‘does to the lovers exactly what the jealous husband does to his wife and her lover: s/he betrays by revealing, and thus destroys at the very moment s/he creates’(50). This reading can be extrapolated to the tale of *Lanval*, in which Marie betrays the secrecy of their covert relationship by relaying it in text. As such, the poet’s internal representation of containment can be read to signify the uncontrollable surplus that language unavoidably alludes to. In *Guigemar*, a clear arena for intimacy is established within the private, secretive towers, conveying a very literal boundary position to be crossed. In numerous other lays, this divide between the publicity of the court and the privacy of the bed-chamber is less clearly laid out. For example, the natural world is used in *Lanval*, *Bisclavret*, and *Les Deus Amanz* as a realm exceeding the narrow dichotomies of private and public. While in some instances, the deep forests or enchanted mountains are posed as arenas for masculinity to be exercised and proven, they simultaneously signify the unstructured potentiality of liminal space.

Alongside Salerno in *Les Deus Amanz*, Avalon serves as a disruptive feminine space in which inverse hierarchies and parallel feminine power enervate the Arthurian Carlisle. These otherworlds, both fictional and Real, permeate and serve the collection as arenas for cultural reflection, transgression, and exchange. It has been noted that Lanval’s departure from the chivalric *Kardoel*³⁷ to the fantastical, mysterious, and ostensibly matriarchal Avalon is twinned with his rejection of his feudal masculinity as he ‘takes on a marginalised and passive role conventionally marked as female’(Chance, 48). The feminine realm of Avalon here stands in distinct opposition to the British feudal society of Arthur’s court, which narrates the divestiture of a masculine and specifically British feudal culture that conventionally and legally displaces female autonomy and voice’(47). It is as such that the physical journey takes on the attributes of a psychological one, as Lanval’s patriarchal societal positioning is replaced by a matriarchal one.

³⁶ ‘[W]hen there exists in a country a man or woman of great renown, people who are envious of their abilities frequently speak insultingly of them in order to damage this reputation... But just because spiteful tittle-tattlers attempt to find fault with me I do not intend to give up’(*Guigemar*, trans. Burgess and Busby, 43). ‘[Marie’s] work was sufficiently well-known for it to have aroused jealousy and perhaps for it to be the object of plagiarism’ (*Lais* Introduction, 9).

³⁷ “Carlisle” (*Lanval*, 1.5)

As I have established, the liminal phase is widely considered to be preceded by the separation phase and succeeded by the incorporation one. This tripartite sequence represents a detachment and subsequent reattachment to structure; between these states, liminality eludes ‘the network of classification that normally locates [...] positions in cultural space’(Turner, quoted in Haydon, 25). For *Lanval*, I propose that the location of his ‘separation’ phase from the previously fixed state of Carlisle is the meadow in which he undresses and abandons his horse.

*‘Un jur munta sur sun destrer,
Si s’est alez esbaneer.
Fors de la vile est eissuz,
Tut sul est en un pré venuz.
Sur une ewe curaunt descent’*(1.41-45)

‘One day [Lanval] mounted his horse and went to take his ease. He left the town and came alone to a meadow, dismounting by a stream’

Whalen and Pickens note the implications of Marie’s phrase “[f]ors de la vile” (outside of the walled city)... [which] recalls the very etymology of *forest* [...] from *foris* ‘on the outside’(197). Only in leaving the masculine-coded Arthurian city for the feminine-coded meadow can Lanval experience ‘a sense of detachment’(Haydon, 24) by removing himself from the homosocial responsibilities of chivalry.

Yet, how exactly *are* these spaces coded as masculine or feminine, and what does this have to do with liminality? Whalen and Pickens’ *Gardens and Anti-Gardens in Marie de France’s “Lais”* will shed light on this matter. As an ‘anti-garden’, the meadow or ‘pré’ (line 44)³⁸ is an uncultivated space which allows feminised characters ‘to defy social conventions’(187). Marie’s entire collection teems with botanical imagery and *Lanval* is no exception; his lover is described as surpassing ‘in beauty the lily and the new rose when it appears in summer... whiter than a hawthorn blossom’ (74, *Lanval*). Noting the sexual codification of these spaces, Pickens and Whalen indicate that ‘uncultivated and semi-cultivated spaces where plants flourish with less confinement and less orderliness’ counterpose the ‘walled gardens’ which ‘represent men’s efforts to control women’. They

³⁸ ‘[M]eadow, grassland’ according the Anglo -Norman Dictionary online database.

pointedly note the stark contrast of the meadow with the royal garden, the *locus molestus*³⁹, in which the queen later tries to seduce Lanval. As a *locus amoenus*⁴⁰, the meadow connotes an ‘Edenic paradise’ which, in its turn, presages the utopic ‘feminized culture’(Chance, 54) of Avalon later in the narrative and ‘foreshadows the reversal of fortune the Otherworld will bring’(Hodgson, 21)’. While Avalon’s botanical status cannot be testified to in the text, it is true that this space is free from the cultivating, controlling forces of Arthur’s patriarchal realm. It is a glimpse that the meadow provides.

The *pré* is further encoded with sexual politics in its specific temporality. It is made clear that this scene occurs around the ‘Pentecost’(73)/ ‘Pentecuste’(line 11), connoting springtime festivity and invoking the well-established medieval fertility myth. Whalen and Pickens indicate that the ‘opposition of the courtly springtime or summery *locus amoenus* to its wintry antithesis participates in a pervading tension [...] between fecundity and sterility’(187) in the *Lais*. For Lanval, the meadow is literally and symbolically fresh turf in which the previous social conventions can be sloughed away, thawed out, and seeded with new structural possibilities outside of the walled confines of the city.

Upon entering the anti-garden, our protagonist is approached by ‘two damsels’ and the transition phase begins. These beautiful maidens take him to their lady’s tent, a space characterised by ephemerality and liminality. Marie uses two different Anglo-Norman phrases to describe the faery queen’s tent; firstly, ‘*paveilluns*’(1.77), a term signifying ‘pavilion[s], tent[s], [or] large structures typically used for encampments, [or] tournaments’ that can also refer to a ‘canopy, [or] awning [on a ship]’. Secondly, she uses the word ‘*tref*’(1.81, 1.91, 1.94, 1.193) four times, which the *AND* lists as the ‘mast, [...] beam, [...] [or] sail’ of a ship, or a ‘tent’. Although the Burgess and Busby translation settles on the ‘tent’ meaning in its modern rendition of *Lanval*, *tref* is used in much the same way in *Guigemar* to describe the magical ship that carries the title character to his beloved.

‘*Braz fu de mer, hafne i aveit.
El hafne out une sule nef,
Dunt Guigemar choisi le tref
Mult esteit bien apparillee.*’ (1.150-53)

³⁹ ‘irksome place’ where the plans of ‘would-be lovers’ are thwarted.

⁴⁰ ‘pleasant place’ in Latin

‘In the harbor there was a single ship
whose mast Guigemar saw; it was very well outfitted.’(60-63, Waters)
‘On it lay a harbour, in which there was a single ship whose sail Guigemar could
see.’ (45, Laskaya and Salisbury)

A stable translation of *tref* is clearly elusive, as Waters opts for the ‘mast’ interpretation of the term in her rendering of the *Lais*. In whichever case, the deployment of *tref* in these two *lais* is evidently an attempt to depict an awning-type structure, on land or sea. What is interesting is that in both of these instances, the term serves as a prelude, a doorway, to the characters’ liminal experience, through which Marie can ‘[realize] the multivalence of reality’(Hodgson, 23), an alternative to the ‘unjust, restricted nature’ of the Arthurian court. Whalen suggests that these ‘two thematic registers’ similarly represent ‘a catalyst for change in the development of the story’, ensuring Lanval is ‘now enclosed entirely within the world of the Other’(Poetics, 92). While in *Guigemar*, it connotes the sail of a ship, a literal means of transportation to a new space, in *Lanval*, it works to signify the transportive nature of the lady’s tent. McLoone, in fact, notes that Lanval’s lover, beyond ‘[occupying] a sylvan otherworld’, is without ‘*terra firma*, she is landless’(8). The emphatic visual element of the tent’s textile riches combines the transitive power of the tent with a certain feminine alterity. Unlike the *vile* or ‘walled city’ of Carlisle, which is very much locked in position, the lady’s ‘*paveilluns*’ can be packed up and re-pitched elsewhere; their placement is transient and impermanent, mirroring the ephemeral queen herself, as she appears and disappears at will. It is therefore my belief that the use of *tref* in *Lanval* works to create a feminine space.

The motif of clothing, of richly draped textiles, follows the Queen of Faery throughout the lay and is held in a curious tension between concealing her nakedness and exposing her wealth. In the first instance, laying on a beautiful bed (‘*ele jut sur un luit mut bel*’, 1.98), she wears only a chemise (‘*en sa chemise senglement*’, 1.100) with a costly mantel of white ermine, covered with Alexandrian purple (‘*un cher mantel de blanc hermine/ covert de purpure alexandrine*’, 1.102-3) wrapped around her to protect her from the heat (‘*ot pur le chaut sur li gete*’, 1.104). Later, she appears at Arthur’s court dressed in a white tunic and chemise, laced on both sides to reveal her flanks (‘*de chainsil blanc e de chemise,/ que tuz les costez li pareient,/ que de deus parz laciez esteient*’, 1.581-4), with a

cloak of dark silken cloth and skirts around her (*'manteus...de purpre bis/ ... les pans en ot entur li mis'*, 1.592-4). The hyperbolic beauty of both her clothing and pavilion enlivens the space with a specifically feminine opulence—notably one that no *king* under the sky could afford, no matter how much he gave (*'suz ciel n'ad rei ki esligast/ pur nul aver k'il i donast'*, 1.92-3). This uniquely empowered clothing motif works to break down the clear boundaries between inside and outside, and between exposure and concealment. It is continually used to signify both her wealth and sexuality; Lanval is welcomed into this tactile, textile room of the pavilion, in which the queen is similarly draped in ermine. She is literally enmeshed in the arena of her power. As such, when her damsels re-clothe Lanval in 'rich garments' and 'saddle his horse', they remake him in their image. His nomadic lady holds a comparable status to him as a foreigner, but instead of being driven into financial troubles, she embodies an exotic opulence, possessing not only her fine silks and purple mantle, but exceeding the wealth, power, and knowledge of Emperor Octavian and Queen Semiramis (*'la reïne Semiramis,/ quant ele ot unkes plus aveir/ e plus pussance e plus saveir/ ne l'emperere Octovien/ n'esligasent la destre pan'*, 1.82-6). Through this lavish portrait, she offers a counterpoint to Arthur's patriarchal court, in which he 'distributes not only the booty of war but "women and lands" ("Femmes e tere departi" [v. 17])' (62, Bloch).

As such, their clothing of him works to restructure ostensible economic hierarchies, as Lanval is now visually elevated to the status of his vassal peers when he returns to Carlisle, changed. This spatial shift, in translating to a hierarchical one, is only more apparent when Lanval returns to the city. Upon arrival, he 'perform[s] many honourable acts' including 'clothing the jongleurs'⁴¹(1.211), who are notably itinerant, or transient performers—and conceivably outsiders like our protagonist and his lover.⁴² Hodgson notes that Lanval's entrance into the liminal realm of the tent translates into the restructuring of visual, social, and sexual hierarchies, as he 'uses his wealth to help those whose alienated plight reflects his own'. Moreover, he suggests that the repeated 'incantation' of Lanval's

⁴¹ *AND* Entry for JUGLEUR: 'juggler, jongleur, one who entertains or amuses people; minstrel, jongleur, one who provides entertainment through music and song; one who performs tricks (and deceives); rogue, villain.'

⁴² 'One late-thirteenth century observer included [minstrels or *jongleurs*] among the hangers-on, the flotsam and jetsam who ever populated the court... 'They rush and flock to the courts of princes from every nation, profession, condition which is under heaven, just like vultures to a corpse, and like flies following the sweetness of oil...' (6, Karras and Goodich).

name⁴³ in this passage ‘underlines his newfound opportunity to establish a deserved identity’(22) and foreshadows the attention he will bring upon himself as an incompatible, disruptive component of the Arthurian machine. Momentarily untethered from the conservative confines of the city, Lanval both inverts and is inverted *by* the top-down structure that regulates the social economy of Carlisle, as he is no longer afforded the ‘cultural space to exist as a marginalized knight’(46, Chance). This visual and economic disruption to the court only becomes more clear when Lanval later attracts the unwanted attention of Arthur’s queen; in his decadence, he has become a threat to the very heart of Arthurian power, the monarchic couple.

After 640 lines, Lanval crosses over into the post-liminal aggregation phase; reincorporated into ‘a stable state again, but new’(Turner, *Liminality*, 24).

*‘Od li s’en vai en Avalun
 Ceo nus recontent li Bretun,
 En isle que mut est beaus;
 La fu ravi li dameiseaus.
 Nul hum n’en oï plus parler
 Ne jeo n’en sai avant cunter.’(641-46)*

‘He went with her to Avalon, as the Bretons tell us, to a very beautiful island; there the lady took him. No man has heard more of it, nor can I recount any more’.

Avalon, by all accounts, is a place of certain uncertainty. While allegoric interpretations of Avalon as an afterlife are fairly abundant and well-documented, it is my belief that the space serves Marie’s *Lais* as a reminder of that which remains unarticulated by language; or, that which is *beyond* meaning. Typically, in medieval English romance, Avalon is a location that is glimpsed or alluded to, conventionally as the birthplace of *Excalibur* and the resting place of Arthur. Monmouth’s *Historia Regnum Britanniae* initiates its use as the location of the legendary tomb, a trope which had been fully cemented in the Arthurian legend by popular romances in Latin Anglo-Norman by the end of the fourteenth century⁴⁴. As such, it is almost undeniable that Marie would have been aware of the trope of Avalon as the location of Arthur’s afterlife as, by the time she was writing, it had already been

⁴³ The disruptive capabilities of Lanval’s actions can be observed at the bottom of f.135r. The scribe uses the name at the start of each line with emphatic visual effect; no one in the court could forget his name now.

⁴⁴ The earliest known example of Arthur in the English language is Layamon’s translation of Wace’s *Brut*, completed around 1190.

embedded in English mythology by the largely popular works of Monmouth and Wace. The fact, then, that Marie chooses to end the lay by sending her protagonist and his saviour to a place that Arthur will only return to once dead or dying is curious. It would suggest, in no uncertain terms, that for Lanval, his allegiance to Arthur and his court has [de]ceased. The king could not retain (*'le peot li reis retenir'*, 1.631) Lanval's lover, even after she humiliates Arthur's queen and exonerates the accused. This language, 'retain' or *retenir*, participates in the lay's ongoing thematic and lexical struggle for control, expressed variously in walled cities, oaths of silence, *'bien afeitiez'* (1.281, well-trained men, well-trained ones), and courtly pledges. Yet when Lanval crosses into the off-page island, he escapes the ambiguities of language and the poet's perpetual desire to control meaning. This choice omission could easily be interpreted as a symbolic proliferation of meanings; various readings of Avalon —as the afterlife, the consummation, *merveilleux celtique*⁴⁵, the garden of Eden,— are perfectly demonstrable. However, if language is, for Marie, an untameable wildfire of signification, then the un-recounted (*reconter*⁴⁶) realm of Avalon is a space that usurps and chokes off the previously unfixed, transitional spaces of the lay. It epitomises the dialectics of *aventure* and crosses over the threshold into the domain of the inexpressible. Fleeing 'to the Edenic paradise of Avalon' (Whalen and Pickens, 190), Lanval and his lady disappear behind a lexical curtain. In its complete opacity, Avalon concludes the rite of passage; its unknowable, unseeable presence in the narrative restores stability and structure to the lives of the characters.

1.7 The 'Minimization of Sex Distinctions' in *Bisclavret* and *Lanval*

So far, this chapter has focused on establishing the formal liminality of *aventure* and the way in which the lay of *Lanval* generates liminal space. It will now turn to the liminal subject, to understand how the experience of modelessness, in-betweenness, and indeterminateness has a corporeal component.

The threshold positioning of liminal *personnae* is not exclusive to monsters. However, their outward manifestation of an internal or a societal anxiety does make them

⁴⁵ 'Celtic otherworld or Celtic wonder' (Hodgson, 19).

⁴⁶ 'm'entremis des lais assembler par rime faire e reconter': 'I set myself to assemble lays, to compose and to relate them in rhyme' (47-8, Marie's *Prologue*).

particularly useful subjects for studying marginal experiences. Monstrousness and the ugliness it implies is socially and visually disruptive. This is because *ugliness and external monstrousness can challenge social hierarchy*; in aesthetic terms, ‘aberrancy within the corporeal order is an aberrancy in the social order’ (Henderson, 34). As such, in addition to posing a threat to the well-being of society, monsters also provide a comfort; their monstrousness, or aberrancy, can be pointed to, can be read on the surface of the body. For medieval society, it is a conceivable bad, —even a useful bad. For example, medieval gargoyles and grotesque marginalia can be seen to guard boundaries, never fully within or without the threshold position of a text, church, or castle. They defend physical and corporeal borders as much as they demarcate them. They permit medieval subjects to generate, in their minds, the category of the human in opposition to the category of the monstrous. Classen states that ‘monstrous otherness serves far reaching functions... with respect to self-identity and the determination of one’s own position here on earth within society and in nature’ (*Monster Within*, 539). As much as they challenge the idea of the human, monsters allegorise social fears of both the Other, as an external threat to society, and make outwardly manifest the monster within.

Bisclavret’s monstrousness is introduced as his desire to eat men, ‘*hummes devure*’ (l.11). Despite never fully exhibiting the frenzied rage that Marie introduces early on the lay, this cannibalistic tendency does come to fruition; not to incite fear into the poetic society, but to rid that society of its true evil.

‘*vers li curut cum enragiez*

[...]

le neis li esracha del vis’

(‘Towards her he ran like a madman... the nose he tore off [her] face’, l.233-5)

This instance, which I term a monstrous kiss, confers the deceitful wife’s internal ugliness upon her external appearance and reveals the monstrous nature behind her ‘*beau semblant*’ (‘beautiful appearance’, l.22). In this kiss, the participants are monstrous, the act is monstrous, and the result is monstrous— she is left permanently disfigured. The social function of the monster, therefore, can be related to the revelation of the inner drives of the

characters. Of course, there is a sexual component here, as the two previous lovers are reunited in a proxy kiss that precipitates their post-liminal lives.

Before considering the implications of this scene in the next subchapter, the liminality of Bisclavret's wolfishness must be established. In this lay, the beast's animal nature initially excludes him from the social group, exiling him to the vast forest, '*granz forez*' (l.12). However, his beastliness, his monstrosity, is twinned with humanity; despite his wolfs-head status, he recognises and submits to his former king. This detail, in which the king says '*ceste merveille esgardez,/ cum ceste beste se humilie!/ Ele ad sen de hume*' (l.171-3, 'see the marvellous way this beast humbles itself before me! It has the intelligence of a human'), necessarily ties his humanity to his status as a monarchic subject. Simultaneously, it obscures and complicates his gender as *la beste*⁴⁷ who sleeps by the king and is frequently kissed by him. It is his relationship with Agamben's⁴⁸ divine sovereign that characterises his liminality then, as it is his submission to the king that permits him the royal protections usually only afforded by human subjects. Although not so on-the-nose, Lanval similarly undergoes a transformation that relates to both gender and nation sovereignty. He begins the tale as an outsider, exempt from Arthur's gifts and attentions despite his valour, generosity, beauty and prowess ('*valur*', '*largesce*', '*beauté*', and '*pruësce*', l.21-2) due to his status as a Breton foreigner. Hailing from Brittany, Lanval's 'alien nature' renders him unable 'to manage the chivalric and masculine duties of valor and loyalty to liege lord and the indoor and courtly virtues of courtesy and homage to a lady' (45, Chance). Chance emphasises Marie's subversion of Arthurian literature, writing that 'the English nation that [Lanval] now inhabits does not allow him cultural space to exist as a marginalized knight' (46). Contrast this with Bisclavret, whose marginalised position as a wolf-man is actually what permits his status of exemption, outside of the structure typically assigned to courtly knights, and yet prevents him from being visually integrated into the courtly setting.

To understand the way in which power is similarly deferred and transferred in *Bisclavret*, we can look to the writing of Michael Goodich and Ruth Mazo Karras. In their

⁴⁷ The term used eight times in the lay to describe Bisclavret; its meaning is translated by Burgess and Busby variously as 'werewolf' (68), 'beast' (70, 71), 'creature' (70), and 'animal form' (72, '*la semblance de beste*'); it is listed in the *AND* as "1) (wild) beast, animal, creature".

⁴⁸ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

comprehensive sourcebook, they catalogue some of the ‘characteristic features’ of marginalised medieval figures; ‘a quest for anonymity, the absence of property, sexual continence and a minimization of sex distinctions, humility, the absence of rank or status, [and] the suspension of kinship ties’(222). Bisclavret, it can be said, both literally and metaphorically embodies these select traits as he undertakes the transition from human, to wolf, and back again.

There is evidently a sexual component to Bisclavret’s wolfishness, even before he is taken into the king’s bed-chamber, as during his transformation he is absent for three days each week, returning joyful and glad (*‘joius et liez’*, 1.30). Alone, this detail may be considered innocuous; however, when situated among a collection peppered with infidelity and marital deceit, the three days in which Bisclavret goes about the forest completely naked (*‘jeo vois tut nu’*, 1.70) take on an alternative meaning that alludes to animalistic sexuality. In fact, his wife initially suspects that his absence is due to him taking a lover⁴⁹. This can be interpreted as the incipit of the separation phase— Bisclavret, as a part-time wolf, becomes untethered from the poetic society’s discrete special and domestic structures. Turner indicates that liminal beings may ‘disguised as monsters... or even go naked’ to demonstrate, not lowliness, but indistinguishability and ambiguity within a structure of ‘law, custom, [and] convention’. Nakedness and the lack of material possessions, he says, is just one of the ‘rich variety of symbols... that ritualize[s] social and cultural transitions’(359). Moreover, the abandonment of his rank, status, and notably, *wife*, accompanies the minimisation of his sexual distinction, as his poetic title transitions from *‘chevaler[s]’*(1.17, 1.299) to *‘la beste’*⁵⁰ and back again. It is my belief that the lay here covertly uses Bisclavret’s transitional status to explore the homosocial and borderline homosexual spectacle that may otherwise oppose typified medieval gender dialectics.

While it is impossible to conjecture Marie’s own views on same-sex love, we can extrapolate from *Lanval* that she at least had some awareness of the vitriol associated with what we would now term homosexuality, an ‘as of yet inexpressible’ component of the *Lais*. To extrapolate further, it is the antagonist of *Lanval*, Arthur’s queen, who espouses

⁴⁹ *‘Mun escient que vos amez,/ e si si est, vos meserrez.’*(1.51, I think you must have a lover and, if this is so, you are doing wrong)

⁵⁰ The feminine word *‘beste’* is used to describe the baron in his wolf form eight times in total.

such emasculating rhetoric, ultimately paying the price of shame for her accusations and covetousness. Arthur's queen says to Lanval,

*'Asez le m'ad hum dit sovent
Que des femmes n'avez talent.
Vallez avez bien afeitiez,
Ensemble od eus vus deduiez'*

(1.279-82, 'you do not desire this kind of pleasure as many have often told me. You go with well-trained (ones/men), with whom you enjoy yourself together')

According to the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français (1330-1500)*, the use of 'afeitiez', conjugated from 'affaiter', has a multitude of interesting interpretations relating to taming, teaching, and training. The sense of a struggle for control tightens concentrically in and around the narrative; any attempt to affix the signification of language is countered by its slippery, fallible nature. Moreover, it is ironically in the queen's desire to control Lanval and make him her lover that she makes this accusation. Here, and later in the lay when she tells Arthur of Lanval's crimes against her, the queen chooses language as her weapon, as she tries oust the outsider from her ranks.

After Lanval enters into this liminal realm of magic, matriarchy, and marginality, there ensues a momentary suspension of gendering and nationalising powers. Arthur's court, which is here charged with ideas of national heritage, is undermined by these gender relations. This is exemplified in Lanval's abandonment of his *cheval*. His horse conveys his status within the court, his chivalry, in addition to his masculinity. Lanval is some ways already a liminal figure. He has been scorned by Arthur as an outsider and the text alludes to his foreignness as the reason for this. However, he is still subject to the structures and status quo of the Arthurian court. As such, when he dismounts and undresses his horse before walking into the meadow, he symbolically rejects these structures and momentarily exists in a space untethered to status, nation, or gender.

The instance when Lanval enters the meadow and loosens the saddle-girth from his horse ('*[i]l le descengle*', 1.47) can be identified as the beginning of the 'separation' phase of liminality, as he literally and metaphorically detaches himself from symbols of Arthurian chivalry. This metaphor can be similarly glimpsed in *Bisclavret* when the king notes that the protagonist has the intelligence of human after he takes hold of his horse's

stirrup and pleads for mercy (*'ele ad sen de hume'*, 1.173, *'il l'aveit pris sun estrié'* 1.147, *'vers lui curut quere merci'* 1.146), 'displaying clear signs of... nobility'(Classen, 534). After this, he is welcomed into the king's company as a courtly subject. Unlike Bisclavret, Lanval 'abandons the very sign of his *chevalerie* [chivalry]—his *cheval* [horse]—who rolls in the meadow just as Lanval himself lies down as if to sleep'(47, Chance). Subsequently ensues the 'transition' phase, in which Lanval is untethered from structure and societal protections. The Count of Cornwall informs Lanval that if he cannot prove his case, he will lose the king's service (*'tut sun servise perde del rei'*, 1.459) and be banished; likewise, dejected and anguished (*'pensis... e anguissus'*, 1.338), the accused calls to his beloved repeatedly, but to no avail (*'[s]'amie apele mut sovent,/ Mes ceo ne li valut neent'*, 1.339-40). As such, Lanval's liminal position here lacks the conditions of his previous state as a somewhat protected, if not celebrated, vassal. Simultaneously, he has not yet entered the new, stable structure of Edenic matriarchy disclosed by the end of the lay.

Mirroring the opening of the tale, the end of Lanval's liminal phase, otherwise known as the 'incorporation' phase, occurs when he leaps onto the palfrey behind his new queen (*'[q]uant la pucele ist fors a l'us,/ Sur le palefrei detriers li'*, 1.638-9). Chance argues that the 'lay feminizes [the] register for alterity within the antiknight's *aventure*—a quest more passive and psychological than active and chivalric, and one certainly more representative of a marginalized female social and cultural position'(46). Moreover, Chance significantly notes that when Lanval does in fact remounts the horse, he does it 'as an ancillary and symbolic female on the palfrey behind the fairy queen'(46) before he ventures to the off-page realm of Avalon. Lanval, I agree, is 'marginalised' in that he is pushed to the margins of the lay, cast out from the poetic realm and the *aventure* that Marie is able to account for. However, in comparison to the poverty he found in the patriarchal court at the opening of the story and the life-threatening experiences in the middle, his new-found home affords him both wealth and physical protection. It spectrally poses the idea of matriarchy without actively disclosing its existence within the narrative. Most importantly, Avalon incorporates Lanval into its (unknown) structure and concludes his rite of passage.

1.8 Sexuality & Liminality in *Bisclavret*

In examining where Karras and Goodich's liminal characteristics occur, we can witness the power exchange and transformation staged in the lay of *Bisclavret*. The 'suspension of kinship ties' can be seen to initiate the liminal phase, as Bisclavret's wife no longer wished to lie with him ('*ne voleit mes lez lui fisir*', 1.102) upon finding out his secret, betrays and wrongs him with her actions ('*issi fu Bisclavret trahiz/ e par sa femme maubailiz*', 1.125-6). The rejection of this nocturnal arrangement is charged with further significance when it is reimagined later in the lay, between the king and Bisclavret; Marie describes that each day, the beast would sleep amongst the knights, just by the king ('*tuz jurz entre les chevalers/ e pres del rei se alout cuchier*', 1.176-7) and showed him clearly that he loved him' ('*bien s'aparceit quë il l'amout*', 1.184). The narrative's internal mirroring mediates the liminal phase and propagates the inversion of normative sexual politics. The 'absence of property' is particularly important in this regard as it is the removal of Bisclavret's clothing that distinguishes his human and animal forms, and subsequently precipitates his exile. Although they are initially taken against his will by his wife, Bisclavret took no look at his clothes when they are returned by the king ('*quant il l'urent devant lui mise/ ne se prist garde en nule guise*', 1.279-80). This might work to indicate not only the *absence* of property, but the *rejection* of it. Moreover, it narratively ties the king and the wife in relation to clothing; as the key to Bisclavret's special status, they initiate and close the liminal phase. Instead of desperately reincorporating, the werewolf luxuriates in his courtly status and inverts the savage *garwaf* myth established by Marie at the opening of the lay.

In addition to suspending presupposed kinship ties, the lay works to reshuffle the social ranks and statuses of the court people, similar to when Lanval clothes the jongleurs. The wolfs-head⁵¹ is so far elevated in status, in fact, that the king's court tortures a woman before they consider killing Bisclavret, as they do not believe he would attack without reason ('*ke il nel fet mie sanz reisun*', 1.208). This otherwise absurd logic is completely legitimised within the liminal phase, in which 'anything considered socially normative in

⁵¹ 'In the eleventh century, the sentence of exile was codified in English law with the famous decree, *caput gerat lupinum*: let his be a wolf's head' (328, Blut):

'[Agamben] refers specifically to the Anglo-Saxon wolf's head — the exile who can be executed with impunity, his head struck off like a wolf's ... '[it] is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither' (331, Blut).

terms of structure, such as behavior, hierarchy, and aspects of space and time'(26) is removed.

Moving through this catalogue of liminal characteristics, the transition phase can be noted by its 'minimization of sex distinctions', a feature far more complicated to show in the text. Allusions to the wolf's femininity as *la beste* and his nocturnal proximity to the king are not, in and of themselves, sufficient grounds upon which to prove the minimisation of a sexual binary. However, the violence of Bisclavret's bite works to maximise sexual distinction by the end of the lay, shedding light upon the elusive, earlier transition phase. The protagonist's transformation back into a man, coupled with his wife's mutilation, works to reinstate the normative gender relations of the medieval court.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, the potentiality of the transition period haunts the incorporation or aggregation phase, working to rewrite the sexuality of both the protagonist and the antagonist. This can be witnessed when Bisclavret awakens from his (incorporative) slumber in the king's bed. While, in the majority of other *Lais*⁵², monarchic structures are transposed onto domestic relations in order to expose their allegorical proximity, Marie deploys this technique here with very literal results. It is abundantly clear that the king and Bisclavret have a physical relationship both in and out of *la chambre* that, by the end of the lay, has replaced that of his previous domestic one. The opening of the liminal phase in *Bisclavret* mirrors its close, not only in terms of spousal estrangement, but regarding the language of physical intimacy. Various configurations of the verbs *acoler*, meaning 'to embrace', and *basier*, to kiss, are used in the collection, appearing alongside one another nine times in total. Besides *Bisclavret*, the terms coincide in *Lanval*, *Yonec*, *Eliduc*, *Guigemar*, *Chaitivel*, and *Equitan*; all of which describe physical intimacy between two lovers. While *baiser*, otherwise spelled *beiser*, may — according to the *AND*— denote kissing as an act of fealty, it can also signify sexual intercourse. The love-making meaning of the term is explicitly used in at least three of the aforementioned lays⁵³. This specific

⁵² I would consider the lay of *Equitan* to be an exception to this rule.

⁵³ '*Ensemble gisent e parolent, E sovent baisent e acolent*' [They lay together and talked, kissing and embracing.], *Guigemar*, 1.537-8.

'*E el li duit jote mener, Baisier, estreindre e acoler*' [she ought to have been full of joy, kissing him, holding him in tight embrace and enjoying herself with him], *Equitan*, 1.206-7).

'*Kar s'amie baisout sovent /e acolot estreitement.*' [he often kissed his beloved and embraced her closely], *Lanval*, (1.187-8).

combination of verbs contributes to the courtly register of Marie's work which, as previously mentioned, was likely to have been received by a Plantagenet court. As such, she relies on the polite terms *baiser* and *acoler*, which operate together as an epithet to euphemise the sex act in the *Lais*. More popular works, including Thomas Chestre's *Lanval* analogue, can use less peripheral language in designating moments of sexual intimacy. Chestre writes that 'For play, lytyll [Sir Launfal and Dame Tryamour] sclepte that nyght' (*Sir Launfal*, l.349)⁵⁴; while not being sexually explicit, this style of writing reduces the level of ambiguity shown in Marie's work.

For example, in the moment when the 'king ran forward to embrace [Bisclavret], and kissed him many times'⁵⁵, her text does not appear to refer to the pair's fealty or allegiance, which has not, at any point, seemed to falter anyway. However, what is most significant about Marie's language here is that it directly mirrors the early part of *Bisclavret*, conveying an intimacy between the wolf and his wife.

*'Li reis le curut enbracier,
plus de cent feiz l'acole e baise.'*

((l. 299-300), when Bisclavret heard this, he embraced her, drew her towards him, and kissed her.)

This word, '*enbracier*', adds further ambiguity. While it clearly means 'embrace' in modern English, its deployment in Anglo-Norman can also signify the act of sex. It is between this curious mirroring of start and end, marital and monarchic, that Marie divulges the highly-restructuring effects of liminality. What would otherwise be a classic werewolf tale transforms into an exploration *of*, or an experiment *in*, medieval sexual politics. While never directly relating her characters' actions to a wider societal metaphor, commentary, or judgement, Marie *does* observe and document their transition between political and domestic structures in her work. For example, although Bisclavret's wolf form elides the sexual binary and models 'the rightful exploitations of androgyny' (Freeman, *Dual Natures*, 299) during the transition phase, by the end of the lay, the implications of gender become visually obvious. Bisclavret's wife has her sex —and implicit sexual history— broadcast,

⁵⁴ This line can be roughly translated into modern English as 'due to lovemaking, they slept little that night'

⁵⁵ '*Li reis le curut enbracier, / plus de cent feiz l'acole e baise.'*

emphatically, to the poetic society, as her noselessness works to ‘generate a matrilineal narrative of dishonor’(298). Mutilating her progeny for generations to come, Bisclavret ‘made his wife’s outward appearance fit her inner reality [and traded] her silence for speech as she had done the obverse for him’(298). Not only is Bisclavret’s wife expelled from society with her lover, but she is gruesomely disfigured by his bite, leaving her and her future female offspring without noses and living noseless (*‘senz nes sunt nees,/ e si viveient esnasees’*, l.313-4). This memorable and bloody act has many sexual and social implications; most importantly, it compounds the lay’s interweaving of social exile, monstrosity, and sexuality. It could be said to represent a symbolic inverse-castration which transforms the nose —perhaps a phallic symbol— an oversized mouth, a yonic maw. The lay is overtly concerned with how a human transforms into his inverse, a monster; and how, covertly, this transformation permits him to trade his masculine status, for its inverse as *la beste*. Is it too far to claim that, as part of the resolution of these binary exchanges, the deceitful wife too specially recodified? Perhaps the reconfiguration of her internal monstrousness reconciles her social position with that of her actions towards Bisclavret. It reimagines and demonises her femininity, confining her to a disfigured human body. In contrast, Bisclavret’s transfiguration —initially the means of his social exclusion— permits his reintegration into the courtly society and consolidates his status as a loyal vassal.

The marked difference between their physical transformations is liminality; Bisclavret’s beastliness functions in the narrative as a rite of passage, enabling him to tip-toe the border between man and beast. At the beginning, it momentarily suspends social expectation, where it appears Bisclavret will be killed, and is instead afforded protections greater than the rest of the vassals, as he sleeps just by the king (*‘e pres del rei se alout cuchier’*, l.177). His status is undifferentiated, oscillating between man and beast, vassal and lover, characterised by an indefinable ambiguity that ultimately enables him to be reintegrated into the court, but changed, anew. What is interesting is that Marie opens the lay with some preliminary *bisclavret/garwaf* mythology, citing the violent and destructive nature of the werewolf that can be characterised not only by madness, but cannibalism.

‘Garualf, c[eo] est beste salvage:

*tant cum il est en cele rage,
humme devure, grant fait,
es granz forez converse e vait.*

(1.9-12, A werewolf is a ferocious beast; possessed by this rage, he devours men, causes great damage, and transforms and travels in vast forests).

What is subsequently depicted is *human* monstrosity; betrayed and wronged by his wife ('*issi fu Bisclavret trahiz/ e par sa femme maubailiz*', 1.125-6)), our protagonist is the one initially being hunted by the kings-men. While admittedly, Bisclavret does commit the most violent act of the entire collection, tearing his treacherous wife's nose 'right off her face', it is the human court that subjects her to torture. Moreover, Marie's voice pierces through the narrative here to affirm the righteousness of Bisclavret's vengeance, writing '*oiez cum il est bien vengiez!*' (1.253, 'hear how he took his revenge!'). Vengeful, violent punishment intersects with physical affection in Bisclavret, and it is in these specific moments that the court notes the wolf's humanity. When Bisclavret attacks the knight who married his wife, the members of the court remark that he would not have done it without good reason for he was bent on revenge ('*ke il nel fet mie sanz reisun... kar volenters se vengereit*', 1.208-10). Not only does this reincorporate ideas of hearsay and 'that which is said by the mouth', but it reaffirms the idea that his violence is related to his status as a [human] courtly subject. In fact, when Bisclavret later attacks his wife, Marie states that no one could restrain him ('*nul hum nel poeit retenir*', 1.251). Bisclavret's monstrous form enables him to circumvent the rules of the court; while initially submitting to the king as evidence of his humanity, his later rejection of courtly behaviour in the form of revenge is what pushes the king to protect Bisclavret yet again. More specifically, it is these instances of intentional violence or intentional affection that disclose both his humanity and his beastliness. These moments depict Bisclavret in his most marginal form, as both a vengeful *beste* and a disfigured baron. For Bisclavret, his monstrous transformation occupies a transitional, interstitial, or liminal moment within the *aventure*; for his wife, her disfigurement conveys her incorporation into a new structure, in which she is socially outcast.

The consequential reincorporation is summarised by Marie in the line '*si tost cum il pot aver aise, tute sa tere li rendi; plus li duna ke jeo ne di./ l femme ad del païs ostree/ e*

chacie de la cuntree'(1.302-6, [the king] restored [Bisclavret's] land to him; he gave him more than I can say. The woman was driven from land, and prohibited from the country). Classen critically asserts that, from this conclusion, 'we do not even know whether Bisclavret ever changes his nature fully, whether he returns to being a werewolf subsequently or not'(535). Taylor notes that, despite the rich detail of the lays, Marie often omits 'basic information'. For example, the lady in *Laiüstic* wraps the bird's corpse in 'a piece of samite that is 'embroidered and written on', but whether it tells her story is never made explicit'(Textual Situations, 103). However, it is observable that, energised by the uncertainty his wolf-status brought into the court, the homosocial structural relations between Bisclavret and his king have been revitalised; '*tute sa tere li rendi; plus li duna ke jeo ne di*' (all his lands he restored; he gave [more] than I can say)(1.303-4). As elements of the previous structure are hybridised in exposing liminality, the ensuing structure is, in turn, partially hybridised with those liminal symbols. Part of 'that transient humility and modelessness'(Turner, *Ritual*, 97) the protagonist experiences in his lay tempers and gives status to his renewed vassal position, the sacredness of which is only realised through the successive, oppositional modes of being he has passed through in order to acquire it. Within the narrative context of the lay, this conclusion represents a reestablishment of individual order, rather than of the poetic society. While Bisclavret's political status is reinstated, indulged even, the questions surrounding his relationship to the king, to his own physical body, and to domestic space are never answered. Like *Lanval*, the ending of *Bisclavret* passes beyond the limit of the text. Despite the fact that *Lanval* and *Bisclavret* contain folkloric, otherworldly threats, they both show an awareness of 'the real legal system in operation at the time'. However, Marie is far more concerned with delivering justice for the crimes brought about by a 'supernatural phenomenon' (Burgess and Busby, 34) than punishing or eradicating that phenomenon itself. Instead, the trace of Bisclavret's liminality — that is, his ambiguous special, sexual, and political status— endure beyond his lay.

1.9 Conclusions

The *Lais* of Marie de France are liminal in three key ways. Firstly, the lay form is a transitional genre in its movement away from musical, aural performance towards a more

literary form of lyric. In its representation of transition, Marie's *lais* are interwoven with mnemonic traces of their own orality and *aventure*. The anaphoric pairing of verbs calls forth these trace associations, working to transpose matrices of sexuality onto those of fealty, and vice versa. This establishes a vocabulary of spatial and social liminality that lexically unites the entire collection.

Secondly, the *Lais* are concerned with the fallible transition of language between writer and interpreter, as well as the attempt to recuperate the past. In her composition, Marie both generates *and* participates in a national-historical mythology, while accounting for her own contemporaneous courtly culture. In doing so, she masterfully manoeuvres through the ambiguities of language and *aventure* and propagates the plurivalent meanings of the texts.

Thirdly, Marie's *Lais* represent a liminal phase in the lives of the protagonists; they briefly depict a period in which they are between political and gendered states of being. Their narrative content reflects the tripartite sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation⁵⁶. In doing so, they precipitate the continued potentiality of language, gender, and nation, and for hierarchies to be covertly reorganised. More significantly, the liminal phase never really "ends" in the *Lais*, as the unstructuring implications of the transition haunt the text, even after its close. In *Lanval*, the persistence of liminality works to reform medieval virtues of masculinity in the image of their feminine counterpart. Bisclavret's transition affords him the ability to navigate the poetics, or politics, of silence and escape language's indifference to human intention. In doing so, both characters manage to circumvent the structures of disempowerment that they face and instead pursue the possibility of Other potentialities.

This examination of the liminality of *aventure* has been significant in my wider study of the anglicisation of the lay form. Marie's *Lais* in particular encapsulate the amorphousness of medieval gender and national identities as political and social categories. In their processing of marginal figures from transition to incorporation, they demonstrate the centrality of the *rite de passage* to this iteration of the form. Moreover, it is by establishing that the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Lais* contain thematic, structural,

⁵⁶ Van Gennep: '[analysis of rites of passage] may be subdivided into *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*...' (11).

and formal elements that reflect the rite of passage that this chapter can provide background and support for the claims ensuing chapters will make of the Middle English lays that appeared in the fourteenth-century.

Chapter 2: Sir Orfeo: Liminality, The Lay, and the Limit of The Word

Sir Orfeo (composed late thirteenth to early fourteenth century) is one of the lays found in the *Auchinleck Manuscript*, a codex of miscellanies thought to have been produced between 1331 and 1340. It tells the tale of a harp-playing minstrel-king, recounting his self-inflicted exile after his queen is abducted by a sublimely powerful otherworld king. After ten years in the forest, Orfeo stumbles upon his captured queen in the wilderness. Through a combination of mistaken identities, sleight of hand, and musical prowess, he saves her from the imprisonment of the Faery otherworld and returns to his former kingdom, preserved by his steward in his stead.

In his oscillation between the symmetrically exempt states of king and outlaw, Sir Orfeo manages to resist the otherwise homogenising power of the Faery King and his entourage. While the enchanting abductors sustain visual enactments of status and wealth throughout the lay, Orfeo's exilic abandonment of both his lands and identity ironically afford him the power he needs to restore his status as king. Through the restructuring potentiality of his liminal status, this unconventional romance hero is able to win back his kingdom and reclaim the minstrel figure as the protean centre of the lay form.

After an evaluation of the material aspects of the *Orfeo* lay, this chapter will open with a discussion of the minstrel-king figure in the *MS Auchinleck*. It will consider how *Sir Orfeo* relates to his manuscript neighbours, *David the King* and *Sir Tristem*, in addition to his textual and mythological antecedent, Orpheus.

Following this, with a short comparison between the Middle English text and *Laiüstic*, the central section of the chapter examines birds and musicality, themes shared by the work of Marie and the anonymous *Orfeo* poet. For each of these lays, the itinerancy of [bird]song drives the central figures onwards, both narratively and formally.

Lastly, this chapter discusses three instances of a significant leitmotif in the *Sir Orfeo* lay. Noted by *undertides*, music, and the disruption of hierarchies, these tripartite occurrences characterise the minstrel-king's liminal status and his descent into disorder.

We have seen in the previous chapter how, for her courtly audience, Marie de France elevates the musicality and aurality she saw in her supposed Breton sources. She draws these sources into the world of courtly romance as an enactment of self-reflecting

fantasy; a mirror in which the elite can see their own plight and political troubles reflected. However, the image she invokes consistently sidelines the figure of the minstrel and his dual role of story-teller *and* story-maker⁵⁷. She consolidates ‘the romance that unfolded from memory on the lips of the minstrel... [for which] any single performance [has] a claim on authenticity’ (Longworth, 2). While Marie’s *Lais* do retain traces of the sources’ auralty, the later Middle English lay of *Sir Orfeo* insists on the significance of music and minstrelsy as a constitutive aspect of the genre. The present chapter argues that, coming from its Anglo-Norman forbearers, minstrelsy reemerges as a lay tradition in the *Orfeo* romance. This reemerging significance is allegorised through two complementary motifs of the lay; on the one hand, Orfeo’s harp-playing and, on the other, the birds in the text.

Like the conventional outlaw-king, the minstrel king is afforded special powers; his dialectical nature blends lowliness and sacredness, religiosity and secularism, which seems to reflect the dual heritage of the lay form. He bears witness to the anglicisation of the lay genre, to the extent that this text attempts to situate the minstrel figure within an English literary canon. Yet ironically, the reality of that supposedly endemic tradition of performance is actually the condition of a migratory, itinerant, and ephemeral story-telling figure. As such, I believe, *Sir Orfeo* is more reflective of a liminal and incipient national consciousness beyond that which the lay form can anticipate.

2.1 Songbirds & Falcons, Minstrels & Kings

The wild birds of the forest will be central to this discussion; in the *foules*’ indifference to human hierarchies, they emblemise disorder. Throughout the lay’s depictions of the exilic wilderness, the birds flock to Orfeo to hear him play his music, waiting at his feet in an image of obeisance that is similarly reiterated by the Faery King’s court, who ‘liggeth adoun to his fete’ (l.441) later in the text. Yet they owe Orfeo no sense of hospitality and they abandon him as soon as his lonely performance is over. Unlike the human court, the birds are not subject to the social hierarchies of the kingdom; only to the appreciation of art and performance, which transcends the borders of human and animal. In the forest, every

⁵⁷ An exception to this claim can be found in Marie’s lay of Chevrefoil, in which the poetess discusses how the lay came to be composed before her; ‘pur la joie qu’il ot eüe/ de s’amie qu’il ot veüe/ e pur ceo k’il aveit escrit, / si cum la reine l’ot dit./ pur les paroles remembrer./ Tristram, ki bien saveit harper,/ en aveit fet un nuvel lai’ (l.107-13, *For the joy he had had for the sight of his love and for what he had written, as the queen had told him to remember the words, Tristram, who was a skilled harper, made a new lay*).

creature, be it human, bird, or beast, can be seen as *foreign*— in a very literal sense of the word. Coming from the Latin ‘*foris*’ (outside) and ‘*reign*’ (king), the foreign element in Orfeo involves the dissolution of all social and political hierarchies. This drives Orfeo through a rite of passage, returning him only to his former sacredness through an experience of abasement. In its partial parody of the human court, the forest and its animal inhabitants hybridise the dialectical concepts of anarchy and monarchy, order and disorder, and synthesise an ever-volatile blend of the two. Restless and stateless, the birds bring disorder to the narrative; in their disruption of the categories of human and animal, they represent the protean, boundary-crossing potentiality that will be later assigned to Orfeo *the minstrel*.

In contrast, the trained falcons represent monarchy and order. As a very literal depiction of the symbiosis of monarchic control, they hold power,— are held *within* power. Vertically bound within the courtly structure, they exert terror over the waterfowl. In turn, the falcons themselves are controlled by the falconers, who manipulate their bodies for the game of the hunt. This consideration casts the role of the falcons in a different light; in one moment an apex predator, the next a domesticated creature, their presence in the narrative alludes to the Faery King’s nexus of control. It is for this reason that I will suggest that the falcons represent the institution of monarchy, or the dominant and domineering order of things in the lay. The powerful hawk is mechanised within a monarchic court that, through all of its decadence and honour, camouflages the violent means of its institution. The falcon, then, may come to represent Orfeo *the king*; likewise holding and held-within power, the minstrel-king is duty-bound to his structural obligations.

Branded under the same hallmark as its Breton sources, this Middle English lay testifies to its rite of lexical, aural, and literary passage via its Anglo-Norman antecedents. Through this *translatio* and through the synthesis of the concepts of minstrelsy and monarchy, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* is able to resituate the genre at its ancestral confluence of centre and margin.

2.2 The *Auchinleck Manuscript*’s Minstrel-King

The *Auchinleck Manuscript* has been housed at the National Library of Scotland since 1925. Although it is unknown why or for whom it was made, its high quality vellum

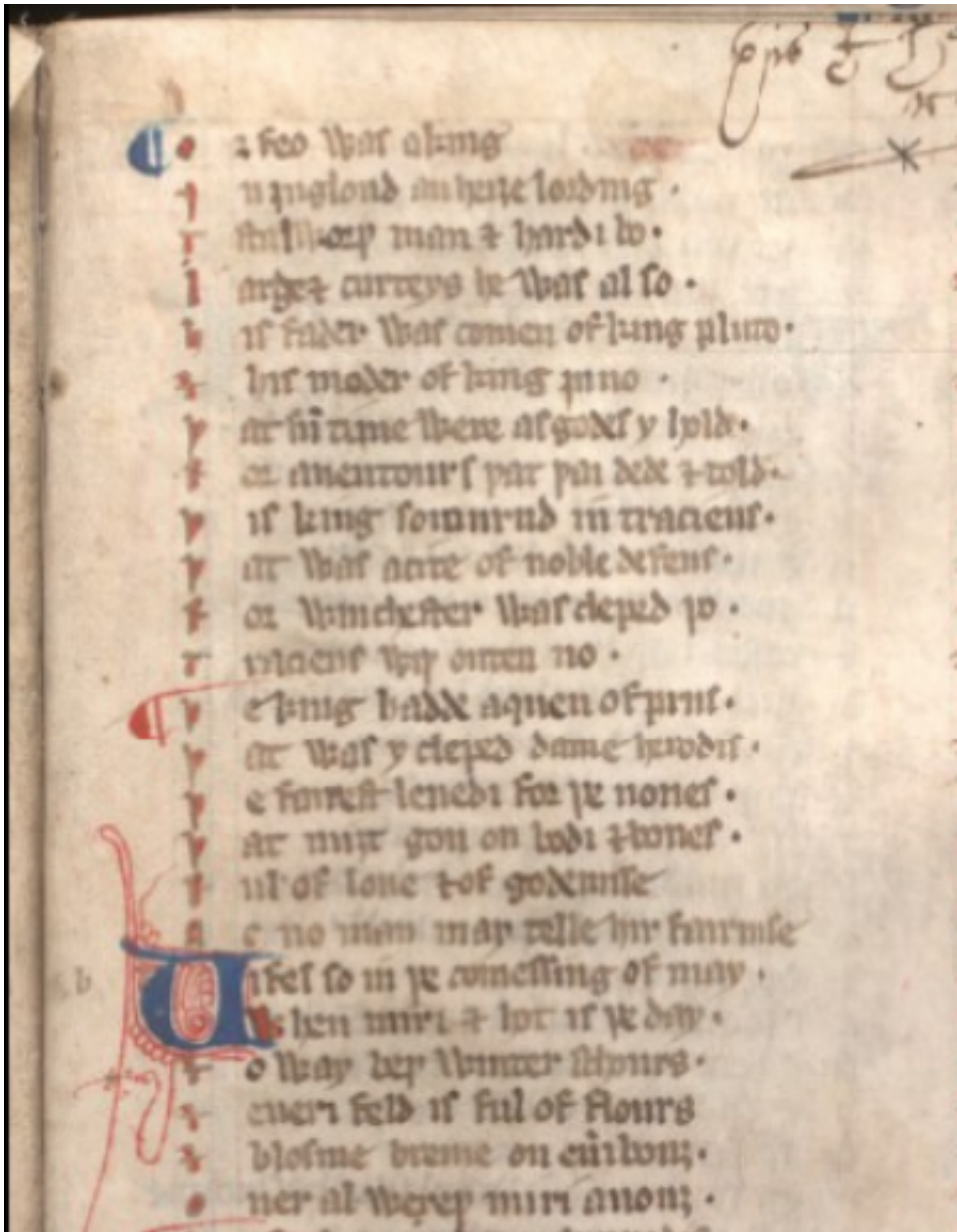
would indicate affluence on the part of the commissioning party. Alison Wiggins, one of the co-editors of the digital *Auchinleck Manuscript Project*, estimates that the codex was likely produced between 1331 and 1340 in London. She says that the *MS Auchinleck* ‘is the first example of a commercially produced manuscript written in English’ (*Scribes*, 10) and is ‘[perhaps] specifically designed for enthusiasts of literary and historical texts in the English language’ (*Auchinleck Manuscript Project* online, hereby referred to as *AMP*). Across her research into the *MS Auchinleck*’s production, Wiggins highlights the manuscripts as ‘an important instance of large-scale collaboration between multiple scribes’ (*AMP*). Namely, she notes Scribe 1’s operational role throughout the manuscript as the predominant delegator, supervisor, and most prolific copyist with 31 out of 44 of the extant items being produced by their hand alone⁵⁸. The written dialect of this scribe has been attributed to the Middlesex area, marking ‘a distinctive stage [...] in the development of the London dialect’ (Wiggins, citing Samuels). Scribe 1 is presumably responsible for two of the Middle English lays found in the manuscript, *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, while *Sir Degare* has been attributed to Scribe 3, who also wrote in the London-area dialect.

Most texts in the manuscript began with a title and a miniature illuminating a scene in the narrative; however, all but four of miniatures have been removed or defaced since its first production. The Middle English lays of *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Degare* are both included in the group of texts with missing miniatures. For *Sir Orfeo*, the absence of an estimated 40 lines of the opening ensures that there is no way of knowing whether it previously contained a miniature. However, it is likely that it did based on the length and significance of the lay in the manuscript. It is estimated that around 16 texts or items have been lost or stolen from the manuscript’s original 60⁵⁹. It is worth noting than an additional 10 folios have been discovered detached from the manuscript.

The three aforementioned *MS Auchinleck* items have been identified as lays through a number of formal and textual aspects. Most obviously, a key identifier is the direct reference to (Litel/Lytyll) Bretaygne, Bretagne, Bretagne, Breteyn(e) for these

⁵⁸ The number of *MS Auchinleck* scribes has long been debated. Wiggins herself unpacks this debate thoroughly in her paper *Are Auchinleck Manuscript scribes 1 and 6 the same scribe? The Advantage of Whole-Data Analysis and Electronic Texts*. She concludes, through analysis of orthographic irregularity between the two, that ‘Otuel was not copied by Auchinleck Scribe 1 but by a sixth contributor to the Auchinleck Manuscript, Bliss’s Scribe 6’ (19).

⁵⁹ ‘The *Auchinleck Manuscript*... is a volume of forty-four Middle English texts, with approximately sixteen items lost’ (Wiggins, *Scribes*, 10)



Middle English texts, or *bretan(s)*, *bretun*, *bretaigne*, *bretain(e)* for their Anglo-Norman predecessors. Used interchangeably to signify the geographic regions of either Britain or Brittany, the term is also used in eleven out of twelve of Marie's earlier *Lais*⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ The exception out of the Anglo-Norman *lais* is *Chevrefoil*, instead setting its scene between 'Suhtwales' and 'Cornvaile'.

For example, the opening of *Sir Orfeo* contains references to the ‘Bretouns [who] made her layes’(16). The first line of the *MS Auchinleck* text, ‘Orfeo was a King’, is line 39 of the Laskaya-Salisbury version, an aspect paramount to acknowledge when considering the materiality of the text. Laskaya estimates that between 36 and 40 lines are missing from the manuscript’s opening, a folio ‘likely lost to miniature hunters who took the entire page’(Laskaya, *Graftings*, 2). This manuscript damage led the editors of the later Harley 3810 version (produced in the early 15th century in Warwickshire, housed at the British Library) to borrow text from what is presumably *Lay le Freine* or *Kyng Orfew*, an analogue⁶¹ found in the Bodleian Library’s MS., Ashmole 61 (produced late 15th century in the North East Midlands) in Oxford⁶². We can reasonably assume that whoever composed the *Orfeo* text was working from a now-extinct Old French source, potentially *Le Lai d’Orphéy* referenced in the *Lai de l’Espine* and *Floire et Blanceflor*. The author of *Sir Orfeo* remains unknown, although some have speculated unconvincingly⁶³ that the poem was composed by the same person as *Lay le Freine*. The *Orfeo* poet does, however, appear to bring their own confident fluidity, emotional depth, and vitality to the tale.

It has been affirmed by John B. Beston that although evidently sharing a scribe, *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay Le Freine* were composed by different poets. For one, *Lay Le Freine* approaches Marie’s earlier version of the story with a more pious hand, removing blasphemy from the mother’s lament and foregrounding the importance that Guroun forsake his concubine in favour of a wife. Comparatively, left ‘untouched by clerical precepts’, *Sir Orfeo* ‘celebrates the glories of minstrelsy’ without ‘Christianizing... [its] Classical or Celtic elements’(155). Beston does conclude that the general prologue is more likely to have been taken from *Lay Le Freine*, rather than the other way around. He posits that in the Harley 3810 version of *Sir Orfeo*, the prologue was appropriated for its references to the ‘layes that ben in harping [in Bretayne]’, calling upon the nostalgic appeal that Breton tales posed in the late medieval period. As ‘a minstrel bid for attention’(161),

⁶¹ ‘*Sir Orfeo* lacks its introduction. ... only a stub remains... leading editors to fashion an introduction by substituting opening lines either from the *MS Auchinleck’s Lay Le Freine* or from the *Orfeo* variant, *Sir Orfew*, found in Bodleian MS, Ashmole 61.’(Laskaya, *Graftings*, 2)

⁶² Given the date of the Ashmole 61, if this was copied from King Orfewe, it would have to have been from an earlier, now lost manuscript.

⁶³ Beston thoroughly refutes this.

both texts call upon the ‘lordinges’ to ‘herkeneth’ to their respective stories, which Beston says is a ‘quick attention-getting device [for the *Orfeo* author] before [he swings] enthusiastically into his own highly polished tale’(162). It is, however, this display of minstrelsy itself that centres the fragmented *Orfeo* text within the conventions of the lay tradition. While this call for the court to listen to the tale could be interpreted as a purely aesthetic or ‘attention-getting’ device, I suggest that its use here lends itself to the musicality, the vocality, of lay culture.

I will now try to justify this perspective as follows. As Andrew Taylor suggests of another Middle English lay, *Emaré*, the direct addresses and references to songs being sung ‘make[s the text] sound like a work designed for the mouth of a minstrel’(Fragmentation, 40). He notes that while the *MS Auchinleck’s* expensive foliation and ornamentation indicates that it was ‘never intended to be a performance script for a minstrel’(42), the *Orfeo* tale’s appearance in the manuscript would suggest that ‘there must have existed [a reading public] that enjoyed reading romances written in the minstrel-style’(43). However, its placement and invocation of the minstrel, or more specifically the minstrel-king, serves a far more emphatically political function within the manuscript,— and more broadly within the lay poetry that I believe points towards both the incipience *of* and nostalgia *for* English story-telling traditions. Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that even in the borrowed prologue’s opening line, the later Harley and Ashmole *Orfeo* variations convey an image of ‘the reader reading and [existing] alongside the high profile given to performance’(Sir *Orfeo*, Laskaya & Salisbury, 1n1);

‘We redeth oft and findeth y-write,
And this clerkes wele it wite,
Layes that ben in harping’(1-3)
[‘We often read and find written,
And scholars know well,
Lays that are played in song’]

Embodying the spirit of *aventure*, the opening ‘illustrate[s] the overlapping of orality and literacy’(Sir *Orfeo*, 15n1) so prevalent in the lays. This harping, which features heavily in the *Orfeo* lay as both a theme and narrative device, refers to the form’s origins as spoken poetry accompanied by music.

The lay, in definition and characterisation, is undeniably ‘linked to sound, to music, [and] to song’ (Bloch, 30). Of all of the extant lays, *Orfeo* is perhaps the one that most vividly resonates with the form’s ancestry of performance. According to Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, *Sir Orfeo* and Henryson’s Renaissance-era Scottish analogue, the *Tale of Orpheus and Eurydice his Quene*, both arise from the English minstrel tradition and are ‘related to the prominent position in medieval society of the singer of tales’ (634). Gros Louis suggests that it was the *Orfeo* lay in particular that ‘enabled the mythical singer to move into medieval secular literature fully acclimated to the world of courtly love and romance’ (645). I would then argue that musicality, which is continually interwoven into the narrative thematically and tonally, can be seen to be inherited from Marie as part of the Breton minstrel tradition from which she drew her *Lais*. Despite Marie’s work presenting itself in vellum and ink in around 70 years before the *MS Auchinleck* work did, the textual and aural tradition of the lays are still a significant component of the manuscript’s production. The haphazard genesis of the narrative content and the postpartum transformation, *defacement* even, of the *Orfeo* lay operates indifferently to the concept of “complete” or “incomplete”, “perfect” or “imperfect” texts. As such, in this chapter, I will attempt to balance the ongoing tensions *and* intersections between the *aventure* of the text and the material presentation of it, without ever privileging one as more academically significant than the other⁶⁴.

Orfeo’s minstrelsy has an interesting, unresolved duality that drives each of the three most comprehensive versions of the text. Despite their lexical variations, the Ashmole, the *MS Auchinleck*, and the Harley manuscript versions all foreground *Orfeo*’s harp-playing as his defining characteristic. However, the *MS Auchinleck* version’s intra-textual positioning uniquely participates in the thematics of minstrelsy that contrasts with the musicality inherited from Marie’s Breton lay form. The *Orfeo* text follows firstly, a single folio (f.28 verso and recto) containing an abbreviated version of Psalm 51 entitled *David þe King*, and secondly the incomplete, 3344-line romance of *Sir Tristem*. This is

⁶⁴ This idea is elaborated by Robert M. Longworth, who says that the oral tradition’s ‘protean identity’ (2) is ‘an evanescent art indifferent to textual authority’. He suggests that, unlike romances ‘made to be read’ (1), the minstrel’s medium cannot be understood in terms of a ‘definitive auctorial version’ (2). Rather, the *Orfeo* lay is one made for, by, and about minstrels and their art form; ‘the hero of the work is a minstrel and the instrument of his heroism is minstrelsy’ (6). In fact, the *Orfeo* lay observes the itinerant and migratory figure of the minstrel as he undergoes a pilgrimage that, by its end, has ultimately (re)instated him in the highest ranking position in the land.

surely no coincidence; the positioning of these three texts links them thematically to the concept of divinely inspired performance. It endows the act of producing music with a catalytic potential, biblically inherited and institutionally disseminated.

Twice in the *Tristem* romance is King Mark's marriage antagonised, directly or indirectly in 'proxy-combat' by the competitive skill of the harp players depicted; firstly, by Tristem himself and subsequently by Moraunt. The second occurrence of this in that romance, Bahr states, parallels '[a] nearly identical scene...in *Sir Orfeo*' in which the Faery King reluctantly releases Heurodis to honour his promise to the minstrel-king in disguise. In *Sir Tristem*,

'[Moraunt] persuades Mark to promise him anything he wants in return for his playing. Mark foolishly agrees, the harper demands Ysonde, and Mark, after considering his options, decides to keep his word.' (Bahr, 185)

Both King Mark and the Faery-King decide to uphold their promises; caught in a double bind, they make a decision based on a flawed code of ethics that transforms the court's (female) subjects into commutable possessions. As a stand-alone detail, each king's moral mistake could easily be interpreted as a literary device meant to challenge the protagonist; to drive them towards the next point in the narrative, at which point Orfeo or Tristem or another knight can prove their love or skill or loyalty by rescuing their beloved. However, this intertextual doubling, this overlaying of parallel images in *Tristem* and *Orfeo*, projects twice the idea of discontentment with royal misbehaviour that had prevailed in the two decades preceding the manuscript's production. The idea of such conduct 'was a resonant theme for [the] Auchinleck's original audience of prosperous London citizens who were still reeling from the chaotic misrule of Edward II' (186). Moreover, it places the character of Orfeo in a curious position. Helpless before the Faery-King's invasion, he abandons his royal obligations, masquerades in poverty, and retrieves his queen through the omission of his kingly status; yet upon his return, he is celebrated by both the poet and the court, who '[f]or joie... wepe with her eigne' (591, for joy wept from their eyes). I acknowledge that the text's placement alongside the *Tristem* romance works to generate a reading experience evocative of the political unrest associated with Edward II's unfavourable rule; however, I

also maintain that the *Orfeo* romance's enduring thesis is that of a minstrel's lay. Hewn from the minstrel's vagabondage, *Sir Orfeo* works to centralise the marginal figure and makes art out of the figure of the artist.

Regardless, its following after *David the King* and *Sir Tristem* certainly indicates that the order of the *MS Auchinleck* considers 'a larger exploration of the practice and ethics of royal power' which, Bahr says, is 'made additionally legible by the more specific recurring motif of harping'(186). He suggests that *Sir Orfeo*'s placement after the paraphrased psalm reinvokes 'David's widespread iconographic association with the harp'(185). This significant textual intertwining of legend and lay does not begin with the *MS Auchinleck's Orfeo* tale. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis writes that Orpheus 'from the earliest days of Christianity... has been compared to David, the magical musician who played in the wilderness'. He also highlights that certain classical sources, such as the texts of Eusebius and Justin Martyr, compare Orpheus' 'charming of the animals to the power of Christ's words subduing the bestial desires of men' and as such liken him directly to 'the Good Shepherd, whose words drew all mankind'(644). In fact, Gros Louis credits the popularity of the Orpheus myth's revival in the medieval *Sir Orfeo* to the allegorisation of the 'Christian acceptance of death'(646), rather than to the English minstrel tradition. While acknowledging the social value of '[a] man who could play the harp and calm, interest or excite his listeners with his songs and stories'(644), Gros Louis suggests that the broad appeal of Orfeo as a medieval hero is that he is a 'moral leader'. He 'overcomes [the loss of his kingdom and wife through] patience, humility, and loyalty'(646) — a far cry from the intensity of love-grief in Marie's work, and even the loss-impassioned demands of the hero's classical predecessor.

It would be remiss to not discuss here this mythic ancestor, styled in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as Orpheus. While the title characters share certain superficial aspects, such as the abduction of Eurydice/Heurodis and their subsequent journeys into a hellish otherworld, their respective tales are situated within varying literary traditions and political agendas. Not only does our Orfeo successfully recover both his wife and kingdom, but the lay reimagines the classical myth as a power struggle between native and invading cultures. Eurydice's descent into an other/underworld is precipitated by an unfortunate, if symbolic, snakebite; Heurodis' departure is an explicit kidnapping by a foreign king. In

rescuing her, Orpheus' strikes his lyre while earnestly and transparently appealing to love in lyric; despite his supposed 'moral' leadership, Orfeo conceals his true identity and relies on the enchantment of his music. These parallel and distorted transfigurations of the classic myth testify to the partial narrative inheritance born into the *Orfeo* lay. However, the *Orfeo* romance recodes the myth as a political analogue, drawing on both classical and biblical associations to situate the otherworld as an inverted hell, as realm of liminal possibility between life and death. Moreover, it leverages the Orpheus myth's foundational associations with the biblical figure of King David.

As such, I argue that, despite finding its genesis in the classical Orpheus myth, the relationship between the minstrel and the lyric poet is consolidated in a new form in the *MS Auchinleck's* minstrel triptych as part of the canon of English literary tradition. By recoding the tale in the medium of a lay, the *MS Auchinleck's Orfeo* reinvigorates the dualism of the minstrel-king; a figure who is, on the one hand, endemic, native, and constitutive of an English cultural convention and, on the other, evasive, itinerant, and mobile.

Yet how can an orthographic medium retain the minstrel lay's aurality? To answer that question, we must again return to the *MS Auchinleck*.

Stephen G. Nichols says that by the mid-thirteenth century, manuscript technology had made steps to presenting metadata with 'heterogeneous material intelligibility'(50). The markers of a 'more sophisticated' organisation of information include 'chapter headings, rubrics, decorated and historiated letters separating sections, [and] miniature paintings'(50); beyond visual appeal, these features contribute to the manuscript's legibility and facilitate ease of navigation. They affirm that the 'manuscript matrix' is an 'interactive space inviting... interpretative activity' rather than merely 'an inert place of inscription'(39). Within the *Auchinleck Manuscript*, within the *Orfeo* text specifically, this dynamic is distinct in that both the text contents and presentation are constructed on a plane 'of radical contingencies... [that] often provoke rupture between perception and consciousness'(203). The manuscript's collective elements synthesise and manipulate a multimedia experience, testifying to the fact that the reading process is primarily a visual one. For example, the *Sir Orfeo* folios have minimal initialisation and paragraphing, at

some points allowing the eye to skip up to 112 lines⁶⁵ without a paraph nor initial subdividing the text. Using a Gothic style, the hand itself lends itself to legibility, particularly compared to the Anglicana and secretary scripts of the later Middle Ages. When it does employ decorated initials, the *Orfeo* text flourishes its rubrication across up to 17 lines in places, including l.175 ('When King Orfeo herd this cas') and l.497 ('Amorwe, oyain nonetide').

While this is typical of the *MS Auchinleck's* visual codicology, it undoubtedly works to generate a reading experience distinct from, for example, the *Tristem* romance in which regular pilcrow symbols demarcate the start of every eleven-line stanza; or *David the King's* frequent 'ornamented blue initials and intricate rubrication for each [line] of Latin'(Bahr). Bahr suggests that the more elaborate *mise-en-page* of the *David* folios 'prompt[s] us to linger over a text that we might otherwise dismiss as just one miscellaneous element of a larger miscellany'(184). Despite this, it hardly seems fair to label the *Orfeo* text plain in comparison given that it has been shorn of its introductory miniature and first few folios. One of these lost leaves could have even depicted, in its miniature, a visual representation of the harp-playing king, and in doing so, invoke the minstrel tradition in its aesthetic as well as textual matrices. Moreover, the text itself does contain some visual clues to the lay's elusive key; namely, in its introduction of Orfeo and Heurodis respectively. The line 'Orfeo was a King' might, to some readers, seem to foreground his royal status before his minstrel status; but compare it to Heurodis'(25) more indirect introduction;

'The king hadde a quen of priis
That was ycleped dame Herodis'(51-2)

The fact that she is a queen, that she is 'of priis', and that she is a dame are all mentioned before her name is listed. For all of the description of Orfeo's ancestry, bravery, courage, and skill (even more lavish in the supplemented versions of the text), Heurodis' *fairnesse* was so great that 'no man may telle [it]'(56). Just like her name, her character, and her

⁶⁵ Between lines 63, '¶ Bis ich quen, Dame Heurodis', and the initialised line 175 'When king Orfeo herd þis cas', the text is uninterrupted by paragraphing indicators. Stretches of over 80 uninitialised text can also be found between lines 219 and 303, as well as 303 and 387.

narrative arc, Heurodis seems to vanish from the text just after having been recovered. In contrast, ‘Orfeo was a King’ visually and textually establishes that he is first and foremost, by his very naming, the Orpheus legend’s Middle English successor. Even in the ensuing description of his royal status, the poet attaches Orfeo’s lineage to that of ‘King Pluto’(29), surely referencing, simultaneously, Orfeo’s Faery-King proxy and his Ovidian ancestry. Notably, the cross-cultural, multivalent family tree presented in the manuscript indicates that ‘his moder [was comen] of king Juno’(30); this imagines the minstrel-king as a figure already stationed between Hades and Olympus, or heaven and hell,— a spatial, lineal, and vital liminality all of its own. Before any of this description, however, the visual organisation of information on the page introduces early on in the text, that Orfeo’s primary character is that of a minstrel (‘Orfeo mest of ani thing/ Lovede the gle of harping’, l.25).

As mentioned earlier, the *MS Auchinleck*’s expense and ornamentation dispel the possibility that it could ever be a ‘performance script’(42) intended for use during a minstrel’s act. The text it contains does, undeniably, participate in the art of minstrelsy, even in its aural imitation of Marie’s octosyllabic couplets which are ‘more suggestive of the Breton minstrel tradition’(Laskaya & Salisbury, *General Introduction*, 1). While the lay does elevate Orfeo’s lyre-playing ancestor to the status of King, it maintains that his principal character is that of the minstrel. Given this textual aspect, it is apparent that, from its Anglo-Norman ancestor, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* recasts the figure within his own play, permitting the English minstrel tradition to serve as theme, medium, and protagonist.

2.3 Musicality, Birds, & the Lay Form

Besides the minstrel, the form’s musicality and aurality preserve another aspect of the Breton tradition. It has been suggested that the term “lai” itself is inherited from the Irish word “loïd” (Bloch, 29), which is thought to mean the song of a blackbird. Of course, in varying ways, the bird and the minstrel both travel from place to place, offering their song. Yet more significantly in the text, birds and minstrels share, in their voices, the ability to enchant, to disrupt, to capture —literally or metaphorically— their listeners.

This is certainly true of the musical figures of the *Orfeo* lay and it has already been noted that both Heurodis’ abduction and return are precipitated by the enchantment of

music. As such, while capturing ‘the vibrant cadences of oral performance’ (Laskaya & Salisbury, *General Introduction*, 1), that is *human* performance, the *Orfeo* text borrows and builds upon another one of Marie’s most iconic tropes: birds. Appearing in *Milun*, *Laüstic*, and *Yonec* as the facilitators of illicit romances, birds serve Marie’s work as messengers of courtly love. For example, in the lay of *Laüstic*, as in many medieval romances, the nightingale euphemises the fleeting nature of love, an association that comes from the bird’s inherent absence-presence. The nightingale occupies a liminal space in the narrative, existing on the edge of sensory realms as a creature often heard without being seen, and vice versa. Moreover, they are migratory and as such are the ‘harbingers of spring’, symbolising the ‘rising erotic desire and burgeoning life associated with springtime’ (3, Dickson). They implant, thematically, the prospect of possibility, as the incoming season welcomes new life. Tied to both musicality and the idea of new bloom, this imagery relates peripherally to the metapoetic elements of the lays, which centre around the self-conscious production of the text within the text.

I propose that the songbird can be seen to be liminal in two ways. Firstly, that it has a voice, but not the ability to produce speech; the ability to sing, but not to produce music⁶⁶. This places it at an ambiguous borderland between human and animal, a theme I will later argue is similarly invoked by the *facouns* of the *Orfeo* lay. Secondly, the nightingale’s typically aural, yet not physical, presence in the narrative symbolically endows it with a sense of spatial liminality, as it metaphysically traverses betwixt and between realms of being and non-being. Within the lay, the nightingale serves as both a liminal figure and as a figure that activates liminality. Its inherent simultaneity, neither here nor there, generates the sense that the prospect of union is beyond reach for the lovers. On the precipice of proximity, the nightingale’s *loïd* allegorises the form’s *aventure*. Just like Heurodis, whose transcendent beauty ‘no man may telle’, the *laüstic*’s physical presence is continually deferred by the lay, except in its moments of suffering.

For the covert lovers in *Laüstic*, the nightingale is a [meta]physical manifestation of their unconsummated passion. Unable to fulfil the physical aspect of their romance, a lord

⁶⁶ ‘The nightingale, as other birds, appears betwixt and between; with voice, but without speech, with song, but without music, with physical presence and yet also with the ability to disappear into thin air—or at least fly away—and evade the human beholder even in the very moment of song.’ (Dickson, 2).

and his neighbour's wife watch one another from their respective windows during the night.

*'Lungement se sunt entr'amé
Tant que ceo vient a un esté
Que bruil e pre sunt reverdi
E li vergier ierent fluri'*

(1.57-60, 'For a long time love existed between them until one summertime when the wood and meadows were verdant and the gardens were blossoming.')

Here, Marie emphasises the natural world's plenitude in the height of summertime (*esté*), while intensifying the love-longing aspect of the relationship with *lungement*. She then qualifies this vivid temporal picture with the musicality of 'small birds', *oiselet*.

*'Cil oiselet par grant duçur
Maint lur joie en sum la flur'*

(1.61-2, 'Those small birds of much sweetness sing⁶⁷ their joy upon the flower tops')

When questioned, the wife tells her husband that she stays awake at night to listen to the *laüstic*'s song since '*il nen ad joïe en cest mund, Ki n'ot le laüstic chanter*' (1.84-5, 'there is no joy in this world like [hearing] the nightingale sing'). Given that 'both [the lover and the nightingale] are close enough to hear, but not close enough to touch', the nightingale and its song become 'representative of, and at the same time bringer of balm to a human sufferer of love-longing'(4). As a nocturnal, migratory, and fugitive creature, the nightingale's scarcity represents the elusive dynamic of courtly love, a convention in almost all of Marie's *Lais*. In generating the tension of love's ache, her Anglo-Norman tales favour this illicit, secretive type of romance; for the *Laüstic* couple, their love can only exist outside of the confines of marriage, unfettered by the consummation of an institution. Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr. affirms that this illicitness is not, as posited by Joseph Bédier, the union of Provençal courtly love tropes with the Celtic love concept, nor representative of fatal *passio* (39). Rather, it is 'because of the obstacles confronting it,

⁶⁷ Laskaya and Salisbury translate *maintent* as 'sang', and Claire Waters as 'break into song'; I wish to note that the infinitive *manier* can also be interpreted in modern English as 'to play (a musical instrument)'.

[that] the love [in Marie's work] always involves suffering and frequently ends in grief' (43). In the case of *Laüstic*, the grief of lost love cannot and never can be assuaged once the nightingale meets its grisly end; the killing of the bird comes to represent the death of the lovers' hope.

However, it is important to recognise that while many lovers in the *Lais* suffer because of their *demesure*⁶⁸, the *Laüstic* couple makes no attempts to facilitate their corporeal union. Rather, the characters in the tale transpose their expression of physical love, and of physical violence, onto the nightingale. The jealous husband kills the bird, presuming it will encourage his wife to stay in bed at night.

*'Le col li rumpt a ses deus meins
De ceo fist il que trop vileins
sur la dame le cors geta
Se que sun chainse ensanglanta
Un poi desur le piz devant'*

(l.116-19, 'The neck he broke between his two hands, in such a villainous (crude) way [he threw it] onto the lady, bloodying her chemise, a little [blood] upon her breast')

I would argue that, in this moment, presuming the body of the nightingale serves as a proxy for the bodies of the lovers, the husband unwittingly enacts two things. Firstly, as he rings the *laüstic*'s neck and snuffs out the very instrument that produces its song, which relates to the themes of musicality prevalent throughout the lay and constitutive of the lay mode.

Secondly, the splattering of blood on the lady's chemise is indicative of a consummation; it imagines the union of their illicit affair, in physical sex, as the remedy to

⁶⁸ *Desmesure* (also spelled *desmessure*, *dessmesure*; *desmesour*; *demesure*; *dismesure*) refers to 'excess', 'outrageous conduct', or a lack of restraint ('unrestrainedly') according to the *AND*. In true Januarie-May style, in *Guigemar*, it is used to describe the nature of a husband who, jealous beyond measure ('*gelus esteit a desmesure*' l.211, ('he was jealous to no end'), locks his young wife in a tower, hiding away the fact that she is beautiful beyond measure ('*[k]ar bele esteit a demesure*' (l.727) Another example of the extreme, unrestrained emotion '*desmesure*' conveys can be found in *Milun*; lamenting that she cannot be with her lover, the lady in this lay feels suffering without measure (l.127, '*mult est dolente a desmesure*') and considers suicide.

The sense of *desmesure* as a measure of restraint is represented most effectively, however, in the lay of *Equitan*, despite not actually appearing in the text. To elaborate, Marie spells the downfall of the lovers by explaining that '*[c]il met[ent] lur vie en nu[n]cure/ [q]ue d'amur n'unt sen e mesure;/ Tels est la mesure de amer/ [q]ue nul n'i deit reisun garder*' (l.17-20): 'They wager with their lives, those who love without sense or restraint. Such is the extent of love that no one can maintain reason over it'. As you can see, '*mesure*' appears twice in this four line passage. One usage of it signifies the *restraint*, *moderation*, or *limit* axis of the term's definition while the other might more closely align with the capacity, extent, or degree to which love makes lovers senseless and predisposed to their fate.

their love-longing. This imitative sex act fells the bird, and transforms their desire into an alternative type of longing,— into grief. In grounding the bird on a physical plane, the act closes the liminal passage of springtime; compounding the harbinger to its physical form, the husband renders their song, and their love, into a corpse, returning it to the death of winter⁶⁹. The nightingale's presence in the story, which up until this point has been primarily aural, transfers into a physical one; yet its metaphor continues. The disruptive power of the liminal persists in the post-liminal; it continues to hint at an alternative textual outcome that escapes from view at the very moment it is glimpsed. This possibility haunts the would-be lovers, who carry their love-grief with them for all their days; '*tuz jurs l'ad fet od lui porter*' (l.156).

Having lost her justification for standing at the window at night, the lady weeps and curses those who trapped the nightingale for her husband. To communicate the reason for her absence, the wife wraps the nightingale in samite and sends it to her beloved. Interestingly, it is the knight, not the husband, who entombs the bird, closing the open circle of life and death and symbolising the demise, and the resting place, of their love. Encasing it in a casket ('*chasse*', l.157), he literally carries the grief with him for the rest of his life. Notably, both lovers conceal the nightingale with high-value materials, samite or gold; obscured from view, just like their covert relationship. The corpse of the bird becomes the only and the highest testament to both their love and their grief, two now inseparable categories. Moreover, they each endow it with a symbolic social position, closing the lay's previous liminal phase during which their love still had the potential to prosper. The nightingale, in life and death, exposes the proximity of absence and presence; to be with love and to be without love.

Equal and opposite in their solitude, longing for love and grieving is, for the lovers, the balancing point of the *Laüstic* lay. Like the nightingale, the haunting aural quality of the lay form itself transcends the physical, even the lingual, as the liminality of the *aventure* reverberates in the post-liminal. As such, the nightingale's song in the *Laüstic* lay can be seen to denote the bounds of liminality; while it sings, the fated potentiality of their relationship may thrive, and its death marks the end of this potential and a return to the

⁶⁹ '[T]he nightingales that appear in Middle English lyrics arrive as the harbingers of spring, evoking reverdie or cyclical greening along with the associated elements of the return from the death of winter to the life of springtime.' (Dickson, 3)

previous social structure. Outwardly, nothing has changed; both lovers hold the same social position as before the *aventure*. In this sense, they have not undergone a rite of passage in accordance with Turner's theories of liminality. However, their love has now transformed into a grief, a suffering equal in measure to their previous love-longing; they have returned to and accepted a 'new', inverse structure.

As in almost all of her *Lais*, Marie's primary transformations relate to that of the individual who, after undergoing a rite of passage, typically arrives at a union, disunion, or reunion of the romantic couple. Both *Laüstic* and *Orfeo* convey the loneliness of love longing through the liminality of song, of *loïd*. However, this trait is elaborated on and extended in the *Orfeo* lay, entrenching far deeper the aural component of lay culture within its formal and textual aspects.

While the *laüstic* is a metaphysical placeholder for the lovers' inhibited union, Orfeo himself assumes the physicality, the musicality, and the voicelessness of the itinerant songbird. Moreover, his eponymous lay culminates in the restoration of the married couple; specifically, this reunion is facilitated *through* music, as it is Orfeo's unmatched harping skill that allows him to win back his queen. Like the nightingale's ability to slip between realms of being and non-being and allegorise human romantic union, Orfeo's minstrelsy takes on the covert properties of evasion and subversion. However, it must be acknowledged that the lay, at the expense of depicting its own king as deceptive, does so to restore the stability of the domestic couple and, in turn, the stability of the realm. This is typical of the fourteenth-century Middle English lays, which follow a trend of assuaging societal fears of a disharmonious monarchy.

Interestingly, both *Laüstic* and *Orfeo* result in the restoration of marital union as an institution; however, they do so to vastly different ends. In each text, the lovers' separation is allegorised in death. While the marriage of Orfeo and Heurodis *is* restored, the minstrel-king names his steward as the inheritor of his kingdom. This act bucks the primogenitary, Ovidian monarchic lineage that endows Orfeo with his king status at the beginning of the lay. Similarly, while the wife in *Laüstic* does resign herself to her marriage, it is not a celebration of love, but an acceptance of the confinement to the *chasse* or tomb of her social rank. Both lays figure the absence-presence of grief and love-longing as liminally entwined. While in *Laüstic*, these two states are twinned sequentially, — with the passion

of love-longing being replaced by the despair of grief, — the *Orfeo* poet overlays them and exposes their proximity. Between the indeterminate positions of life and death, both Orfeo and Heurodis exist between the certainty of social rank or structure.

As such, the Middle English lay delves further into the paradoxes of liminality, blending ‘lowliness and sacredness’(Turner, *Ritual*, 96), and elaborating upon the allegory of death as an interstitial phase, as opposed to an ending.

This love-grief, absence-presence, is confronted, to varying degrees, in all of the lays. *Sir Orfeo*, for one, figures music, human or bestial, as an expression of this love-grief and of being and non-being. Moreover, as in the *Laiistic* lay, the thematics of aurality suspend, momentarily, the principal social order; song is the medium through which liminality is permitted to disrupt and reorient the direction of the characters’ *aventure*.

The contact and confluence of the civilised world and the natural one recur throughout the text. The musicality of birds is a thematic and formal motif that appears throughout the lay body of texts. However, its deployment specifically in *Sir Orfeo* ushers in moments of liminality and denotes the permeability and ambiguity between the otherwise separate categories of human and animal at the very moment of their confluence. While suggesting that the metrical and lyrical powers of harp-playing in the poem ‘bring into harmony nature [and] society’(8), Robert Longworth aptly points out that, Orfeo’s ‘art itself is rooted in deception’(10). This is to say, his art exposes that ‘the heart of disorder [... has concealed] itself in successive layers of order’(8) by the end of the poem; an order precipitated by Orfeo’s deceit of the Faery King *and* of his own steward, which he himself admonishes⁷⁰. Inherently playful, Longworth indicates that *Sir Orfeo* ‘celebrates [this] delicious irony’(10);

‘The Fairy King is deceived by Orfeo’s art into releasing Herodis- but the Fairy King, after all, has first practiced deceit by snatching Herodis away from Orfeo. The birds themselves are deceived into auditory respectfulness in the wilderness when Orfeo plays his harp, though to hear the birds sing is a reason for Herodis’ visit to the orchard from which she is snatched by the Fairy King.’ (10-11)

⁷⁰ When the Faery King denies Orfeo’s request for the return of Heurodis, he replies with an tentative admonition (‘Yete were it a wele fouler thing/To here a lesing of thi mouthe!’(1.464-5)) and affirms that the king must keep his word (‘nedes thou most thi word hold’(1.468)).

This waterfall of disorder, of fragmentation, is brought about by the liminality of music or song. I suggest that the liminal figure, —be it the minstrel or the songbird,— marries their unstructuring and restructuring potential to each scene, ushering in an upheaval or reversal of authority. As Turner says of the rite of passage, the liminal ‘[reveals] some recognition...of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties’(96). The metrical musicality of the songbird and minstrel operates to reform the sequence of the poem; to introduce to it, if only tentatively, the prospect of an alternative structure that could reorder the otherworld’s discord. The potency of this suggestion is continuously augmented as the poem progresses, culminating in the minstrel’s harp being transformed into a catalytic key to unlocking the restoration of Orfeo’s social rank. Moreover, it is through this dialectical relationship that the poem reveals the contingency of order and disorder, of harmony and cacophony. This ‘unstructured and highly structuring’(20, Thomassen), or more accurately *structured and highly unstructuring* potential affords Orfeo the ability to traverse the mixed spaces of liminality.

2.3.1. Separation

This detachment from structure and the opening of the liminal phase occurs at the beginning of the lay when Heurodis,

‘went in an vndrentide
To play bi an orchard side,
To se þe floures sprede & spring,
& to here þe foules sing’(l.65-8)

The orchard is the site of Heurodis’ initial abduction by the Faery King. As a semi-cultivated space, the genteel orchard is notably distinct from the uncultivated wilderness in which Orfeo serves his exile, in addition to the inhospitable faery castle, which is ‘a scene of grim desolation, of mutilation and [of] arrested motion’(7, Longworth). Yet despite its ostensible calm, the orchard side introduces liminality into the lives of the protagonists, firstly through its *undertides*, and secondly through its organisation, or disorganisation, of space.

Pickens and Whalen suggest that Marie's version of walled, cultivated gardens, 'vergiers', represent an ironic countermeasure to extramarital affairs that simultaneously facilitate such illicit relations. Botanical gardens and orchards, a recurring feature in all but one of Marie's *Lais*, generate 'semi-cultivated spaces where plants flourish with less confinement' (186) and 'represent men's efforts to control women'(187). As a *locus amoenus*, there exists implicitly within the borderland 'the possibility of its subversion of inversion'(187); the flora is always at risk of withering into a *locus horribilis* and the walled enclosure is equally at risk of transgression or penetration by unwelcome guests. Heurodis' orchard, too, poses this potentiality; situated between enclosure and exposure, the walled space is stalked by the liminal spectre of subversion. In this way, it offers a distorted glimpse of the Faery-King's castle later in the poem; an inverse prison in which, death-like, Heurodis is eternally '[s]lepe under an ympe-tre'(407) and which remains under threat of infiltration, albeit at this point by Orfeo. Pickens and Whalen say that the medieval gardens 'constructed in castles, abbeys, and manors' bring under control the '[c]haotic natural tendencies' that 'prevail in wildwood forests'(185). The orchard designates a finite space in which human power dominates that of non-human power, as an enclosure in which the pleasure or produce nature provides is momentarily put into the servitude of the court. Notably, it is a garden that Heurodis is comfortable enough to visit accompanied by only 'to maidens of priis'(64), even comfortable enough to fall 'on slepe upon the grene'(72).

Yet, emphatically, it remains a borderland, situated on the boundary of human and natural realms. While the orchard is not the bleak 'missays' (*Sir Orfeo*, 262) nor zone of indistinction encapsulated by Orfeo's exilic forest, it does facilitate a moment of possibility, of a literally and metaphorically permeable borderland between realms, in which the prevailing social order can be upended. Twinned with birdsong, this early moment in the poem establishes a leitmotif, an aural register inscribed within the text, that portends disorder. It sets up a tripartite catalogue of liminality to be deployed, variously, at significant moments in the poem, sequentially cueing in the restructuring of social, special, and spatial hierarchies.

The three components of this leitmotif are; '[t]he music that symbolises [order] within the story'(Longworth, 8); the disruption of hierarchies, or 'disorder'; and a third

agent of chaos, the *undertides*. Mentioned six times in total, the ‘vndrentides/vndertides’ signal a moment of transition, of permeability between structural models and is typically, Block Friedman notes, when the Faery King enters ‘the land of the mortals’. Explaining that although the term ‘has a shifting meaning... which can apply to any time of day from about nine o’clock in the morning to three o’clock in the afternoon’, he believes it is used in *Sir Orfeo* to refer to noon since ‘it was a time of danger, traditionally’ for both the Middle Ages and ‘for antiquity as well’. He suggests that at this time, ‘because of the heat of the sun directly overhead’, humans are weaker to the attack of the ‘noon-day demon’, as well as to their own sloth and temptation; ‘even Milton has Satan tempt Eve at midday’(28). Based on Block Friedman’s argument, I believe that the *undertide* facilitates the confluence of order and disorder, and in doing so, engenders ambiguity. Its placement in the narrative represents the thinning of the barriers between faery and mortal realms, allowing a warm, unsettling draft to pass through a liminal doorway that has been left mysteriously ajar. As the sister of ‘tiding’, a term with the ominous subsense of ‘an announcement; also, a prophecy; [and] also, a warning’, the phrase’s deployment in the text communicates the instinctual recognition that something is amiss. Relatively innocuous on its first and even second mention, by the final use of *undertide* in the poem, it has come to underscore an uncanny intuition and an upending of social hierarchy. As a stock phrase integral to the text’s oral recitation, improvised or otherwise, the term must be considered within the minstrel’s art of performance. Taylor affirms that the oral delivery of the minstrel-romance relies on such ‘formulaic language’ and direct address to ease recitation, reinforce ‘communal values’, and ‘invoke benediction on the whole circle, narrator and audience alike’(40). Framed as such, *undertides* can be imagined as analogous to the booing and hissing that welcomes a pantomime villain onstage, both unsettling and satisfying the audience's narrative expectations of a descent into iniquity.

Examining the subsequent uses of *undertides* illuminates the function of its deployment proceeding Heurodis’ abduction. The Laskaya-Salisbury textual notes highlight this motif, writing that ‘[i]t is also in the hot undertides that the *king o fairy with his rout* comes out into the wilderness to hunt and is consequently seen by Orfeo’(18n75-75). Interestingly, Block Friedman indicates that hunting for game at

noontime, which ‘undertides’ seems to refer to, is uncommon, ‘as any amateur sportsman would know’. As such he, suggests that the Faery King hunts an alternative type of prey.

‘If, however, the prey were to be men - or women - the hunting parties might expect more success. Carrying this line of argument a step further, we are bound to view the collection of people inside the walls of the fairy castle as the catch of just such hunting trips.’ (29)

This suggestion would indicate that the separate categories of human and animal are not inverted, as such; it is not that humans are hunted by animals. Rather, the divisions between such categories are made indistinguishable. The Faery King kidnaps women not for political domination or cultural homogenisation; he does so to keep them as metaphysical taxidermies, rendered out-of-time and out of subject-hood, silent and undead. Although violent, the *undertides* signalling an incoming cultural take-over would still reside within the bounds of order, of social evolution, as a predator makes smaller, weaker animals its prey, and as hierarchy replaces hierarchy. Instead, the *undertides* pose a radical transformation in the subject, not only removing their rank or status but also shirking their grasp of the discretion of human and beast.

As such, the imagery of Heurodis’ orchard visit sets into motion the rhythm of disorder, the three aspects of the poem that foretell liminality. For one, the playing of music or the singing of song; two, the disturbance and convergence of human and non-human, natural and non-natural dialectics; and third, the *undertides* that presage the disruption of courtly harmony. In the same way that the Faery King is capable of reducing human subjects to hunting game, Orfeo is able to momentarily raise the status of the birds and beasts of the woodland.

2.3.2 Transition

The second instance of song initiating a liminal passage occurs when Orfeo, lost unto the wilderness, watches the otherworld knights and ladies pass him by and hears their cacophony. Between lines 281 to 302, the poet places before Orfeo—and by extension before the audience—a rapid succession of vignettes, a parade-like series of images stacked on top of one another to highlight their proximity and elide the passing of time. The first image in this zoetrope of courtly life illustrates of the ‘king o fairy’(l.283) on his

hunt, accompanied by the sound of baying hounds and ‘bloweing’ horns (l.285); this is followed by ‘stout and fers’(l.293) knights on the hunt, ‘[i]ch y-armed’(l.292) and ‘ich his swerd y-drawe’(l.295); followed by knights and ladies dancing ‘gisely’ (l.299) and ‘softly’(l.300) through the forest to the sound of ‘tabours and trunpes’(l.301). Interestingly, this contingent sequence generates a sense that Orfeo is petrified in time, like the figures later in the poem, as otherworld life passes him by. Suspended in place, ‘[o]ft in hot undertides’(l.282) these figures disappear out of his field of comprehension; ‘never he nist whider they bicomme’(l.288), ‘never he nist whider thai wold’(l.296). Like the ‘wilde bestes’(l.273) and ‘foules’(l.275) that abandon him as soon as his harping is done, the ladies and knights dissipate at the very moment of contact, conveying Orfeo’s inability to command an audience, to command subject-hood, or to exact his status. This *statuslessness*, his ‘transient humility’(Turner, *Liminality*, 360), can only be revealed in its contact with his previous hierarchical structure, or at least in a parodic allusion to that structure. As such, the avian mimesis of his previous courtly life emphasises his loss and his detachment from human hierarchy. However, this evidently does not mean that Orfeo’s human court is replaced by that of a non-human one. Simply, the text leverages the image of birds and beasts surrounding him to draw a contrast with his former exaltation as a king. As mentioned earlier, the liminal phase does not seek to replace one structure with another, but to elide the categorical discretions upon which the previous and anticipated hierarchies are constructed. Emphatically, the indifference of the passing faery court to Orfeo works to reimagine the ‘knightes of priis’(l.249) and ‘levedis’ that ‘[b]ifor him kneland’(l.250) described in the proceeding lines, a passage that, line by line, contrasts Orfeo’s previous royal lifestyle with his ‘pover’(l.430) forest subsistence. Moreover, the sonic elements of this passage diverge from the harmonious birdsong and metrical harp-playing of the preceding scenes. Instead of ‘melody’ and ‘soun [that] gan schille’(l.272), Orfeo hears ‘dim cri and bloweing’, ‘houndes...berking’, ‘[t]abours and trunpes’, and ‘al maner menstraci’(l.302). The dancing knights and ladies are described as ‘queynt’ in both ‘atire’ and ‘pas’ (step, l.299-300); but their ostensibly joyous frolic in the woods is disquietingly underscored by the same rhythm as the Faery King’s hunt. Considered in relation to the risk of abduction and death that the Faery court presents to the human one, their elegant dancing is far more sinister than the ‘ten hundred knightes’ (l.291) who also pass by Orfeo.

It should not be ignored that, earlier in the narrative, Orfeo attempts to prevent the Faery King from abducting Heurodis by arming himself with ‘ten hundred knightes’(l.183) who are also ‘[i]ch y-armed’ and ‘stout’(l.184); nor should it be ignored that some of the undead held in ex-animate hostage in the Faery King’s castle are ‘armed on hors sete’(l.395). Considered sequentially, it becomes unclear whether the armed knights are part of the Faery King’s entourage or part of his game; certainly, his superlative and supernatural powers of abduction would not necessitate an army. Moreover, the liminality of the faery *undertides* invites the fracturing and reformulation of hierarchical relations, perhaps here facilitating the radical transformation of the roaming army into a multitudinous flock of lost creatures. In their zoetropic indistinction, the fleeting and alternating presence of the war-like troupe and the skilled dancers bewilder and confound the reader as much as they do Orfeo. Here, the sequence of the leitmotif can therefore be observed as follows; firstly, the threatening and prophetic *undertides* sweep through the forest; next, with ‘[t]abours & trumpes’, the passage resonates with the thematics of music; and thirdly, the uncanny dance-hunt permits the elision of social hierarchies, of the hunter and the hunted, of the king and his court, and of human and non-human life.

Narratively speaking, this passage precedes the scene in which the banished king is momentarily reunited with his abducted Queen Heurodis. In the moments leading up to this pivotal encounter, Orfeo witnesses an unchaperoned group of the Faery King’s female subjects hunting waterbirds using trained falcons;

‘And on a day he seighe him biside
 Sexti levedis on hors ride,
 Gentil and jolif as brid on ris;
 Nought o man amonges hem ther nis;
 And ich a faucoun on hond bere,
 And riden on haukin bi o rivere.
 Of game thai founde wel gode haunt -
 Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt;
 The foules of the water ariseth,
 The faucouns hem wele deviseth;
 Ich faucoun his pray slough’ (303-313)

For one, this image of ‘sexti levedis on hors ride’(304) reiterates the equestrian motif used throughout the text in reference to the Faery King’s power. Dominique Battles suggests that the motif’s appearance here may allude to Orfeo’s impotence at the start of romance in the face of the horse-riding Faery army, a trope associated with Norman military dominance over the less technologically advanced Anglo-Saxon forces. Specifically, she cites the use of the *scheltrom* (187) also known as the shield wall, which was one of the ‘main defensive military techniques’ used by the Anglo-Saxons, who ‘[u]nlike the Normans, who used horses during battle, [...] customarily fought on foot’(183). The appearance of the horse-riding ladies in *Sir Orfeo* could, therefore, usher in liminality, the boundary between ‘Englond’ and the fantastical otherworld kingdom. Emphatically, the text mentions that the Faery King’s company ride ‘snow white stedes’(145) or ‘riche stedes’(161). Battles indicates that the use of horses in the text has specific national implications, writing that ‘[the] horses form a cornerstone of the Fairy King’s political image in a way they do not for Orfeo’(186). According to the text notes, horses, or more specifically white horses, are commonly used to signify a boundary to the Otherworld. Other iterations of boundary-guarding white animals used in medieval romance play more explicitly on the role of gender in a chivalric court, including Chrétien de Troyes’ employment of the white stag hunt tradition in *Erec and Enide*, in which ““whoever can kill the White Stag must forsooth kiss the fairest maiden of your court, come what may””(trans. W.W. Comfort, 2). Despite more clearly pertaining to the courtly love tradition, the appearance of the white stag similarly ushers in a moment of liminality where power relations can be challenged and renegotiated. Importantly, it collapses analogies of sexual and cultural conquest and in doing so thematically ties medieval gender to the political configuration of space. For the Orfeo text, the horses’ appearance here reinstates power implications of the earlier scene in which the *scheltrom* is overwhelmed by the horse-riding Faery army. Moreover, it creates a visual hierarchy between Orfeo and the ladies, as while he is compelled towards the ground with references to ‘roots’ and ‘bark’, they ride on horseback, their hawks soaring above their prey.

Significantly to this chapter, I believe that the representation of hawking and falconry further overlays the woodland scenes with liminality, and exposes the entanglement of human and non-human power relations. Like the aforementioned dancers,

this passage underscores the civility of courtly activity with the threat of violence. As the falcons slay the waterbirds, the poet allows the dialectic of predator and prey to momentarily reemerge; previously (super) human-on-human violence, now bird-on-bird violence, the scene re-affirms the dissolution of special or social convention. However, the image of the hawking ladies does more than generate the idea of a cultural takeover, or of a hierarchical structure that replaces another, weaker hierarchical structure. Hawking and the practice of falconry can be seen as a symbiotic alliance, not only through its associations with aristocracy and nobility but also through the symbolic gender implications of the sport itself. The image of the hunting ladies in this passage, '[n]ought o man amonges hem'(306), must be situated within the context of medieval gender and falconry traditions. Susan M. Johns discusses the deployment of hawk imagery in medieval Welsh literature, specifically the *Brut* Chronicle, for which she 'suggests that gender, imperialism and nationalism were fundamentally important to the way the *Brut* constructs a view of [Owain ap Cadwgan of Powys' abduction of Nest, the wife of Gerald of Windsor]'(102). For example, she explains how both Nest and her daughter Angharad are described in the *Brut* as having 'hawk-like' bodies. Johns suggests that the 'aristocratic associations with hawks and hunting express notions of social status, prestige and authority, and the use of the hawk in such description related to this'(113-114). However, she also acknowledges the gendered implications of 'hawk-like', using the aristocratic hunting tradition to analogise the way in which a prince attains a wife. Again, this overlays ideas of game hunting and sexual conquest to expose their resemblance; a device which, for the Orfeo text, is so multivalent as to obscure which game analogises the other. Like Bases, Johns identifies the tension of the hawk symbol, the necessity to submit to authority in exchange for power, writing,

'On the seals of twelfth-century noblewomen hawks were an ambiguous symbol since the hawk could also symbolize sexuality and the arts of love. The phrase "hawk-like" in the *Life* could be a simple description of physical fitness, but the meanings of this allusion, perhaps, like the hawks depicted on women's seals, may also resonate with allusions to contained sexuality.'(113)

This idea of contained sexuality can be similarly glimpsed in other lays, including Marie de France's *Yonec*. In fact, the tale goes much further to anthropomorphise its characters than the *Sir Orfeo* poet does. In the tale, Eudemarec transfigures into a hawk in order to visit his lover, the young wife of an ageing lord who keeps her locked in a tower and away from temptation. Like the walled gardens of *Laiüstic*, the tower functions to both contain and to flaunt the lady's sexuality, — to advertise its existence through its very concealment. With this dual tension in operation, the tower facilitates the privacy of her affair, while physically demarcating the limits of her political power as the wife of a lord. As such the tower constructs a space in which the spectacle of contained female sexuality can be explored, playing on the erotics of the transgression of borders, homosocial codes, and even human-animal categories. Moreover, like the *Orfeo* romance, the conclusion of the Anglo-Norman lay precipitates the recuperation of political power as the townspeople claim Eudemarec's son Yonec as their lord after he avenges his parents' deaths and reclaims the throne. Instead of statically figuring humans as animals and animals as humans, the lays of *Sir Orfeo* and *Yonec* permit their characters to operate along an axis of transfiguration. It is as such that the *Sir Orfeo* poet indirectly links their work to Marie's; not only using birds as a motif but figuring them as catalytic incentives to social reformulation.

In its exchange of human and animal states, this metamorphosis analogises the potentiality of the characters' subject-hood and social rank. Like the outlawed minstrel-king, the anthropomorphised hawking ladies can use their hybridised status to exact and defer power. Unlike the minstrel-king, they cannot circumvent the conditions of their existence and are suspended between the rungs of their fragmented social structure, as intermediaries. By operating along analogous lines of ambiguity, the hawks and their ladies in *Sir Orfeo* are similarly situated at the confluence of gendered and heraldic associations.

Orfeo witnesses this group of 'sexti levedis' riding on horseback, specifically using their trained falcons to hunt for '[m]aulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt'(310). According to Hannah Bases' research into women in medieval falconry, female falcons were and are commonly used in this practice due to their larger size and more aggressive nature. She explains that only the nobility could afford to practice falconry, given that 'the purchase

cost [of a falcon] alone could be almost half the yearly income of a knight⁷¹ [in medieval England]'. She suggests that,

'[m]any upper class women with property had images of themselves holding falcons or hawks on their seals. [However,] falconry also has roots as a symbol of submission in medieval romances and poetry' given that 'the symbol of male falconers luring in a female bird was used in medieval literature as a metaphor for a man luring in a woman to "train" and dominate [...] as the male falconer protects his bird'⁷².

In addition to an enactment of status, therefore, falconry can be seen in *Sir Orfeo* as an expression of the tension between women and power. For noble women who gained power by submitting to institutions of social control and regulation, such as marriage, their domestic life very much analogises medieval sovereign-subject relations. The act of entering into agreement with structures of power, of welcoming the Other into the dominant political regime, permitting it power by partially or fully homogenising it, is a key theme in the medieval romance form. *Sir Orfeo* in particular permits the inversion of these traditional relations, by situating the Anglo-Saxon kingdom as politically inferior to the warlike dominance of the Faery King's rule. The hawking imagery alludes to the tensions between women and power in a courtly structure. To partake in the benefits of that power, they must submit to its homosocial dominance. The concept of taming and training the birds simultaneously occludes and reveals the liminal status of disorder, of chaos, and of the wildness that came before it. As such, it foregrounds the revelation that hierarchical positions can only be instituted through the sacred passage from which they were transformed from a previous state of disorder. Chaotic modelessness, *statuslessness*, is both the necessary prerequisite and opposite of order.

Bases also notes the evidence in texts such as Dame Juliana Berners' *Boke of Saint Albans* and several commissioned tapestries that women also participated in falconry in

⁷¹ Oggin's *The kings and their hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* is a thorough investigation of this subject, the literature of which, he says, increased significantly in Europe over the twelfth and thirteenth century. These are largely scientific and veterinarian treatises (Adelard of Bath's *De avibus tractatis*, Daude de Prada's *Dels azuls cassadors*, and Frederick II of Hostenstauden's *De arte venandi cum avibus*) and governmental records ('Anglo-Saxon charters, laws, Domesday Book, and Edward I's letters to one of his falconers... [and] The Pipe Rolls' (7, dating seventh to twelfth centuries).

this period, as is depicted in *Sir Orfeo*. The unchaperoned ladies, the Faery King's subjects, are definitively aligned in the text with such symbols of power and status, their falcons slaying the 'foules of the water'. Their presence offers a representation of liminality in which power relations are not totally dispelled, but rather fragmented and cast into disarray. Symbols of power (armies, hawks, courtly audiences) are distributed haphazardly throughout the wilderness, partially hybridised with the liminal realm to expose the interdependence of lowliness and sacredness. For example, the slaying of the waterbirds allows the scene to culminate in a literally striking example of human-animal transgression;

'The foules of the water ariseth,
The faucouns hem wele deviseth;
Ich faucoun his pray slough'(l.311-314)

The slaying harks back to and parodies an earlier act of violence, in which Heurodis is abducted from under a similarly described bough⁷³. Interestingly, Heurodis makes her visit to the orchard where 'blosme breme on everi bough' (l.61) in order to 'here the foules sing'(l.68), reiterating the thematics of musicality. By extension, this reaffirms that this text is, critically, a minstrel lay, since the appreciation of (musical) performance is again placed front and centre for the audience and for the characters themselves. Moreover, this scene reinstates the threat of violence and reimagines the abduction through the slaying of the waterfowls. It is curious therefore that, on the one hand, the poem depicts the otherworld ladies as adept huntresses, unchaperoned and independent from their king, and on the other it likens them to the birds directly. The lay draws its own comparison between the women and the birds, describing them as 'gentil and jolif as brid on ris'. While 'gentil' indicates their status, not only as aristocracy who can afford to practice hawking but also as nobility with a higher social status than Orfeo in this moment. This idea is repeated later in the text when the Faery King denies Orfeo's request on the basis of him being 'ill-matched'⁷⁴ with Heurodis. While Orfeo is suspended in this zone of uncertainty, the otherworld ladies not

⁷³ 'Under a fair ympe-tre,/And wel sone this fair quene /Fel on slepe opon the grene.'(70-2): Under a fair grafted tree the fair queen very quickly fell asleep upon the green.'

⁷⁴ 'A sori couple'(l.458)

only use tamed horses and falcons as an extension of the self, but they subject the natural world to their sovereignty by slaying or abducting it. As previously discussed, the poem depicts Orfeo at the interstices between man and beast, outlaw and king, and as such weaves together opposing states of exception in order to foreground their proximity. The physical transfiguration of Orfeo into a beast and his partial integration into the liminal forest permit him to occupy these symmetrical and opposing categories. In doing so, it exposes them as a part of an often unstable network of exception and inclusion from political and social life. In this way, the otherworld ladies, like Orfeo, also inhabit a ‘zone of indistinction’ (Evans, 204), oscillating between the figures of woman and beast, the keepers and the kept.

2.3.3 Incorporation

The third and final instance of the minstrel’s leitmotif appears when Orfeo enters the Faery castle and observes the undead ‘mervails’ (l.409) littering its halls. Using the same tail-rhyme as the previous moment of contact with the Faery entourage, the by-now familiar *undertides* are deployed to invoke the poem’s well-established thematics of disorder.

‘And wonder fele ther lay bisides
Right as thai slepe her undertides’ (l.401-2)

With each encounter with the Faery realm, its retinue of abductees appears to increase in size, — from Heurodis alone to the ambiguous forest entourage, the castle is populated by ‘folk...thought dede, and nare nought’ (l.389-90, that seemed dead but were not), preserved out-of-time in the very moment of their death. As Orfeo descends into the lair of his enemy, he is confronted by the legion of undead in a final revelation of the violent substratum of the otherworld’s courtly exterior, previously only alluded to by the hawking ladies. Besides the undead, at the epicentre of the Faery King’s power, Orfeo finds a mausoleum of Heurodises, each sleeping in *undertides*. As if the multiplied images of her being fragment farther from Orfeo’s reach, she is just one of the ‘wonder fele’ (l.401, ‘wondrous many’) sleeping women suspended between life and death. Further eliding her identity from the narrative and stressing the fading significance of her previous royal

identity, the poet says that it was ‘[b]i her clothes’ (l.408) that Orfeo recognised her. The spectacle of ‘his owen wiif[s]’ (l.405) borderline-indistinguishability from the other supernatural abductees represents the culmination of her rite of passage, as she is almost completely alienated from her past structural rank. At its denouement, the minstrel poem has summoned, firstly, chaos-inducing *undertides*; second, it has painted before its audience the destructive and de-structuring potential of the Faery court, in which the former queen fades not into inferiority, but into indeterminacy. For a medieval audience, the unknowability of her position within the social hierarchy poses a threat. Heurodis cannot be hierarchised; thereby she represents that which cannot be socially known and understood. This incompatibility with social structure is dangerous since it conveys the idea that, if only momentarily, the monarchic structure *cannot* subsume all, from centre to margin; it, therefore, poses the potential for its ubiquity to be challenged, if not overcome.

It is at this moment that the poem mobilises its climatic, yet ever-present agent of order; the minstrel song. The ‘blisseful notes he ther gan’ (l.527) force the Faery court to recognise Orfeo’s exceptional status and thank him for ‘his melody so swete’. Through its metrical and lyrical properties, the minstrel’s sound ‘bring[s] into harmony nature [and] society’ (8, Longworth). This return to structural harmony precipitates the return of Heurodis and, as such, restores the domestic marriage institution thwarted at the start of the poem by the queen’s abduction. Moreover, this return to order later sanctions the restoration of Orfeo’s kingdom. To substantiate his kingly identity, Orfeo flaunts his unmatched harp playing skills to his human court, who accept his return to Winchester and restore his status. Interestingly, the poet proffers the same ‘blisseful notes’ in its epilogue as its climax,

‘And *tok his harp* so miri of soun,
 And *tempreth* his harp, as he wele can,
 And *blisseful notes* he ther gan’ (l.436-8, emphasis added)
 ‘He *toke his harp* and *tempred* schille;
 The *blissefulest notes* he harped there’ (l.526-7, emphasis added)

The minstrel, —both poet and protagonist,— adheres to the consistency of this formal and textual sequence and further impresses upon the audience the reestablishment of structural

balance. The recovery of Orfeo's English kingdom is twinned with the recovery of his minstrel powers. The assembly of his composition reflects the structural reassembly of social order. This is part of the poem's metapoetic register, in which the lines restoring narrative harmony within the poetic realm reflect linguistic symmetry on a textual level. Moreover, imagining itself told by the mouth of a minstrel, this detail turns the poem outward and reveals the strings of the puppeteer who self-referentially alludes to their own role within the story they weave. Specifically, the end of the poem depicts the minstrel permitted to re-enter the centre, to claim his place at the head of it, in fact. As such, it testifies to the anglicisation of the lay form, a poetic medium forever evading its itinerant past and in perpetual pursuit of its future incorporation. The minstrel stands at the crossroads of these structural opposites. He is a performer turned protagonist; a lowly jongleur endowed with sacred powers, thrust from the margins to centre stage.

2.4 Conclusions

It is, in fact, Orfeo's steward who inherits the throne after the king and queen's passing; 'sethen was king the steward'. This eleventh-hour note would seem to reject Orfeo's aforementioned Ovidian ancestry, which is inherited both literarily and literally from his 'moder' and 'fader'. More so, it could be interpreted as a rejection of the marriage institution, the structural order, that the lay has worked to restore. Alternatively, it could be said that this detail acknowledges the non-linear development of the poetic tradition; the volatile and vacillating parentage of which lends itself to the aural tradition which is haphazardly, yet fortuitously disseminated. As such, both Orfeo's kingdom and his lay are passed to worthy inheritors, stewards sworn to uphold their minstrel heritages.

The *MS Auchinleck's Orpheus* analogue seeks to crystallise the guerrilla artistry of the minstrel lay. Its written word can never exhaust the kinetic ability of the minstrel's sounds; the *aventure* of the *Orfeo* lay is just one reverberation of song that echoes through the written medium. However, the poem does effectively reconcile the form's dual heritage, marrying the medium of Marie's courtly lay with the content of the storytelling tradition. The minstrel is the natal progenitor and inheritor of the lay form. From its apocryphal birthplace on the tongues of Breton storytellers who, accompanied by the *blisseful notes* of *harps*, *tambours*, and *trumpes*, the lay form's musicality is revived in *Sir*

Orfeo. The text is not only a minstrel-lay but a minstrel-fantasy; while Marie reflects the plight of the court, Orfeo explores both the minstrels' destitution as a product of his exile and the special, social transcendence achieved by his song. The figure's reemergence here is critical to the genre's reentry into the English canon. Like Marie's evanescent songbird, Orfeo the minstrel's absence-presence alludes to how thinly veiled the inverse realm of disorder is to the realm of order. This is exemplified, across the narrative, by the *undertides* that penetrate, at its thinnest point, the division separating order and disorder. Through the symmetrical opposition of Orfeo's minstrel-king status, he is able to navigate his rite of passage and negotiate the opposing structural models that are variously synthesised and hybridised in the forest and Faery realm.

Like no other, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* works to retextualise the metapoetic nature of the oral and written form. It figures the author as authoritative and yet also disempowers them; affording them the recovery that precipitates the resolution of the narrative. It centres on the authority of the author, not only as a creative producer but as a source of tradition, bringing together past and present text to glean new meanings. By holding the attention of the audience, the lay depicts the power held by such figures over such audiences, whether they be literary or aural. The control the author has to manipulate the message they transmit is extended, sequentially, to the listener. Bringing to the fore the aural and Celtic aspects of the lay tradition that predate Marie's poetic activity, the text refigures the role of the minstrel at the center. The synthesis of these elements in the text redefines the lay genre, which through its combined inheritances, is anglicised.

Chapter 3: The Latent Lai in Lay le Freine: Memories of Marie

Narratively speaking, the tales of Marie de France's twelfth century *Le Fresne* and the early fourteenth century anonymous *Lay le Freine* tell the same story. In each, after casting doubt on the paternity of her neighbour's twin sons, a noble lady births twin girls and realises the consequences of her slander. Under the cover of night, she has her handmaiden abandon one of the daughters in the hollow of an ash tree with nothing but a ring and a mantle to identify her. Recovered by a nunnery's porter, the baby is named 'Frein' (LLF, l.235)/'Freisne' (l.184) and is raised as the abbess' niece. After she reaches maturity, 'Guroun'(l.256)/'Gurun' (l.300), a passing knight, notices her beauty and decides to pursue her. Beguiling the abbess with '[I]ondes and rentes'(l.282) to gain access to the young protagonist, he eventually brings her to his house and makes her his concubine. Here, Le Freine is loved by all except the landed knights who want a legitimate heir to their kingdom. These knights convince their lord to marry a girl of noble birth who, unknown to them, is Le Freine's twin sister. All is revealed when Gurun's new mother-in-law notices his concubine's distinctive ring and mantle. She confesses her secret, the marriage is annulled, Le Freine's status is restored, and Gurun is allowed to wed the one he loves. Each lay shares in the thematics of child abandonment and questionable paternity. Each fantasises about the restoration of status and the reunion of parent and child. While in many of the Middle English lays, the residue of their anterior Anglo-Norman medium can be observed only in glimmers and glimpses, *Lay le Freine* is relatively explicit in its rendering of the tale 'in Ingliche'(l.25). Given this aspect, it is a particularly critical text on the topic of the twelfth century anglicisation of the lay form. Moreover, its unrelenting themes of affinity and antithesis, duality and duplicity, are particularly promising ground for discussing the liminality of *aventure*. Regardless, it is important not to be deceived into believing these texts' similarities make for an observation of anglicisation under control conditions. Even if *Lay le Freine* were an exact —and intact— conversion of *Le Fresne* into English, that act of translation itself could not capture and exhaust all the meanings of the text's *aventure*.

However, it is by virtue of the stories' consanguinity that this chapter can investigate what it *means* to anglicise a text. In the previous chapter, I suggested that the

recovery of identity in *Sir Orfeo* allegorises the reemergence of an English aural storytelling tradition, the minstrel lay. Eliciting the tale from the very means of the lay's production, the *Orfeo* romance witnesses an anglicisation in its thematic and textual matrices. Drawing upon the classical Orpheus myth, the minstrel poem is chiasmic in its return to an ancestral, oral form. More so, its positioning within the *MS Auchinleck* miscellany works to further generate its Englishness. The 44 surviving *MS Auchinleck* items are primarily and almost exclusively written in Middle English, making them potentially the 'first example of a collection specifically designed for enthusiasts of literary and historical texts in the English language' (Wiggins, *AMP*). Containing three of the seven extant Middle English lays⁷⁵, the manuscript testifies to the prevalence of the form's circulation at the time of its production between 1331 and 1340. Notably, each *MS Auchinleck* lay depicts the loss and recovery of an identity, with an intervening period of 'transient humility' (Turner, 360) that forms the main body of the text. *Lay Le Freine* is no exception. Like in *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Degaré*, the titular character is removed from her noble status and is returned to it by way of an identity token, namely her ring and mantel. However, the *MS Auchinleck's Freine* romance is unique among the lay collection for a number of reasons. For one, it is the only known version of the tale in Middle English. Secondly, as stated, *Lay Le Freine* is a close transliteration of its Anglo-Norman ancestor, Marie de France's *Le Fresne*. For formal comparison, Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* (early 15th century: *MS Cotton Caligula A.ii.*) also reimagines one of Marie's lais, *Lanval*; but its 1045 lines makes for a significant expansion upon to the older 646-line poem. In contrast, *Lay Le Freine* runs only 340 lines in length, not including an unknown number of lines lost either to time or to miniature hunters. This count of 340 includes an estimated 13 lines from folio 261 verso, lost to the defacement of its sister page, folio 261 recto, which likely would have contained a small illumination headlining the lay. This damage, only mildly remedied by the image of such hunters as lilliputian vandals, further curtails the text by at least 42 lines given that all that remains of f.262r (and by extension f.262v) is a stub. Using

⁷⁵ Alison Wiggins' digitisation of the *MS Auchinleck* is a wealth of information in this area. The incomplete lay of *Sir Degare* can be found between the folios 78r to 84v. Varying *Degare* texts can be found in 5 other manuscripts; BL Egerton MS 2862 (late 14th century); the Bodleian Library MS 14528 (late 15th century); the CUL Ff.2.38 (late 15th century); the Bodleian Library MS 21835 (1564); and the BL Additional MS 27879 (c.1650). Besides the *MS Auchinleck*, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* is preserved in the BL Harley MS 3810 (early 15th century) and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 (late 15th century).

Marie's lay as a guide, Henry Weber reconstructed *Lay Le Freine's* (hereby *LLF*) missing passages in his 1810 book, *Metrical Romances*. Yet, even in its supplemented form, it is 110 lines shorter than *Le Fresne* and is notably faithful and concise in its retelling of Marie's rhetorical narrative. It is not one of the *MS Auchinleck's* major poems; it does not appear to elaborate upon the *aventure* of its fore-bearer; nor does it depict a particularly active recovery of identity, in the way that *Sir Degare* does for instance. However, this makes its faithfulness to *Le Fresne* all the more curious. In a manuscript so financially and socially invested in the production of an English literary canon, why does this text appear in English,— and, more to the point, why does it appear at all?

The first two sub-sections of this chapter evaluate *Lay le Freine* as a transliteration of *Le Fresne* by contextualising each poem within its manuscript container. By investigating the sister-lais as material, multi-lingual artefacts, essential conclusions about their textual kinship, disparity, and interdependence can be drawn. This section will also introduce the concept of the untimely as a tool that encourages an understanding of the manuscript book, be it the *MSS Harley 978* or the *Auchinleck*, as a polychronic assemblage, rather than as an artefact hermetically contained within its cultural moment.

The third section, '*Freisne ne portë unke fruiž*', interprets the way in which the botanical imagery of *Le Fresne* is commuted into agrarian scenery and how this relates to the Middle English text's altered audience and poetic register. It superimposes the union of the domestic couple onto the harmony of medieval English society through a succession of vegetal metaphors and metonymies. Before drawing its final conclusions, this chapter relates its discussion of plant life in the later text to its distinctive winter timestamp and explores how this may consolidate the ideas of fertility and social prosperity that may or may not be found in the maimed manuscript of *Lay le Freine*.

3.1 Translating The *Freyms*

A translation is not the elision of one language, a mathematical conversion, nor a facsimile that univocally preserves words as exact units of meaning. However faithful, the *translating* language will always introduce its own multivalences. Likewise, haunting its estranged progeny, the *translated* language will retain its vestigial influence over the text, even if only spectrally. For *Lay le Freine*, the spectre of its progenitor is more material than

most. The central segment of a Venn diagram designating the commonality of Old French and Middle English words in this text would swell with plenitude. ‘Envieous’(l.60), ‘deshonour’(l.72), ‘aventours’(l.8), ‘pel’(l.178), ‘abbesse’(l.210), ‘air’(‘*heir*’, l.316), ‘hiritage’(l.321), ‘turnament’(l.262), and ‘spusseayl’(l.340), for example, make a mere handful of terms from the lay that are etymologically derived from Old French or Anglo-Norman. It is as such that *Lay le Freine*, in particular, testifies to the hybrid capabilities of language and to the dynamic potential of English to assimilate non-English words. Sif Rikharðsdóttir notes that at the time the *MS Auchinleck* was being produced, ‘Anglo-Norman had already begun to decline and be integrated into English’ (159). As such, it makes sense that the *Le Fresne* lay would have to undergo a translation in order to propagate its popularity among a growing English-speaking readership.

Despite the Old French roots of the aforementioned words, the text itself certainly testifies to the idea that readers of the *MS Auchinleck* may not have spoken or understood Anglo-Norman, at least by formal definition. When, as a baby, the protagonist is recovered from the hollow of an ash, the romance explains why she is fittingly named according to the French word for the tree, and not the English one; ‘[t]he Freyns of the “asche” is a *freyn*/ After the language of Breteyn’(l.231-32). Surely, this embellishment of Marie’s prototype would not be necessary had the text been produced with a bilingual readership in mind. It also participates in the lay’s ongoing concern with the duality (or duplicity?) of language. It is for this reason that the resemblance of the word for the ‘Freyns’ language and the name ‘Freyn’ must not be overlooked⁷⁶; nor that the text rhymes the latter with ‘Breteyn’, a highly changeable term used to mean both Britain and Brittany. The borderline imperceptible replacement of *Bretaine* with *Bretayne* in *LLF* generates the simultaneity of meanings. This transposition is much more visible when *Le Fresne*’s Dol-en-Bretagne⁷⁷ becomes the English South-West. Yet, with one English and one French, both locations are notably rich in Breton heritage. As such, while diverging, this transference does not make the geographical and cultural leap that *Sir Orfeo* does, for instance, in its repositioning of

⁷⁶ Although Laskaya and Salisbury note that they interpret ‘freyns’ to mean ‘French’ in modern English, in accordance with Weber and Zupita, they do footnote that Varnhagen and Ellis believed it to refer to the titular character’s name.

⁷⁷ Simply referred to as ‘Dol’(l.297) in *Le Fresne*.

the classical, Thracian myth in the quintessentially English city of Winchester⁷⁸, a seat of economic and political power. Of course, we can infer from *Lay le Freine*'s transliteration of Brittany ('Bretaine' (1.3) and 'Dol' (1.297)) into 'the west cuntré' (1.29, *LLF*) and 'Ingland' (1.239) which isle the tale is set within. However, this almost imperceptible transposition of the tale from one *Bretaine* to the other exposes the physical proximity of the two cultures, both in geography and in language. In much the same way that *Le Codre* and *Le Fresne* are two sides of the same coin, the Middle English and Anglo-Norman lays are fraternal twins.

While the explanatory glossing of the '*freyns*' could be categorised as a divergence from the older text, this literary characteristic has long been identified in Marie's *Lais* as a 'device which [she may have thought] belonged to the technique... of Breton storytelling'. Foulet suggests that the examples of English words in the Anglo-Norman *Lais*, such as *gotelef* and *nightegale*, serve simply to 'delight in that very medley of languages'. Citing Wace's translation of Stonehenge into '*pierres pandues*' (hanging stones), he writes that the 'literal rendering' of the word 'seems to point to a genuine French appellation... but is really putting into French the meaning of the English word' (110–11). He posits that, similarly inspired by tales of ancient Britons, Marie inherits her translative 'mannerisms' from Wace's Norman *Brut* and does not indicate that she had, in fact, a tangible Middle English source text. Foulet concludes that these instances of English words in her work are evidence only of the linguistic tastes that Marie borrowed from Wace; not to translate the text to her Anglo-Norman public, but to relish in the nostalgic capabilities of the stylistic choice. These instances of bilingualism are baubles that she pins into the fabric of her text to invoke the stylistic liberties Wace takes with his own translation. Marie, for example, similarly renders the Anglo-Norman honeysuckle into English in *Chevrefoil*, writing,

'Gotelef l'apelent en engleis
Chievrefueil le nument Franceis'
 'Goatleaf call it [the] English
 Chevrefoil [Goatleaf] call it [the] French' (1.115-6)

⁷⁸ '[King Orfeo] sojourned in Traciens./ That was a cité of noble denfens -/ For Winchester was cleped tho/ Traciens, withouten no' (47-9, *Sir Orfeo*). The Middle English lays geographical shift, from Brittany to Winchester, represents for Laskaya and Salisbury, an implicit adaptation of Marie's work, one that caters to the concerns of an incipient English nation. Moreover, 'England's burgeoning literacy and of an increasing privatization of reading' (6) is indicative of a country concerned with redefining its own social, collective, and individual values.

The *MS Harley 978* itself, on f.27, lists the English word for ‘*hunisucclles*’ in its glossary of herbs, an index that lists each item’s Anglo-Norman and Latin name. This glossary, however, aligns the term *hunisucclles* with ‘triffoil’, meaning clover in Anglo-Norman, and ‘ligustrum’ meaning privet in Latin. Likely produced around 80 years after the time at which Marie was writing, the Harley index of *chaudes* and *freides herbes* is hardly a reflection of the poetess’ oversight in translation, nor botanical knowledge. Like Marie’s renderings, this herbal curiosity is perhaps just a tchotchke, a decorative detail from which little analysis can be extrapolated. As Foulet says, ‘little significance is to be attached to the use of the words *gotelef* and *nichtegale* by Marie de France’ (111) who, he theorises, may have been ‘struck by the recurrence of [Wace’s] rhyme and much interested in the varied samples of linguistic information’(110). However, does the inclusion of this index not point to the *MS Harley 978*’s interest in multilingualism, in the practical uses of translating the words for medical herbs? Moreover, does the *hunisucclles* definition not illustrate the evasiveness of language to its would-be captor, be it the translator, the herbalist, or the poet?

While synonymous, the retention of meaning and the retention of sense are not necessarily equivalent in their outcomes. Even after its transformation, the translated word *gotelef* retains the power to speak, to call forth its own linguistic associations that would be lost by *hunisucclles*. As such, *Chevrefoil* and *gotelef* invoke the dual senses of the term ‘gloss’ which, on the one hand, can foster clarification, as in *glossary*, and on the other can conceal and mystify, as in *gloss over*. A third meaning of gloss, — one incorporated into English from Old French —, in fact plays out in *LLF*. Gurun’s ‘fair bihest’ and ‘gloseing’ (l.289-90) is first applied to the abbess so that she does not ‘souchy gile’(l.275) and subsequently to le Freine so that she grants ‘him to don his wille’(l.291). While this instance clearly aligns the term closer to ‘blandishment, flattery, or deceit... and also, [coaxing]’, its use here reiterates the agency of language to conceal intention. All this is to say that the translative glosses in *Le Fresne* and *LLF* share a concern *with* and a delight *in* the particles of ‘unarticulated consciousness’(Bloch, 26) lost and gained in the process of transmission. This relates firstly to the the limitless potential of *aventure*, which ‘designates that which exists before and beyond the text’(Bloch, 26, emphasis added); and

secondly, introduces textually a thematic concern with the way in which language betrays its speaker.

It with these curios in mind that I argue that the anglicisation of Marie's *Le Fresne* is demonstrative of the translation process' variously mimetic, haphazard, and self-conscious residues. It does not represent a direct transference of content from one medium to another. Rather it is an adaption, a transformation, that retains in its reliquaries of language, the composite traces of previous hosts. Intentionally or otherwise, these translative aspects of the text allude to the slippage of language(s) and delight in the lag of equivalent translation. Quoting Rita Copeland, Ríkharðsdóttir says that 'literary translation seeks to erase the cultural gap from which it emerges by contesting and displacing the source and substituting itself'. Extrapolating this, she claims that *Lay le Freine* recreates 'an existing authoritative text within a more local and diverse context of its English speaking audience'(160). In the very instance that *Lay le Freine* accounts for its Englishness, it is forced to acknowledge its shared paternity with its French sister text. More to the point, it is in no uncertain terms that *Lay Le Freine* sets out to tell its tale '[i]n Ingliche'(1.25). In this way the text is, in the simplest definition, *anglicised*; it is put into a medium accessible to readers of the English language.

3.2 *Lay le Freine* as Palimpsest

The question remains whether the text is *reanglicised*; that is, whether it turns back towards a diachronically anterior state. I question whether the authenticity, the historical validity, of that state is integral to the process of reanglicisation. *Sir Orfeo* confidently reinstates the marginalised minstrel figure of yore into the position of king in its interpretation of English social mythology. It favours allegorising cultural recalcitrance through the minstrel's symbolic associations, rather than through the direct acknowledgement of its own Englishness. What I mean to say is that, disinterested in historical reality, *Sir Orfeo* resides in a (national) fantasy, — a magical fantasy at that, one that invokes the older English traditions of oral storytelling and *merveilleux celtique*. Both *LLF* and *Orfeo* could be said to anglicise the form; however, each one undertakes that task with different tools and the resulting texts bear the marks of their varying production methods. Yet in content they both somehow account for a figure who, in their text's *aventure*, is recovered from a marginal

position and is reinstated by way of a relic from their previous life, their ‘original’ status. If the *Sir Orfeo* anglicisation is chiasmic, *Lay Le Freine*’s is palindromic. It returns the echo of *Le Fresne*, preserving the lay’s essence as best it can in an English linguistic medium.

I have been using the term *anglicised* without much regard for its verisimilitude; generally speaking, the lays are more concerned with faery and fortuity than with chronicling medieval life. Rather, much in the same way that contemporary historical fictions seek to unearth the present as much as the past, the medieval form calls upon the nostalgic potential of the Breton ‘kinges [who]... maked a lay and gaf it name’(l.15-18, *LLF*). However, it is essential to consider the historical significance and reception of the ironically twinned Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances of *Lay le Freine* and *Le Fresne*. While the *MS Harley 978* compilation has been dated to between 1.261-65, the *Lais* contained within it are likely to have been composed in the 1160s. While the ‘*noble reis*’(l.43, *Prologue*) they are dedicated to has never been verified with certainty, it is believed that Marie’s *Lais* would at least have been heard by the court of Henry II Plantagenet and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Comparatively, the *MS Auchinleck* miscellany was produced in the 1330s at the cusp of the Hundred Years’ War when, as Ruddick phrases it, ‘royal claims were [being] repackaged in official rhetoric as a national concern’(25). Notably, however, it is thought to be one of the first manuscript texts produced as a ‘commercial venture’; that is, *not* by a ‘monastic scriptoria ...for [an individual’s] own use or for use by their family or local community’(Wiggins, *Auchinleck Manuscript Project*). That being said, the temporal distance between the two texts must be accounted for in this discussion. As such, there is an interval of, at the very least, 66 years between the production of the *MSS Harley 978* and *Auchinleck*, a period that may seem fleeting in the field of medievalism, which so often reifies literary conventions and movements within the span of entire centuries or even within the varying lifetimes of royal houses.

Regardless, in addition to the linguistic movement from Anglo-Norman to Middle English, I must concede a temporal transition that precipitates the text’s anglicisation. This interval of time, alongside the supplanting of the earlier text in the later one, generates *Lay Le Freine*’s multitemporality. Jonathan Gil Harris’ *Untimely Matter* has been a particularly useful tool in reconciling the lay’s simultaneous Englishness and Frenchness, as well as Weber’s aforementioned supplementation. In this book, Harris says that, through the

polychronic process of collating diverse moments in time, past matter generates its own multitemporality. That is to say, instances of material culture, such as a manuscript text, can ‘assume a more dialogic relation to the present, suggesting affinity and proximity rather than distance’. In this way, the *MS Auchinleck’s* lays are polychronic, as all manuscript texts are to some degree. As such, while prompting ‘many different understandings and experiences of temporality’(4), a multitemporal text can acknowledge itself as a hybrid assemblage, resistant to the homogeneity of time as epoch. Imagined by Deleuze and Guatarri as ‘a temporal becoming-other’ and by Nietzsche as the *unzeitgemässe* (11, Gil Harris), the untimely properties of matter empower texts to reject the idea that they are contained within a discrete cultural or historical moment. By enabling us to reject the idea of time, or ‘times’ as discrete or hierarchical, the concept of the untimely can help us better understand how the various temporalities a manuscript pertains to relate to and inform one another.

Harris suggests that the untimely can manifest as a spectral or radical counterpoint to the idea of textual wholeness or finality. This is what he refers to as the temporality of explosion, a relation through which ‘the apparition of the ‘old’ text shatters the integrity of the ‘new’(15). In the case of the *Fresne/Freine* transliteration, I rather observe what Harris refers to as ‘the temporality of conjunction’; by ‘superimposing past and present without insisting on any linear relation between them, [the text] compresses different times within one surface’(16). Harris here is referring to the Archimedes Palimpsest and, by extension, to palimpsests generally. Besides literally, *Lay le Freine* is in many ways a palimpsestic overwriting of the Anglo-Norman *Le Fresne*. In the same instance as it updates and alters text towards the tastes of its contemporary English audience, it reinstates the textual authority and relevancy of its antecedent. By that same token, Marie’s *Le Fresne* — and her entire lay collection for that matter— could be described as palimpsestic; does it too not scrape together various cultural and temporal traces to produce a hybrid and polychronic textual assemblage?

Counterposing the assumption that the Middle English *Le Fresne* defers textual authority to Marie’s so-called original, it could be argued that the text’s anglicisation is a polychronic process that permits various temporal fragments to exist simultaneously. In this way, *Lay Le Freine* does not palimpsestically overwrite — or override, perhaps,— *Le*

Fresne; rather, it diaphanously glosses it with meanings, draws attention to its artistry, and pays homage to its textual influence *and* influences.

Given their absence in the *MS Auchinleck* text, Weber reconstructed lines 121 to 133 of *Lay le Freine* from *Le Fresne*. The text proceeding this break depicts the slandering mother telling her handmaiden to murder one of the twin babies, instructing her to ‘fordo⁷⁹’ (l.116) the child. The next extant line in the manuscript reads,

‘By Mary blisseful quene above,
May help it for Godes love.’
The levedi graunted anon therto,
And wold wele that it were ydo.’
(l.133-36, emphasis added).

Weber’s addition, therefore, is particularly critical to the preservation of the narrative, or at least a narrative that subscribes to Marie’s lay. In words extracted from *Le Fresne*, the handmaiden offers to take the newborn and abandon it in a convent, averting the shame and dishonour that would otherwise be brought upon her mistress; ‘this o child wol I of-bare/ And in a convent leve it yare./ Ne schalt tho be aschamed at al’ (l.129-31). In his early 19th century rendition of the lay, Weber indicates that the missing passages, described as ‘defects’, have been recreated ‘as nearly as possible in the style of the [French] original’ ‘[i]n order to render the perusal [of *Lay le Freine*] less unpleasant’(xii). For general readership this reasoning is perfectly acceptable,— laudable even, given Weber’s success in retaining the dialect and tail-rhyme of the *Auchinleck Manuscript*. However, the absence of that short passage does pose some interesting possibilities for analysis. For one, it asks the reader to trust in Weber’s recreation; trust not his translative choices, per se, but trust that the *levedi* does in fact relent in her decisiveness to kill the infant. It also presumes that the *MS Auchinleck* scribe, in relaying the tale, did not intend to stray too far from Marie’s *Le Fresne* in story and character. As such, it conjectures a hierarchical relationship between the two texts, with the Anglo-Norman as authoritative and the Middle English as derivative. Moreover, it interprets *Lay le Freine*’s missing passages as void, simply serving

⁷⁹ According to the *MED*, ‘fordōn’ can mean ‘2.(a) To put (someone) to death, to kill; (b) to ruin (someone), bring into disgrace; to lead (someone) to ruin or perdition; (c) to condemn or damn (someone); fordon and fordemed, condemned and doomed.’

to attenuate the narrative and to limit its expressive potential. With little to no evidence to the contrary, I can hardly blame Weber for this assumption, nor am I suggesting that the ‘hokerfulliche missegging’(l.61) lady, by some twisted rationale, would grant her handmaiden kill the baby to ‘help it for Godes love’(l.134). I only wish to posit the idea that the missing passage inadvertently becomes part of the *aventure* of the lay. It breaches the *limin* of the text and invites speculation and supplementation, or in other words, boundary-crossing. Regardless of what we read into those missing lines, the text continues to yawn its emptiness at us. As such, this redacted section of *le Freine* can be made to articulate ‘diverse moments in time’(4, Gil Harris), one of which being the lines found in Weber’s 1810 book. Besides, in a text so intimately concerned with the regenerative capabilities of speech and silence, the significance of this moment of radio static cannot be neglected. I am choosing, therefore, to consider the damage on folio 261 not as a defect, but as the manuscript equivalent of a blank scrabble piece. Despite its vacancy, the square nevertheless contributes to the reading experience, the *mise-en-page*, of the poem as much as any other example of its typographical spacing.

3.3 ‘*Freisne ne portë unke fruiz*’

Yet *Lay le Freine*’s manuscript damages cannot be made to account for all of its omissions. At no point does it explicitly relay the sentiment laid out in *Le Fresne*’s central thesis: ‘*en la Codre ad noiz e deduiz; freisne ne unke portë fruiz*’(l.339-40), ‘on the hazel there are nuts and pleasure; [the] ash does not bring fruit’. To interrogate the significance of its absence in *LLF*, we must understand its presence in *Le Fresne*. This line is integral to the lay’s relationship to the rest of the Anglo-Norman collection, particularly regarding its interest in botanics. Often staging the characters’ drives within an adjacent corporeal realm⁸⁰, botanical imagery is used in eleven out of the twelve *Lais*. Pickens and Whalen indicate that references to plants, gardens, nature, and vegetation are part of the ‘narrative economy’(186) of the collection and represent ‘the pervading tension... between fecundity and sterility’(187). Although it is not explicitly mentioned by Marie, they indicate that the ash tree from which *le Fresne* is recovered is, in fact, part of a *vergier* since it ‘has been planted to provide comfort: “*pur umbre fair*” (to give shade)’(191) to those that pass into

⁸⁰ See discussion of *Laüstic*, Chapter 3.

the abbey. They suggest that when she is recovered from the tree, le Fresne is birthed for a second time, but now into a ‘*locus amoenus*, [the] very emblem of fecundity’(192), which relates of course to the tale’s interest in hyper-fertility. Firstly, le Fresne is born surplus to requirement, insinuating an over-virility that alludes to infidelity; secondly, she is plucked, fruit-like, from a tree, her supernumerary value reimagined within the horticultural bounty of nature. It is as such that the *Lais*’ orchards and pleasure gardens are capable of expressing the tension of cultivated abundance and why, for many of the female protagonists, they operate at the level of sexual regulation; that is to say, they permit fruit and flora to thrive within the confines of their walled limitations. This duality is further expressed when Marie describes the way that that nature formed Le Fresne’s beauty: ‘*que nature furme beuté*’(1.236). Driven by the interpretive stamina of ambiguity, Marie curiously qualifies this testament to beauty through a contradiction just two lines later.

‘[E]n Bretagne ne fu si bele
 ne tant curteise dameisele:
 franche esteit e de nbone escole
 [e] en semblant e en parole’(1.237-40)

‘In Brittany there was no more beautiful nor such a courtly damsel: well mannered and of good schooling/upbringing in face and in speaking’

Invoking the opposing factors of that which is *inherited* and that which is *inculcated*, Le Fresne’s *beuté* is the product of her unknown lineage *and* her upbringing in the abbey; of both her natal rank and her assumed rank as the abbess’ niece. The ‘nature’ that formed her can therefore refer simultaneously to her first birth mother and also to her second birth ‘mother’, the ash tree. Outwardly simplistic, the kinetic potential of Marie’s expressions and the multitudinous meanings that lurk behind the surface of the text are what have driven the continually expanding discourse on her *Lais*. Would, for example, the reference to Le Fresne’s ‘*nbone...parole*’ not contrast her nature with her matrilineal heritage, ‘*la dame que si mesparla*’(1.65)? In the same instance that it reiterates the theme of speech and, in doing so, draws the character into alignment with her [mis]speaking mother, it pulls the two women apart; we will not in fact hear the prudence of le Fresne’s *parole* for another 197 lines.

Moreover, it is for this very reason that the botanical metonymy of '*freisne ne portë unke fruiz*' is conspicuous. Rather than leaving the reader to interpret the characters' desires and inner psychology through the allegory of *vergiers* and verdure, the claim epithetically demarcates the limits of the two women's comparative social value. The advisors' claims about the sterility of the tree, —and by extension the sterility of le Fresne, — are wrong since the ash has *already* produced offspring when it safely delivered the infant into the care of the abbey. Likewise, Pickens and Whalen explain why the claim is incorrect both *within* and *without* the tale since 'ashes propagate by producing great profusions of showy samaras that scatter far and wide'(192). It is no mistake that the false claim comes from Gurun's malcontent advisors who want to maintain [feminine] social regulation; nor is it a coincidence that their claim is later disproven. So much are they threatened by the concubine's presence in the court that they mean to relinquish their services if their lord does fulfil his duty to them by producing an heir and securing his lands; '*jamés pur seinur nel tendrunt,/ ne volenters nel servirunt,/ si il ne fait lur volenté*'(1.304-6). Much of the discourse around this lay focuses on the '*felonie*', the *mesparlai* of the mother's slander; however, it would seem very little has been made of the advisors' defamatory, albeit dignified, misrepresentation of le Fresne. It is through its inclusion here that the lay reiterates the fallibility of the signifier as the deeply misguided chaperone of the signified; the idea that language can deceive the speaker as much as the listener. It is their insistence, in fact, that he find a noble wife that precipitates the restoration of le Fresne's status. Evidently, they are not subject to the poetic justice that le Fresne mother is in conceiving twins, although neither are they as vitriolic in their speech. Yet, if they had not lauded the fertility of the hazel, the fertility of the ash itself would not have been exposed. The subtext of this is that, at the end of the lay, the same advisors must now answer to the woman that they deemed unworthy of the role of progenitor— and presumably, they will have to continue to answer to that very progeny which they had denied could exist. Just as the mother's *mesparlai* implicates herself in her error, the advisors, in trying to establish their homosocial authority over the feminine surplus that is le Fresne, fundamentally undermine it. As such, while metaphorical botanics are used throughout Marie's *Lais* to ventriloquize the characters, its deployment in this instance works varyingly to implicate the men in the very misspeak that the slanderous wife is

initially guilty of. Compare their allegory, for instance, to the imagery used by Marie in her *Prologue*, which carefully constructs meaning within a bounteous cypher of revelation. Referring to her own ‘*esciënce*’ or God-given talents, she writes,

‘*Quant un granz biens est mult oïz
dunc a prime est il fluriz,
e quant loëz est de plusurs
dunc a expandues ses flurs.*’(1.5-8)

‘When a good thing is heard by many/ It then enjoys its first blossom,/ and when it is praised by many/ then bursts forth its flowers.’

As her work is spoken of and praised, the medium of her *bone eloquence* effloresces and her talents are revealed. In just four lines, she introduces the thematic concomitance of flora, speech, and reputation within the *Lais*. Almost in the same breath, Marie refers to the ancients who wrote obscurely (‘*anciëns... oscurement diseient*’) so that later generations had to gloss the text and add surplus to its original sense (‘*pur cels ki a venir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient/, que peüssent gloser la letre/ e de lur sen le surplus metre*’, 1.13-6.). As I highlighted in Chapter 2, the *Lais’ Prologue* favours the plurivalent capabilities of obscurity over singular, self-evident interpretation. As Bruckner so elegantly concludes, ‘[t]he paradox of Marie’s writing is to achieve excess in ellipsis’(957). While remaining thematic tied to much of the wider collection, the position of the botanic statement in *le Fresne* is actually, in some ways, atypical in execution. For one, it reiterates the collection’s negative attitude towards those that ‘*gangleür u losengier*’(1.16)(slander and lie) established in the *Prologue*. More so, unlike Marie’s masterful metonymical inscrutability, the validity’ of the knight’s statement expires before the marriage is ever consummated. It could be said that, in this context, they lack the interpretive stamina that Marie possesses. Without explicit condemnation, the exposure of their mistake in the revelation of *le Fresne*’s true heritage undermines their reasoning and, fundamentally, their own social reputation as advisors. Bruckner points out that the advisors’ ‘metaphorical reading’ of the ‘fertile Hazelwood ... the barren Ash’(953) is based on ignorance of the fact they ‘are equally fertile, as they are equally noble’. Comparatively, ‘[Marie’s] more generous description of the ash ...sets up a different relationship between woman and tree

in which Fresne herself appears as the ash tree's unexpected fruit'. When the mantle is placed upon the bed '[le] Fresne's true identity is revealed, [and] metonymy recuperates and trumps metaphor without abandoning it'(955). Freeman explains that at this moment of reunion, the ring and the mantle which 'could be construed as the symbols of the [the mythic values of chivalry]... have been rerouted to become the symbols of the power and lineage of women working together to survive, and even flourish despite feudal and marital conventions'(Sisterhood, 22). In other words, the advisors interpret *le Fresne's* name as an indicator of her lack, when in fact it is the opposite. Rather than having no mother and no (possible) offspring, no past and no future, she possesses the dual heritages that permit both twin daughters to assume noble ranks by the end of the poem; '*mut richement en lur cuntree/ fu puis la [Coudre] donee*'(1.511-12, 'very nobly in that country did la Codre then court'). What, coming from the mouths of the advisors, would be considered calumny rooted in ignorance, transforms on the lips of the poetess, particularly when considered among the *Lai* collection's botanical economy. The differentiating ash/hazel allegory is commuted into a reunion afforded by recognition, affinity, and familiarity; the lay is in fact pinioned upon this transformation.

It is curious therefore that such a line would be omitted from the translation; it does not appear in the critical passage in which the Middle English Gurun's disgruntled men, wanting an 'air'(1.316) to their lands, convince their lord to take a worthy bride who can 'bere his hiritage'(1.321). Due to the aforementioned manuscript damage, it cannot be said with certainty that the name *le Codre* and the botanical metonym are not included in the *MS Auchinleck* tale. *LLF* does rearrange parts of Marie's narrative and as such it is entirely possible that it was included and, subsequently, lost. One such rearrangement can be noted at the start of *LLF*, when the Middle English poet delays the good 'tiding[s]'(58) brought by the messenger, choosing to announce the birth of the twin boys within character speech, rather than narration. By line 15 of *Le Fresne*, the messenger has announced the fortuitous male birth ('*que sa femme ad deus fiz eüz*'). Contrastingly, it takes 54 lines for *LLF* to reveal the birth of '[t]uay sones'(54) Ríkharrðsdóttir says that the English and Norse versions of the *Lais* 'show a predilection for compact and rapid narrative, less so of the rhetorical flourish [typical of Marie]'. As such, in a text that otherwise forgoes the rhetorical bent of its predecessor, it could be significant that *LLF* delays revealing the

gender of the twin boys. It could likewise be marked up merely to an editorial choice on the part of the Middle English scribe. Delaying the delivery of the information brings an immediacy to the narrative; the news of the twins' birth is relayed to us, as the audience, in the same instance that it is relayed to le Freine's parents.

This passage also introduces the idea of substitute parentage through the indication that one of the babies will be given to le Fresne's mother and her husband, who will become the boy's 'gossibbe'(42) or godfather. This point, in fact, begins to lay down the foundations for the carousel of proxy-guardians that the protagonist is later spun through. Moreover, it highlights an element preserved in the Middle English rendering of the Anglo-Norman; namely, the equal valuation and celebration of the twin boys births, as each messenger is granted either '*un bel cheval*' or 'a palfrey'(58). Besides emphasising the celebratory response to masculine births, this equine gift contributes to the courtly backdrop that the two texts share. It acknowledges the shared literary history between the English and French romances. It could be argued that the *aventure* of *Le Freine*, relatively unadulterated in the *MS Auchinleck*, testifies to the affinity of the cultural canons. While the meaning of the name 'Fresne' must be explained to be understood by a monolingual audience, the text's symbolic associations and representation of courtly life need no translation. As discussed, Ríkharðsdóttir attributes this to 'rapid assimilation and the integration of Anglo-Norman descendants and their traditions into existing English culture'. She writes that 'the interconnectedness of the two cultures [that coexisted] within the same locality' are reflected in *Lay le Freine*. She contrasts this with certain translative alterations and expansions in *Strenglaiker*, the 13th century rendition of Marie's *Lais* into Old Norse, which are made to clarify 'French words or concepts that would have been unfamiliar to the audience'. While the financial value of horses would no doubt be similarly recognised by speakers of Old Norse, for both Anglo-Norman and Middle English-speaking audiences the words *cheval* and *palfrey* invoke cultural institutions of masculinity and *chevalrie*. In Chapter 2, I discussed the significance of the *cheval* in Marie's *Lanval*. In a gesture symbolising his rejection of Arthurian homosociality, Lanval dismounts and unbridles his horse. Having symbolically thrown off the constraints that chivalric life imposed upon him, he ends the narrative by leaping to a palfrey behind his new queen and lover, assuming a subordinate, passive role that might otherwise be

assigned to a female character. Likewise, in Chapter 3, I cited Dominique Battle's interpretation of the *Sir Orfeo* lay, in which the motif of horses symbolise the Faery King's military dominance, first appearing at the moment when Queen Heurodis is abducted. In this Middle English lay, the disruption of the domestic couple allegorises the emasculation and impotence of the sovereign as it plunges Orfeo into a decade of solitude, never to produce an heir of his own. While each use of the *cheval* as a poetic device differs in results, a through-line can be traced by each that points back to the creature's associations with social virility and the institution of masculinity. More to the point, like the ash-hazel dichotomy, its metonymic deployment in *Le Fresne* is wordlessly concomitant with maleness. The reward for bringing such excellent tidings of abundant male births in *LLF* and *Le Fresne* evidently share in the cross-cultural institution of *chevalrie*. Freeman in fact points out that, through the surrogacy of le Fresne, the plan for the twin boys is 'implemented but in secret and within the confines of the hidden feminine world' (*Sisterhood*, 16). While the palfrey and *cheval* are only directly mentioned once in each of the *Freine* romances, their associative potential persists in the later mention of the tournament that Gurun attends before discovering our protagonist in a nunnery. This tournament, as a grand display of masculine strength, might otherwise form the denouement of a more chivalric form— namely, as space in which the homosocial authority thwarted at the start of the lay by the prospect of infidelity could be restored. Instead, the secular, courtly, and notably male institution is superseded by the feminine confines of the nunnery.

For obvious reason, the birth of the twin girls is not rewarded equally, nor announced at all, in either lay. Rather, the feminine birth sets off an inverse chain of events that pass le Fresne/Freine down a successive line of matrilineal surrogacies; 'apparent adulteresses, maiden aunts, serving-women, and concubines.... who are considered marginal in the public arena of a male-dominated society' (Freeman, qu. in Burgess, 42). From her original mother, to the 'maiden fre', to the ash tree, and the porter's daughter — who in fact breastfeeds her as a mother would—, each take up the duty of maternal guardianship, each becomes a feminine *gossibbe*. Eventually, the abbess tags into the mother-role, this time under the guise of an aunt— a detail noteworthy since, as Freeman mentions, it alludes to 'another pair of sisters, one of whom produces offspring, whereas

the other does not'(Freeman, *Sisterhood*, 16). By virtue of these illegitimacies, le Fresne's life and paradoxically her honour are preserved. Once taking up her own role as concubine — an echo of her birth mother's calumny surrounding extra-marital sex —, le Fresne operates from the shadow position of substitute-wife; 'thus sche lad with him hir liif/ Right as sche hadde ben his wedded wiif'(1.309-10). She is then able to quite literally take up the mantle of legal wife, swapping places with her sister and restoring harmony.

As mentioned earlier, the status of spouse would never have been afforded her had the marriage between le Codre and Gurun not been orchestrated by the knights. It is through this subversion, Freeman points out, that Marie 'exploit[s] a clerkly-styled cliché... for her own unique and feminine purposes'(*Sisterhood*, 6). Each successive substitution, —a covert operation built upon secrecy and complicity—, could be said to parody maternity and matrilineal kinship. All the while, it slowly unpicks the bonds of *heritage*, *air*, and *wedlok* upheld by the male characters in *le Fresne*. Throughout the course of the Anglo-Norman lay this male institution is surreptitiously infiltrated and transformed by its feminine inverse. This sorority of successive mothers, sisters, and wives operates on a seemingly ad hoc basis in the narrative, haphazardly and serendipitously protecting the infant girl. It is undoubtedly that subterranean string of mothers, daughters, and sisters that serves as the feminine foil to male patrilineage in the narrative.

3.4 Fertility Myths & Marriage

It is at this point in the chapter that I must question for the final time; *why* is the '*freisne ne portē unke fruiz*' line dropped from *LLF*? Can it be chalked up to the assumed gender of the Middle English scribe? Does its associative potential simply not translate as succinctly into the more brevilouquent literary style? Does it attest to a lay form less concerned with interrogating the chivalric sexual politics of its contemporary moment?

To answer this, I would like to posit the idea that the ash-hazel cornerstone is, as Rikharðsdóttir phrases it, recreated 'within [the] more local and diverse context' of its English-speaking reception. Rendering out the backdrop of courtly pleasure gardens, orchards, and flora, the lay's concern with legitimacy and fertility is commuted into something far more bucolic and *celtique* in its associations. Take, for instance, the moment between the newborn le Freine and her saviour, the fair maiden who delivers her—notably,

for a second time!— into the hollow of the ash. In Marie’s version, the maiden simply implores God to prevent the child from falling into peril (“*cest enfant garde de perir*”, l.164) before returning to her lady’s house. Comparatively, the *MS Auchinleck* introduces a pastoral peculiarity in this passage:

‘With that it gan to dawe light.
The foules up and song on bough,
And acremen yede to the plough’(l.180-82)

Sandwiching a line referencing birds and their musicality, the image of agrarian daybreak would never be found in the courtly register of Marie’s writing⁸¹. With all of her images of flowers and plant life, only once does she ever make reference to agriculture and even this is to allegorise the way in which the ruling minority oversee the noble class. Her cultivated orchards are designed to give pleasure and, in the case of *Le Fresne*’s convent vegetation, to provide shade to parishioners. As such, the image of the ‘acremen’ heading to plough their fields testifies to an entirely different version of parochialism than what Marie’s Plantagenet audience would be accustomed to. It figures the tale within a distinctly more local, native literary tradition and one that relates tangentially to Celtic ideas of fertility.

In the Middle English romance of *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, vestigial Celtic fertility myths code the sexuality and fecundity of the domestic couple within the ‘fruitfulness of the land’(198, Bugge). Inversely and necessarily, they relate the failure to produce an heir to the failure to renew life in spring. The myth figures a contingent relationship between the floral and agricultural abundance of summer and the harsh and icy infertility of winter. This land-lord, nature-society dualism can be related, if peripherally, to Galen’s two-seed theory, in which the fruitful union between two *mutually consenting* partners, one male and one female, must take place to produce off-spring. Ultimately, it is a paradigm that, neolithic in origin, passed from Celtic social mythology into Breton and later Middle English literary tradition. In its path, it bound agricultural

⁸¹‘*Li vileins dit par reprivier, quant tencē a sun charuier, qu’amurs de seignur n’est pas fiez*’(‘The villeins say proverbially, when [one] quarrels with their ploughman, their lord’s love is no payment’, l.61-3)

prosperity to domestic success and, I believe, underpins much of the late medieval English literary canon's obsession with marital union as a means to social harmony.

It is certainly replicated, if subconsciously, throughout the Anglo-Norman *Lais* via its interest in the ill-matched couple⁸², often archetypically likened to Chaucer's *Januarie-May* pairing. The Breton storytellers that share in the narrative inheritance of Celtic folklore would likely have preserved, if inadvertently, these ideas, all the while elevating them for a more courtly audience. Marie herself leverages the rhizomatic associations between vegetal proliferation and intergenerational harmony in the *Prologue* to the *Lais*. Moreover, she ties the fertility of the body and the fertility of the land and its flora in '*freisne ne portē unke fruiz*'. However unique among the lays for its resolution in marital union, the ending of *le Fresne* fails to mention whether that marriage results in the 'air' that Gurun's men so desperately wanted. Potentially, the Middle English lay may have ended in the fruitful union of le Freine and Guroun, closing the open circle of the poem with a birth that matches the hyper-fertility of its start. However, once overlaid with the Celtic fertility myth, the Middle English text may expose its own socio-political agenda within the *MS Auchinleck* miscellany, as well as allow us to steal a glimpse into the poem's secret passages.

If May is '[a]s fressh as is the brighte someres day' (*Merchant's Tale*, 1896), Le Freine is as sterile and cold as a winter night. It is known for certain the season of le Freine's birth; the text describes the handmaiden rushing 'thurch feld and thurch wode... al the winterlong night'(l.149). As if to emphasise the inhospitability of her tree-mother's embrace, the poet twice here notes how cold the baby is in the hollow.

'Therin sche [the handmaiden] leyd the child for cold
In the pel as it was bifold'(l.178)
'Sche [the porter's daughter] bad it souke and it nold
For it was neighe ded for cold'(l.204)

⁸² '[C]ist viel gelus, de quei se crient,/ quē en si grant prisun me tient?' [What does] this old jealous man...fear, that he keeps me in this vast prison?' (*Yonec*, l.71-2). The Januarie-May trope is most conventionally explored in *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, *Laustic*, *Milun*, *Chevrefoil*, but anxiety about ill-match couples also be identified in *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, and *Bisclavret*.

These two mentions of le Fresne's death-like chill are swaddled, literally and metaphorically, in maternal affection. Various breastfeeding or bundling her up, an emphasis is placed on her coldness, her proximity to death, and the syndicate of surrogacies surrounding her. In both texts, this fugitive flight is depicted after dark; after all, when else is a woman supposed to abscond with a secret and potentially illegitimate girl-child? Nighttime is typified in the mythology of the *Weddyng* as dangerous and deceptive, notably in its ability to mirror and invert the day. For the *MS Auchinleck* lay, the *winterlong night* timestamp, for one, generates the aforementioned sense of the sub-visual, the secret, the feminine inverse to the clerkly-styled chivalric romance. Firmly, it establishes the icy frigidity of the time of year the twin girls' birth, a detail reiterated later when le Freine is described as 'twelve winter eld' (l238). Emphasising the longevity of that cold winter night, the text suggests that, despite being birthed from an abundant if self-cursed womb, le Freine is codified within the myth's language of sterility. That is, if not infertile, she is unfertilised; she finds herself in a predicament that can only be resolved through the harmony of 'spusseyal' based on mutual consent and equality. Perhaps the missing ending to the poem would have closed this mythic and medical allegory in a reference to spring, new birth, fruit, or some other narrative cue that le Freine's wintriness has been commuted into summery abundance. With this so-called 'defect', the subtextual element of a fertility myth can only be peripherally imagined through the *MS Auchinleck's* extant materials.

It does seem conspicuous to me that this *winterlong* night ends with the sound of birdsong and the visual detail of *acremen* ploughing their fields. Ploughing, in particular, inspires the possibility of new life, the turning over of earth in preparation for springtime crops and the natural cycle of life and death that is thought to have inspired the neolithic myth. At the very least, it is an interesting intermediary between deathly winter and vital summer. The pastoral framing of daybreak ends the cold night, as the baby is returned into maternal warmth; an aspect of the poem that is presumably replicated when, reunited with her natal parents, le Freine's unproductive proxy-marriage to Gurun is transposed into a legal union. It is with these peripheral details that the later Middle English lay imbues its source text with an echo of its own mythic literary history, albeit not with the *merveilleux celtique*, the otherworldly quality, perhaps of *Sir Orfeo* or *Sir Launfal*. For Marie, the

representation of vegetal life relates to the metapoetic aspects of the *Lais* which, as flowers, bloom as they are heard and praised. The other, invoking older literary and mythological traditions, transfer the traces of the metaphor into a different socio-political context, one interested in securing unanimity and prosperity for the land, as well as for the couple. After all, the *MS Auchinleck* collection on the whole does appear to collate an English literary canon, bringing tales forth from obscurity to perpetuate their meanings in new cultural contexts. The outwardly simple transposition of the botanic into the pastoral, of courtly France into bucolic England, reverberates throughout *LLF*. It almost imperceptibly changes and updates the social fabric of the text and relates, I believe, to the late medieval idea that the prosperity of the domestic and symbolic couple relies on the consensual resolution of antitheses.

The shift from botanic to agricultural imagery is not so much of a transformation in as much as a slight divergence; it is an adaptation of the way in which the older material generated the metonymic associations between vegetation and fertility. In conjunction with the pre-existing fertility myth which depicts the cyclical commutation of wintry infertility into summery abundance, the plant life in *LLF* comes to represent the poetic society's cyclical return to stability, rather than allegorising the characters individual drives. In turn, this is representative of the anglicisation of the lay form on the whole, which works to transfer poetic drives from the individual to the societal.

3.5 Conclusions

The transliteration of *Le Fresne* into *Lay le Freine* is, in some ways, a failure. Found in a manuscript compiling exemplary English literature, composed in a quintessentially English tail-rhyme, it determines to tell its lay in *Ingliche* and in England. Nevertheless, it relies on its Anglo-Norman fore-bearer to inform its substance, in the form of gloss, in inadvertent lexical choices, as well as in narrative content. Moreover, in its damaged state, critical passages of the *MS Auchinleck* tale require supplementation from the intact *le Fresne* found in the *MS Harley 978*.

But neither is it a direct facsimile of *le Fresne*; it is not able to preserve the flourish of Marie's octosyllabic couplets, nor the courtly register of its predecessor. It converts

metaphor, disinherits imagery, and diverts away from Marie's economic structure and individual focus.

Perhaps this is what it means to anglicise the lay form. Attenuated by the necessary limitations of translation, the tale re-emerges in a later, English context, making provisions for its mercantile audience that sacrifice some of the rhetorical and kinetic capabilities of its source.

Yet once we dispel the hierarchy of source over successor, we can reach a greater understanding of the relationship between the two. In this instance, greater analysis can be drawn from textual and contextual affinity, which permits an understanding of the polychronicity of the lay as a form which is itself characterised by transition and the rite of passage. *Lay Le Freine* retains the spectre of its past form, the reveries of Marie's lay, which bring its meanings forth from obscurity and perpetuate its transmission, albeit transformed.

Chapter 4: The Lanval Analogues

With *Sir Launfal*, Thomas Chestre attempts to update Marie's *Lanval* for his late fourteenth-century audience. The resulting poem has relatively unanimously been agreed upon by modern scholars to be a contrived and unsophisticated interpretation of its ancestor, one that substitutes delicate charm and ellipsis for hackneyed conventions and illogical narrative additions, a confident mishandling of the Anglo-Norman materials. The surplus that generates meanings beyond the surface of Marie's lays is extrapolated *ad nauseam* in *Sir Launfal* with perhaps little contribution to the themes of feminine power and homosocial pretence. The rite of passage Lanval undergoes from inhospitable patriarchy to opulent matriarchy is replaced by Launfal's tangential episodes in jousting. Particular umbrage is taken with the nearly two-hundred line passage of 'turnement[s]'(l.445) that Launfal must participate in, or 'elles hys manhod schende'(*else his manhood shame*, 528).

Neither, however, have critics found the text able to forge its protagonist anew into a convincing image of chivalry or honour. One such reason for this is that Chestre has Launfal deceive those around him. At the beginning of his story, he lies to Arthur about why he leaves Carlisle, rather than requesting payment for his contributions to the king's exploits. Later, he encourages 'Syr Huwe and Syr Jon' (l.136) to lie about their impoverished appearance⁸³. Following this, Launfal wins his tournaments against Sir Valentine and the Earl of Chester through deception rather than skill, relying on his knave Gyfre to invisibly engineer his success⁸⁴.

Despite not finding favour among scholars, the text has nevertheless been critical to this thesis' demonstration of how the form made popular by Marie de France in the twelfth century reemerges in the fourteenth. Modified by language and shifts in the literate

⁸³ Upon leaving Caerlon, Sir Launfal instructs Arthur's nephew to "'Tellyth no man of my poverté,/ For the love of God Almyght!'"(l.143-4). When they meet Guinevere and Arthur, they explain that their impoverished appearance is intentional, as they chose to wear clothes that are 'totore and thynne'(l.156) to go hunting: "'in our old robes we yede that day'"(l.172).

⁸⁴ After smiting The Earl of Chester off of his horse, Gyfre invisibly leaps into the saddle and rides away on the animal: 'And whan the constable was bore adoun,/ Gyfre lepte ynto the arsoun/ And away he gan to ryde... So the prys of that turnay/ Was delyvered to Launfal that day'(l.466-88). A hundred lines later, Launfal gores Sir Valentyne with a 'gryssly wounde'(l.600) with the help of his knave's cunning manoeuvre: 'Gyfre kedde he was good at nede/ And lepte upon hys maystrys stede -/ No man ne segh wyth syght; .../ Gyfre the scheld up hente/ And broghte hyt hys lord, to presente./Er hyt cam doune to grounde.(l.580-94).

demographic, close readings of *Sir Launfal* and its analogues speak to how the process of anglicisation extends beyond transliteration. More importantly, it can provide insight into how Lanval's transmission into a Middle English language, class, and culture can encapsulate the tail-end of the lay period.

Thus, this chapter is primarily concerned with the haphazard and indirect transliteration of Marie de France's *Lanval* into Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*. It also aims to bring a new perspective to the Middle English text, the scholarship on which has thus far focused heavily on narrative origins. Ultimately, I aim to answer whether *Sir Launfal* is deserving of the 'lay' label and what its formal divergences can tell us about the rest of lay corpus.

A theory already discussed in this thesis is that the lay form is a self-described one; that the reference to 'a ley...[t]hat hyght "Launval"'(l.5), within the first five lines of Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, is enough to qualify its formal status. Yet does this assumption not prioritise the poem's aspirations over its textual substance? 'Lay' seems a convenient way to categorise the text, but one that fails to consider that the inclusion of the self-affirmation may simply relate to Chestre's desire to capitalise on the nostalgic potential of the lay form, a choice he is tacitly making by reimagining *Lanval* in the first place. Schofield makes a similar point of the narrative lays of *Espervier*, *Ombre*, *Conseil*, *Amors*, *Aristote*, and *Oiselet* 'which bear this [Breton] name simply because their authors knew that the designation would make their works popular'(173). Most likely, this is a stylistic feature taken from Chestre's assumed sources; the lays of *Graelent* (late twelfth to early thirteenth century) and *Sir Landevale* (early fourteenth century), which each take their cue⁸⁵, at least partially, from Marie.

It is this very unease and irritation with the poem's categorisation, however, that is pertinent to my study. With one foot in each formal camp, so to speak, I question whether it can be convincingly stated that *Sir Launfal* is a true lay; yet neither can I say that it is fully acclimated to the legibility of the English canon of chivalric romance. Rather, it would appear that *Sir Launfal* is trapped between the drives of the societal and the individual and between the forms of lay and popular romance. However, by considering the text not as a

⁸⁵ *Graelent*: '.I. lai en firent li Breton;/ Graalant Muer l'apele l'on'(l.755-6, The Bretons composed a lay about it/ Graelent Mor it was named).

Sir Landevale: 'And thus was Landevale brought from Cardoyll/...That knowith every Brytan'(l.531-4)

poor imitation of Marie's refined lay of *Lanval* and the swan-maiden folk story of *Graelent*, but rather as the hybrid product of those antecedents, we can better extract meaning from Chestre's work. I aim to focus on contextualising *Sir Launfal* as such, without the constraints of a limited, if not entirely untrue value judgement. Moreover, I must keep in mind a point often acknowledged in the discussion yet excluded in the analysis of this text: that Chestre was *not* directly using Marie as a source and that the only extant exemplification of his poem appears some 300 years after the time at which Marie was writing.

So, how is that the passive and subversively feminine Lanval became the pseudo-chivalric hero-knight of the 'Rounde Table'(l.11, 1.34, 1.86, 1.451, 1.1034)? More to the point, how did his courtly Anglo-Norman lay, concise in lines yet abundant in meanings, come to protagonise Chestre's protracted romance?

To resolve these questions, this chapter will begin by evaluating the effects of Chestre's amplification and embellishment of the *Lanval* lay. By situating this textual and formal expansion in relation to the tradition of *translatio studii* and literary invention, I hope to explore the uncertainty that scholars have confronted in *Sir Launfal*, particularly in response to its lay label. Following this, I will examine the *MS Cotton Caligula A.ii* (c.1450, hereby referred to as *MS CCA.ii*), the only surviving manuscript containing the *Sir Launfal* lay. Since the text is widely considered an outlier in the lay corpus, interrogating *Sir Launfal* in relation to its various other labels, — as a Chestre romance, a Cotton Caligula manuscript, and a household miscellany— will assist in interpreting its afterlives. Moreover, building on the previous discussion of *translatio studii*, this subsection will highlight the influence of translation and transmission on the text's composition and on the construction of the national canon of literature that the Cotton Library facilitated.

Tracing the myth's genealogy in reverse chronological order, I will connect *Sir Launfal* to *Lanval* by way of their intermediaries, *Graelent* (late twelfth to early fourteenth century) and *Sir Landevale* (first half of fourteenth century). As stepping stones, these Old French and Middle English analogues are indispensable to the study of the anglicisation process between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Each of them leave their mark on *Sir Launfal* and inform the critical genealogy of both the lay at hand and the wider body of texts.

In the last subsection of this chapter, I hope to reconcile the dissatisfaction with Thomas Chestre's poetic capabilities by positing a potential explanation for the register, style, and content of *Sir Launfal*. This explanation is rooted in the idea that, through the process of anglicising the lay, Chestre reworks past courtly materials to better suit a newly wealthy, English-speaking audience. Not quite a parody, but not a commentary either, *Sir Launfal* blends the themes of social injustice and wealth aspiration, attaching both its political drive and its literary impotence to the same mooring.

Beyond language, I intend for this discussion of the anglicised figure to testify to shifts in literary mode, poetic form, readership, and reception. Perhaps more clearly than any of the Middle English lays discussed in this thesis, the anglicisation of the Lanval figure demonstrates both the unconscious byproducts of *translatio* and the self-conscious adaptations that the process can engender.

4.1 Literary Invention & *Translatio Studii*

In his 1900 paper, Schofield briefly suggested that 'Chestre carried on the amplifying process to such an extent that his poem may fairly be called a romance'. Unlike Marie who 'makes no claim to invention or originality' and 'does not seem to have done more than recount what she heard or read'(175), Chestre attempts in *Sir Launfal* to reconfigure and expand upon existing materials to offer original meanings. Chestre's episode with Sir Valentine, Schofield says, is 'clearly padding' (152). He reasons that 'the grace of style so characteristic of the Anglo-Norman poetess'(175) is her ability to condense materials, a valid argument that has been similarly made by other Marie de France scholars⁸⁶. However, I will diverge from Schofield's assertion, or at least reject his reasoning.

While I too place *Sir Launfal's* formal status under scrutiny, I do not believe that its length alone can preclude it from the lay categorisation. I acknowledge that Marie's *Lais* have been distinguished for their density and economy of detail, but recognise that these aspects are not the only qualifiers in the canon— for one, the Middle English lays of *Sir Degare* (1106 lines) and *Erle of Tolous* (1221 lines) both exceed *Sir Launfal* (1045) in line length. Marie's longest lay, *Guigemar*, runs 886 lines in length— hardly a significant

⁸⁶ Bruckner: 'Marie's is the art of brevity, the art of the miniaturist, not the excess of amplification so typical of her rival, romance. The paradox of Marie's writing is to achieve excess in ellipsis'(957).

difference from the length of *Sir Launfal*. Of course, by ‘amplifying’, Schofield is referring not only to the poem’s length, but to Chestre’s embellishment and elaboration upon existing stories and literary conventions.

This exemplifies the crux of the issue over the form of *Sir Launfal* and of the lay in general. For one theorist, its length and embellishment would indicate that it defects from the succinct form, which broadly speaking recounts one event-adventure, or *aventure*, in its protagonist’s life. However, another theorist, with the same material, could equally as reasonably argue that the text’s elaboration participates in the lay tradition of *translatio studii*, in which *aventures* are orally passed from the ancients and into the written form and the vernacular, thereby conferring the authority of the old onto the new. This dynamic is in fact demonstrated in the first twenty five lines of *Sir Launfal*. Chestre sets his scene in ‘doughty Artours dawes... that helde Engelond yn good lawes’ (l.1-2). With immediate effect, two things are established. Primarily, that this is an Arthurian text and as such participates in the ongoing and emerging Arthurian tradition. The late fourteenth century saw a boom in the production of Arthurian literature in Middle English, with the *Stanzaic Morte Darthur*, Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*, and Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* and *Squire’s Tales*⁸⁷ all being composed between the years 1387 and 1400. It was in fact in 1348, less than 50 years prior to the *Sir Launfal* text’s estimated composition, that Edward III founded the Order of the Garter, a chivalric institution born in the image of Arthur’s retinue. Contingently, the references to ‘doughty Artours dawes’ implicate the events of the text in a nostalgic past, one in which the country was ‘helde in good lawes’, a phrase that in my view relates to both social conduct and penal administration. Between 1327 and 1400, England had seen three kings reign, two of which were deposed after long periods of

⁸⁷ It should be here noted that Chaucer’s position within this group of texts is uncertain. In comparing the Arthurian court depicted in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* with Marie’s *Lanval* and the anonymous *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Quinn points out that Chaucer ‘has omitted much extraneous detail, modified many familiar conventions, and introduced some unexpected reversals’(217) This argument is based on the idea that, taking a genre already well-established and familiar to fourteenth century audiences, Chaucer employs irony and parody to highlight to distance between ‘the illusory world of Arthurian romance and the real world strife...in fourteenth-century England’(217), thereby undermining the tradition in that same instance he transmits it.

For Chaucer’s audience, Quinn says, ‘there would be a flash of recognition, then a start of surprise as they perceived what he was drawing on, omitting, modifying, reversing, in short, playing with’(218). With Chaucer’s ‘ironic touch’(217) in mind, it should be considered that the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* cannot be so easily contained within the earlier conventions of Arthurian literature. However, it remains that, like Chestre, Chaucer takes the Arthurian tradition already known to his audience—one representing a mythic and distant past—and reworks it to reflect topics both real and contemporary to them and as such may represent a trend within this period.

unfavourable misrule⁸⁸. Undoubtedly, over this century, subjects across social strata were in turmoil, with an incline in class mobility only matched by deep-rooted social anxieties about the future —and past— of the nation. Dissatisfaction with monarchic misrule — ranging in severity from incompetence to outright tyranny— is thus one of the backdrops of Chestre’s lay. It makes sense, therefore, that the lay of *Sir Launfal* would yearn for a mythic past, a noble ruler ‘that never noon better ther nas’(l.12), particularly in the recent memory of its fourteenth-century readers. Marrying the prestige of *Lanval* with the contemporary popularity of Arthurian tales, Chestre exploits the collective spectral imagination of his audience.

The construction of that lost Arthurian England in the first stanza is matched by the second, in which Chestre lists — supposedly in order of hierarchy⁸⁹ — the knights of the Round Table (l.11); ‘Sere Persevall and Syr Gawayn, / Syr Gyheryes and Syr Agrafrayn/... Launcelet du Lake;/ Syr Kay and Syr Ewayn... Kyng Banbooght and Kyng Bos... Syr Galafre and Syr Launfale’(l.13-22). This listing device is thought to be a convention of Chestre’s writing style, as he similarly uses it in *Libeaus Desconus*⁹⁰. This assertion would be confirmed by textual comparison, as the technique is certainly not inherited from Marie, nor the *Sir Landevale* and *Graellent* texts from which Chestre fashioned his work— although the feature is not unusual in the romance form. In fact, compared to the other extant lays, this makes *Sir Launfal* distinctive, for typically it is only the primary characters that experience the *aventure* who are named in the lay form, while many secondary

⁸⁸ Edward II’s monarchic court was typified by military failure, political incompetence, flagrant favouritism, and disunity between monarchy and nobility. After twenty years of dissatisfaction among his barons and scrutiny over the nature of his involvement with his mentor Piers Gaveston, Edward was finally forced to abdicate in shame. His death was announced in 1327; some historians believe he was murdered by the order of Roger Mortimer, the lover Edward’s Queen Isabella. Following a brief period of *de facto* rule, Edward III’s fifty year reign reinvigorated ideas of chivalric conduct and public harmony. However, like his father’s reign before him, this was period of extremes. The arrival of the Black Death on English shores in 1348, spreading from Bristol throughout the land, killing between 25 and 60% of the population, and transforming the social fabric of the nation. This century ends with the deposition of Richard II, who unlike his grandfather and predecessor, saw little value in chivalry. He sought to reduce the power of barons and aristocrats. He too was forced to abdicate.

⁸⁹ ‘The ordering may suggest a hierarchy of worth, or it could simply be determined by meter or be a way of placing Launfal in the ultimate position among the company of the best and greatest of Arthur’s knights’(footnote for lines 13-24, Laskaya and Salisbury).

⁹⁰ ‘Þe ferste was Syr Gaweyn/ Þt oþr Syr Þcevale/ Þe þyrþe Syr Oweyn/ Þe ferþde was Syr Agrafrayn’, ‘The ferste was Syr Gaweyn/ That other Syr Percevale/ The thurthe Syr Ywayn/ The fourth was Syr Agrafrayn’(l.217-20).

characters are left nameless⁹¹. Moreover, aside from Gawayn, Launfal, and to a lesser extent Lancelot⁹², none of these figures reappear, and seem to serve the text only to array it with intertextual prestige. Likely guilty of the previously mentioned poetic crime of ‘padding’, Chestre does here preempt the ‘[b]ateles’ (l.18) that will make up the central part of the story which, at the very least, foreshadow the renown that Launfal will receive for this victories. While the first stanza can be figured within the lay mode of writing, therefore, the second struggles to meet such criteria and instead finds itself more generic in character.

The thread tying the two stanzas together, however, is the references to the ‘ley that was ysette’(4) and the call to ‘herkeneth’(6) to ‘a noble tale’(23) which from ‘among us schall awake’(24). Of course, ‘ley’ links the tale to its past forms and most likely arises from the opening of *Graelent*⁹³, an Old French analogue of *Lanval* and a text that allegedly bridges the gap between Marie and Chestre. The idea that the tale arises from ‘among us’ notably brings into proximity storyteller and audience and takes further advantage of the nostalgic Englishness of the lay. This ‘us’, this shared community, plays out on two levels; firstly, of audience and storyteller, who are to share in the experience of the *aventure* as it unfolds; secondly, it generates an ‘us’, a unity, between the audience and the retinue of knights Chestre has listed. It reveals, perhaps, a political drive behind the text’s composition; with the same retrospective impulses as Edward III, Chestre constructs a piece of writing *for* and *about* the English people and their historicised, mythic, and chivalric past. As an audience-gathering device, it says *this story rose from among us, and therefore is about us*.

⁹¹ Examples include the sister in *Lay le Freine* who is named Le Codre in *Le Fresne*, the steward in *Sir Orfeo*, and many of the characters in Marie de France’s Lais. *Les Deux Amanz*, *Laüstic*, and *Chaitivel* include no names at all. There in fact are eight women named in Marie’s Lais, two of which only appear peripherally or (Noguent in *Guigemar*, Brenguein in *Chevrefoil*, Ywain in *Lanval*) are simply referenced in descriptions of other women (Queen Semiramis in *Lanval*). Many of the men in the Lais also remain nameless, with only fifteenth receiving names by my count, including Bisclavret which is perhaps more of an epithet.

⁹² At the sight of Dame Tryamour’s handmaidens appearing in court, Gawayn exclaims, “Launfal, brodyr, drede the no wyght!/ Her cometh thy lemman hende.”(l.854-5). This, and a mention that alongside Sir Percival, he provides sureties for Launfal in court (‘Syr Percevall and Syr Gawayn,/ [t]hey wer hys borwes’ l.814-5), Gawayn’s role in the text is fairly limited. Equally, the only other mention of Lancelot is when Arthur ‘commaundede Launcelot du Lake’ (l.910) to take the second group of faery handmaidens to arrive at court to the same chambers in which the first group await their lady. In these few lines, the complete extent of involvement of the knights that were introduced at the start of the text has been laid out.

⁹³ ‘*L’aventure de Graelent/ Vos dirai si con je l’entent;/ Bons en est li lais a oïr/ Et les note(i)s a retenir.*’: The adventure of Graelent I shall tell you./ just as I understand it; /The lay is good to listen to /And the melody good to retain.(l.1-4).

The way in which Chestre, in the tradition of *translatio studii*, acclimates the *Lanval* tale to his fourteenth-century English audience necessarily removes it from its precise and economical lay form. To one scholar⁹⁴, the liberties this fourteenth century poet takes may accord with his twelfth and thirteenth century sources and relate to how later generations gloss the text and add surplus to its original sense (‘*anciëns... oscurement diseient...pur cels ki a venir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient/, que peüssent gloser la letre/ e de lur sen le surplus metre*’, 1.9-16), as is the postpartum life of the *aventure*. To another⁹⁵, such additions extend the text beyond the typical brevity and economy characteristic of the lay form and instead make it a more typical form of romance.

To use the *rite de passage* as both an analogy and a philological model, I aim to show that while the earlier lays are situated at the brink of the separation phase — detaching from their aural past and moving into a written literary form — this later iteration of the lay-romance finds itself on the edge of reintegration; that is, it generates a new mode of writing, for which reason the question over its form has produced perennial frustrations and uncertainties.

4.2 The Cotton Library

Between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries, scholars interested in perusing the manuscript of *Sir Launfal* (*MS Cotton Caligula A.ii*) would have needed to seek access to the library collections of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631). As an antiquarian and manuscript enthusiast, Cotton amassed a library that in its heyday was one of the most comprehensive private collections on record and that, after his death, was foundational in the establishment of the British Library’s own collections (Tite, 107). It included particularly notable manuscripts such as those relating *Beowulf* and *Gawain and the Green Knight*, — of which Cotton’s *MSS Vitellius A.xv* and *Nero A.x* are now the only surviving copies. Cotton facilitated the publication of ‘works central to the study of British history, such as chronicles, cartularies, maps and state papers’ (*BL Online*), as well as those

⁹⁴ McKloone says that, like Marie who is also ‘translating a translation’, *Sir Launfal* is produced ‘in the spirit of medieval *translatio*’ (3); specifically, she argues that the ‘dual themes of colonial threats and textual potential... are amplified and made clearer by [Chestre’s] own use of *translatio*’ (19).

⁹⁵ Schofield, as mentioned, points to the ‘padding’ of Chestre’s source materials. He suggests these scenes are ‘only interesting’ in that they shows the poet’s eagerness to expand his narrative... [and amplify] a Breton lay into a romance by adding to it incidents borrowed from various and unlike sources’ (152-3).

pertaining to Norman influence over medieval England⁹⁶. Due to fires, theft, loss, damage, lending, and exchange, some of these early print editions are now the only remaining evidence we have of manuscripts which have since been lost or destroyed.

Likewise, Cotton used manuscript evidence to resolve ‘[m]atters of right of title to property, or exercise of rights of local taxation....’ (Van Houts, 149), including his own legal battles with the tenants of his estates. The utilitarian use of legal documents affirms the collector’s awareness of the influence his library had in permitting him to answer questions over identity, authority, and most importantly to this study, nationhood. This detail, alongside the editing and printing of Welsh and English chronicles, would corroborate the collection’s investment in the early mechanics of nation-building as an exercise dependent upon both the legal realities and fabulous social histories that the library collections encompassed.

Based on the contents of his since-donated library, it seems Sir Cotton had a particular interest in texts that account for the origins of the British nations. The prevalence⁹⁷ of chronicles of Britain is particularly notable in the Caligula section of the Cotton Library, which is shared by our very own *Sir Launfal*.

Sir Launfal’s container, *Cotton Caligula A.ii*, derives its name from its positioning within the library collections, in which it would have sat beneath a bust⁹⁸ of the infamous Roman emperor, on shelf A, two manuscripts from the left. Within this manuscript, *Sir Launfal* is sandwiched between two⁹⁹ further romances also believed to be produced by Thomas Chestre.

⁹⁶ These include Dudo of Saint-Quentin’s *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae Ducum* (“Concerning the Customs and Deeds of the First Dukes of the Normans”) and the *Enconium Emmae Reginae* (“Praise of Queen Emma”) (both eleventh century manuscripts).

⁹⁷ Its contents include but are not limited to Humphrey Llwyd’s *Chronicle* of Welsh history (sixteenth century), Peter of Ickham’s *De gestis Britonum et Anglorum* (early thirteenth century), Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicle* (thirteenth century), an anonymous short metrical chronicle of England (thirteenth century, a version of which can be found in the *MS Auchinleck*), an unattributed *Chronicle* of English history, AM 1 – AD 1347 (fourteenth century), and a version of Layamon’s *Brut* (originally written c.1190), the thirteenth century manuscript of which is named *MS Caligula A.ix*.

⁹⁸ Many of the manuscripts in the Cotton library inherit their label from the way in which the collection was organised, although it has been suggested that this was only implemented posthumously by the collector’s son and heritor, Thomas. According to this system of cataloguing, a bust of a historical figure would have sat atop each bookcase. It is from these busts that many of the manuscripts take their title, some of which have been mentioned thus far; Vitellius, Nero, Otho, Vespasian, Tiberius, and Cleopatra to name a few.

⁹⁹ *Libeaus Desconus*, “The Fair Unknown”, another text existing within the Arthurian poetic universe; and *Octavian*, a romance concerning a fictionalised version of Emperor Augustus. Very little is known of Thomas Chestre beyond his authorial claim to the text of *Sir Launfal* itself: ‘Thomas Chestre made thys tale/ Of the noble knyght Syr Launfale’ (l.1039-40).

All this exposition is intended to paint an image of what reading the text of *Sir Launfal* in the seventeenth century, — 200 years after the manuscript’s production and potentially 300 years after it was composed,— may have been like. It is to consider the afterlife of the mid-fifteenth century manuscript which, as I aim to show, seems to have been neglected or undervalued in contemporary scholarship. Moreover, it is to suggest, tentatively, how the reading experience of this medieval manuscript, for the Stuart-era century scholar, was generated beyond the page. The reading experience of *Sir Launfal* at this time was certainly one of prestige, exclusivity, and of national consciousness. More so, it is one that visually participates in *translatio studii* and *imperii*, concepts which have already been spoken of in this thesis. Here, however, the physical organisation of the Cotton Library goes further to confer upon its volumes the literary authority transmitted from ancient Rome by way of shared knowledge and culture. It provides a visual cue to understanding the way in which Cotton’s British texts are situated in relation to an imperial past and inherit their renown from them. It seems relevant here to mention the fact that Chestre’s text is not called *Sir Launfal* in the *MS CCA.ii*, nor in the seventeenth and nineteenth century library catalogues; it is called *Launfal Miles*, meaning ‘knight’ or ‘solider’ Launfal in Latin. Before the text has even begun, therefore, its Old French, Celtic, and Breton provenances are backdated to the chivalry of Rome.

This invocation of the past is further apparent on *Sir Launfal*’s title page, f.35v., in its use of early Gothic-style and Anglicana scripts. Unlike earlier iterations of Gothic scripts comprising, for example, the lays found in the *MS Harley 978*, the scribe of the ‘Launfal Miles’ title differentiates their minims, making the name of the text extremely legible. This detail may reveal a particular impulse on the part of the compiler or scribe, one influenced by a late medieval literary trend for nostalgia and shared cultural memory. For one, the title uses a more traditional form of Gothic script that by the mid-fifteenth century had largely been replaced by writing systems that were less restrictive for scribes and more legible for readers. Although scripts and scribal hands should be thought of as loosely characteristic of periods and regions, rather than as hermetically sealed within them, such dense early Gothic forms including *textura* were by this time certainly being overtaken by their more cursive, legible successors, such as Anglicana and Secretary. This manuscript detail is made more emphatic by the aforementioned

observation that the *MS CCA.ii* was likely compiled as a ‘household book’, one presumably intended to be read and used; recipes and secular texts added on blank leaves after the initial composition of the codex further confirm to this (White, 2). It was then perhaps created with legibility and pragmatism in mind— and yet its producers titled its text with a type of formal script that even medieval writers complained ‘baffles the eye’ (51, Brantley, quoting Petrarch). Such an indictment cannot, however, be put to the ‘launfal miles’ title; in fact, among the manuscript’s eight romances, it is likely one of the most legible headings to the modern scholar. It is much clearer than, for example, the body of the text of *Sir Launfal*, which employs Anglicana¹⁰⁰, a script more typical of the manuscript’s fifteenth century provenance. I posit, therefore, the possibility that the letterform used in the title of this lay participates in the nostalgic appeal of the text to its fifteenth century owner. The use of the slightly outdated script in the titles of the romance may seek to imagine older, more formal and more expensive Gothic texts —such as the highly ornate *MS Harley 978* — in the hands of the bourgeois owner of the *MS CCA.ii*.

In spite of the accusations of ineptitude levelled at Chestre as a poet, the producers of the only manuscript preserving his work leave a trace of a careful, considerate production process¹⁰¹. Given the moderate —albeit still significant¹⁰² —expense of the manuscript, this scribal detail might suggest care and attention on the part of the producers, perhaps even an intention to enrich the collection with visual interest despite their budgetary limitations.

Moreover, the use of the quasi-Gothic script may show an awareness that *Sir Launfal* is a literary relic that has inherited, even in its updated form, a sense of its

¹⁰⁰ This late medieval variety of Gothic script improves the legibility of its dense, vertical letterforms through large ascenders and descenders which visually break up the lines and aid in differentiating letters. As the name would suggest, this script was typical of English (and some French) manuscripts in the late medieval period.

¹⁰¹ In her comprehensive study of the *MS CCA.ii*, White suggests that the manuscript must have been carefully planned out due to its layout. The scribe ‘often ended a work on the verso side of a leaf... [and] always started a new work at the top of a leaf’ (1). Moreover, ‘few errors appear’ and when they do, they are corrected in a consistent manner, inserting ‘a carat (^) for a missing word’ and for misspelt or incorrect words, crossing through or placing a dotted line beneath (7).

¹⁰² White estimates that *CCAii* cost 8 pounds, 2 shillings to produce in the late 14th century. A relatively mid-range purchase, although still prohibitively expensive to the grand majority of the population at that time. White compares this estimation to the cost of a cow (‘about 9 shillings, 5 pence’) and the cost of building a merchant’s house (‘between 33 and 66 pounds’)(23).

intertextual past¹⁰³. This reverie of the past is, of course, also present in the text itself, with Chestre's suggestion that the events occur as '[i]n romaunce...we rede'(1.741). This, alongside the reference to his source in 'the Frensch tale' (1.474), alludes to the Anglo-Norman ancestry of *Sir Launfal*. The *translatio studii* model argues that texts can invoke and capitalise on the prestige of literary mythologies and social histories not their own. More to the point, in this *topos*, neither the true origins nor historical reality of such myths can attenuate the authority they provide to their heritors. Rather, in calling forth their ancestors, later texts request from readers the respect and renown comparable to that of their past forms. In the *MS CCA.ii*'s *Sir Launfal*, the combination of nostalgic elements and visual prompts may conjure up an association with an illustrious past, demonstrating an inheritance within the text, on the page, and in the library.

Looking to catalogues documenting the contents of Cotton's library can further illuminate *Sir Launfal*'s post-medieval reception. *Launfal Miles* is listed as item 6 in the 1696 *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Cottonianae* by Thomas Smith and as item 7 in Joseph Planta's 1802 *catalogue of the manuscripts in the Cottonian Library deposited in the British Museum* (42). Samuel Hoopers's 1777 *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library* does not deign to mention Chestre's work specifically, although it must be noted that tallying 233 pages, it is half the length of Smith's 1696 list and a third of the length of Planta's 1802 one. This would suggest that *Sir Launfal* — or *Launfal Miles* as it should perhaps be known— was not deemed a particularly prominent text, at least in the late eighteenth century.

Although being 'dismissed as mere copies or poor adaptations of their French sources' in more recent criticism, White attests to the continuing popularity of the texts found in the *MS CCA.ii* 'for some three hundred years' after they were first composed, citing evidence that the 'romances survive in more than ninety manuscripts, ranging in age from about 1330 to the seventeenth century'(16). While *Sir Launfal* exclusively survives in

¹⁰³ Many of the romances found in the *MS CCA.ii* in popular at the time of the manuscript's production. However, the term 'popular' should not be conflated with 'new'. It seems here both obvious and pertinent to note that the range for which a piece of media might be considered old or new would be vastly different for medieval audiences as it would be for modern ones. White elaborates on this, writing that although 'none [of the romances] are found in their first version in CCAii' and were likely not considered 'brand new', they would have remained popular enough to be considered "in-style" and impressive to the manuscript's bourgeois buyer (26).

the *MS CCA.ii*, certain conventions it employs were well-established ones¹⁰⁴ and are used in numerous medieval romances; again, its entertainment value to medieval readers should not be discounted. If *Sir Launfal* is to be considered within the lay collection — a group of texts so emphatically concerned with aurality, performance, and, tangentially, minstrelsy —, this quality of the text could perhaps even explain its narrative additions, such as the tournaments which add not only the thrill of peril¹⁰⁵, but of the spectacle of overseas travel¹⁰⁶.

Having detailed the life of the manuscript, from its Cotton library prestige to disfavour in contemporary scholarship, I will now turn to the text's past. To answer the question over form, I must first trace the haphazard genesis of Chestre's *Sir Launfal* back to Marie's *Lanval*.

4.3.1 Sources of *Sir Launfal*: *Sir Landevale*

Sir Landevale is, presumably, the earliest known entry of the *Lanval* tale into the English literary canon, as all predecessors were composed in Anglo-Norman, Francien, or Picard. Surviving in three manuscripts¹⁰⁷ ranging in date from the late fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the anonymous *Sir Landevale*¹⁰⁸ is thought to have been first composed in the first half of the fourteenth century. This places its composition around the same time that Edward III was magnifying England's mythic past in the Order of the Garter, an act which, as mentioned, imitated the institution of the Round Table. Moreover, it makes the text's composition contemporary with the construction of the Winchester Round Table, a

¹⁰⁴ Citing the research of B.K. Martin, Laskaya and Salisbury reiterate the popular folktale elements of *Sir Launfal*, including 'the spendthrift knight, the fairy lover, a journey to the Otherworld, combat with a giant, the magical dwarf-servant, magical gifts, a beauty contest, the offended fay, a secret oath that is broken, and the cyclic return of the mounted warrior's spirit to this world once a year'. They also note that 'Chestre's representation of Guenevere harks back to an earlier period in Arthurian romance when she was frequently despised'. More to the point, as her blinding at the resolution of the poem is unique to the *Sir Launfal* text, its inclusion was likely influenced by folklore and mythology, as opposed to an existing Arthurian tradition. '[B]linding by blowing on the eyes', Martin states, 'is part of a widespread international folk-tradition, and it is as well attested in continental Germany as it is in Celtic Britain' (201).

¹⁰⁵ The Earl of Chester 'smot [Launfal] yn the helm on hegh/That the crest adoun flegh' (1.473-4).

¹⁰⁶ In order to battle Sir Valentine, Launfal 'wente over the salte flod/ Into Lombardy.' (1.557-8)

¹⁰⁷ The *MS Rawlinson C. 86* (Bodleian Library, Oxford) will be used primarily in this study since it is the oldest of the three. The others include the *MS Additional 27879* (Percy Folio, British Library, London) and the *MS Kk.5.30* (Cambridge University Library).

¹⁰⁸ Various named *Sir Lamwell/Lambewell*.

materialisation of the Arthurian myth that is directly referenced multiple times in both *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal*¹⁰⁹.

The oldest of the manuscripts relaying an intact version of *Sir Landevale*, the *MS Rawlinson C.86* was produced at some point between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries¹¹⁰. It is thought to be ‘at least one remove from the original translation’ (85, Williams), which makes sense seeing as the text has been dated to around two hundred years after the poem’s original composition.

From this date of composition alone, it can be said with certainty that the *MS Rawl. C.86* was not the version of the tale that Chestre copied from. It is widely accepted that Chestre partially based his romance on the material of *Lanval* by way of *Sir Landevale*, most likely from a now-lost copy. Schofield points out the consistency between the two texts, counting ‘83 cases in which the same rhyme is employed, and in 50 more the same word is used to end other lines’ (152). Certain moments in *Sir Launfal* seem directly lifted from *Sir Landevale*, with Chestre adding minimal original details of his own. In the passage in which the knight and his new lover enjoy their first evening together, Chestre deems it only necessary to add the types of wine the couple drink at their meal; ‘[p]yement, clare, and Reynysch wyn’ (l.344)¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁹ Its worth noting that the ‘Table Rounde’ (l.15) is also mentioned in *Lanval*; however, this is only mentioned once.

¹¹⁰ While, as with many medieval codices, its provenance, original commissioner, and intended use have been obscured by time, it is possible to conjecture that the *Landevale* section of *Rawl. C. 86* miscellany was compiled relatively economically; perhaps by someone who did not hold it in as high esteem as *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* or other devotional texts such as the *Northern Passion* which are given more scribal attention. The hand’s frequent pen flourishes serve as the only ornamentation to the otherwise plain folios. Part I of the *MS Rawl. C. 86* is far more visually striking than this later section, opening with a gilded miniature of the crucifixion, before launching into pen flourished initials, decorative ascenders and descenders, and evenly ruled columns throughout. Part III appears humble in comparison, with limited rubrication and cadels. The folios pertaining to *Landevale*, 119 verso to 128 recto, are rather inscrutable to the untrained eye given the scribe’s use of a particularly cursive secretary lettering, an influential hand that had been imported to England from continental Europe by the end of the fourteenth century. With between 28 and 34 lines per column, the two scribes produced the manuscript without rulings, opting to simply follow the vertical lines created by folding the paper—a material, it must be mentioned, that was cheaper in cost and inferior in quality in comparison to the vellum parchment used in, for example, the *MSS Auchinleck* or *Harley 978*.

¹¹¹ This is presumably an original detail on Chestre’s part, since it is not mentioned in *Graelent*, nor *Sir Landevale*, nor of course in Marie’s *Lanval*.

From *Sir Landevale*:
 ‘This lady was son up *sette*,
 And bad hir maydyns mete *fette*,
 And to thir handys water *clere*,
 And sothyn went to *souper*.
 Bothe they togedirs *sette*;
 The maydyns servyd theym of mete—
 Of mete and dryng they had plentie,
 Of all thing that was deynté.
 After soper the day was *gone*;
 To bedde they went both *anon*.
 All that nyght they ley *yn-fere*
 And did what thir will *were*—
 For pley they slepyd litill that *nyght*.
 Tho it began to dawe *light*’ (l.139-52)

From *Sir Launfal*:
 ‘The damesell gan here up *sette*,
 And bad her maydenes her *fette*
 To hyr hondys watyr *clere* -
 Hyt was ydo wythout *lette*.
 The cloth was spred, the bord was *sette*,
 They wente to hare *sopere*.
 Mete and drynk they hadde afyn,
 Pyement, clare, and Reynysch wyn,
 And elles greet wondyr hyt *wer*.
 Whan they had sowpeth, and the day
 was *gon*,
 They wente to bedde, and that *anoon*,
 Launfal and sche *yn fere*.
 For play, lytyll they sclepte that *nyght*,
 Tyll on morn hyt was *daylyght*.
 (l.337-50)

With such great swathes of text being appropriated by Chestre, the influence of *Sir Landevale* on *Sir Launfal*, at least in terms of language, is likely more significant than any of the other analogues. In contrast to the earlier *Lanval* and later *Sir Launfal*, little has been made of *Sir Landevale*. It has typically been labelled a mere stepping stone between the two major texts, with Spearing describing it as an ‘intermediate’ and relatively faithful handling of *Lanval*. Williams, comparatively, suggests that while its translation and compression of Marie’s lay results in ‘an unadorned folktale, with characteristically simplified issues and emotions’, *Sir Landevale* does ‘not deserve to be constantly overshadowed by Marie’s courtly lay or Chestre’s lively but much expanded romance’ (85). The *Landevale* poem sinuously ties together the otherwise oppositional Lanv/fals. Between the older, more feminised and eminent figure, and the younger, more conventional, chivalric hero, I agree with Williams that *Sir Landevale*’s merits have been too easily overlooked.

These merits include material and textual aspects of the poem that point to a shifting register and, by extrapolation, reflect changes in the reading public of the time. For one, unlike Marie, the *Landevale* poet clearly intends for the poem to be enjoyed by an English-speaking audience— why else would they bother to translate it into English, after all? However, the repeated use of ‘rounde table’(l.6, l.46) in the text works to invoke the

image of a mythic past and simultaneously, an ideological institution currently in flux. Unlike the tangential image of the Arthurian court constructed in so many lines in Chestre's poem, the political backdrop is economised in *Sir Landevale* through this simple, yet effective synecdoche. Such use of synecdoche is perhaps inherited from Marie's work¹¹², as in the other lays already explored in this thesis. Marie sparsely describes objects in her lays, typically deploying them to economise the expression of an emotion or a relationship¹¹³. The invocation of the Round Table is, however, distinct from Marie's use of objects, which are typically universal and somewhat mundane items. The sacred table inspires the idea that this equity is fomented by an institution, one that defines the relationship between nobility and monarchy as mutually constitutive.

Through this use of metonymy, the *Landevale* poet retains the economy of detail and precision so integral to Marie's lay form. Importantly, however, they preserve *Lanval* scene by scene, rather than line by line, and adhere to a strict octosyllabic tetrameter rhyming couplet structure. A comparison of the aforementioned passage in *Sir Landevale* and *Lanval* will expose the way in which the translator prioritises the preservation of the metre of Marie's poem.

From *Lanval*:
*'l'ewe li donent a ses meins
 e la tuaille a esuer;
 puis li [a]portent a manger.
 Od s'amie prist le super:
 ne feiseit mie a refuser.
 mut fu servi curteisement,
 e il a grant joie le prent.
 un entremés i ot plener,
 que mut pleiseit al
 chevalier' (l.178-86)**

From *Sir Landevale*:
 'This lady was son up *sette*,
 And bad hir maydyns mete *fette*,
 And to thir handys water *clere*,
 And sothyn went to *souper*.
 Bothe they togedirs *sette*;
 The maydyns servyd theym of mete—
 Of mete and dryng they had plentie,
 Of all thing that was deynté.'
 (139-46)

*('They gave him water for his hands and towel to dry them, then brought him to eat. With his love he took supper, not a morsel could he refuse. He was served very

¹¹² Marie does mention '*la table roûnde*' (l.15) in *Lanval*.

¹¹³ This, as discussed, is in the case for the hazel branch in *Chevrefoil* and the ring and mantle in *Le Fresne* which underpin Marie's mnemonic tapestry.

courteously and was seized with great joy. One dish that there was plenty of very much delighted the knight', my own translation).

Evidently, the poet perpetuates the *sen* (sense)¹¹⁴ of the lovers' tryst in their translation, as is typical of translations in this period, but does not convert each word as a linguistic unit into English. The preservation of the octosyllabic metre in the translation, however, emphasises the significant influence of the courtly, Anglo-Norman register of Marie's poem over the *translation* process (as opposed to the *anglicisation* process) and relates, differentially, to the text's musical quality that has been retained from the lay tradition. The integrity of the lay to the *Landevale* poet therefore perhaps resides in its metrical form. The octosyllabic tetrameter so typical of Anglo-Norman romance is a formal aspect that Chestre discards in his version in favour of a merry tail-rhyme structure more familiar to English storytelling traditions. This demonstrates one difference between *translating into English* (as the translation of *Lanval* results in *Sir Landevale*) and *anglicising* (as the anglicisation of *Lanval* results in *Sir Launfal*).

Considered as such, the *Landevale* 'lay' — I believe at this point it can still be labelled as such— is an unassuming yet vital chrysalis that facilitates the delivery of Marie's hero into Middle English as a language. It does not directly deliver *Lanval* into the literary conventions associated with that language, nor does it adapt his *aventure* to the reception of the newly established literate middle class to the extent to which, I will argue, Chestre does in his own analogue. The anonymous lay, however, is likely the character's entry point into English and by extension, its lead into its anglicisation.

Inversely, as the link to Marie's *Lanval*, this intermediary text is part of the web through which *Sir Launfal* can siphon the renown and character of its ancestor. The close consideration of this parentage is crucial in exposing how, in his own transliteration, Chestre ensures that essential link, that connection to his text's past form. In *Sir Launfal*, the *Landevale* figure finds himself displaced from 'uncuth londe' (l.27, *Landevale*), naturalised as a citizen of Arthur's court, and reprogrammed to emulate the political and social interest of the lay's new audience. Be that as it may, before this argument can be

¹¹⁴ 'cels ki a venir esteient...que peüssent...de lur sen le surplus metre'(l.12-16, *Lais Prologue*)

demonstrated, another of Chestre's source must be considered as textual evidence, as follows.

4.3.2. Sources of *Sir Launfal: Graelent*

It is not only by way of *Sir Landevale* that *Sir Launfal* inherits Marie's *Lanval*; the role of *Graelent* cannot be sidelined in the discussion of the story's anglicisation. The anonymous Old French poet who produced *Graelent* is thought to be a contemporary of Marie's, feasibly composing the text between 1178 and 1230, according to O'Hara Tobin¹¹⁵ (Burgess and Brook, 352). Like *Lanval*, the lay is courtly in its register and employs octosyllabic rhyming couplets throughout.

It is found in two medieval manuscripts¹¹⁶ both dating from the latter half of the thirteenth century. Materialising towards the end of this century, the *MS Paris, BnF 1104 (S)*, it should be noted, contains versions of nine of Marie's twelve total lays¹¹⁷. Likewise, in the *MS BnF, fr: 2168*, which dates from the second half of the thirteenth century, *Graelent* can be found alongside *Guingamor*, another lay, as well as three of Marie's *Lais*¹¹⁸. Evidently, over one hundred years after their composition, the affinity between Marie's writing and the anonymous *Graelent* remained. It is perhaps for this reason that the poem was erroneously attributed to Marie in an 1819 publication of the *Lais* edited by Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort. The study of *Graelent* has in fact generated much debate concerning its source texts, its Celtic origins, and its now largely disproven influence over Marie de France's work.

It has been variously posited that *Lanval* and *Graelent* have a common source text¹¹⁹; that they have interrelated but independent source texts¹²⁰; that *Lanval* is the source

¹¹⁵ 'In Tobin's view the reference in v. 398 to crusaders ('*Et les prisons et les croisiez*', v. 382 in MS A), not found in *Lanval*, could refer either to participants in the Third (1189) or Fourth Crusade (1202) and thus help to date the text. However, prisoners and crusaders seem to be associated here merely as examples of knights who are in some way disadvantaged' (Burgess, 352).

¹¹⁶ There also exists the Paris, BnF, Arsenal, 2770 (L), an eighteenth century copy of BnF, fr. 2168, made for French historian Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye.

¹¹⁷ These are: *De Guimar (Guigemar)*, *Le lay de Lanval*, *Le lay de Dyonet (Yonec)*, *Le lay du chievrefueil*, *Le lay de Milon (Milun)*, *Le lay du Fresne*, *Le lay d'Aquitan (Equitan)*, as well as an incomplete version of *Le lay des II amanz (Les Deux Amanz)* and of *Bisclavret*.

¹¹⁸ *Li lais de Eudamarec* (of *Yonec* in the *MS Harley 978*), *Li lais de Gugemer (Guigemar)*, and *li lai de Lanval*.

¹¹⁹ Kolls

¹²⁰ Schofield

for *Graelent*¹²¹; and, conversely, that *Graelent* is the source for *Lanval*¹²². Evaluating these theories, Burgess and Brook conclude that *Graelent* was ‘largely drawn from Marie, but [that its author] integrated... Celtic material into [the lay] independently of her’ (358), a stance that I wholly agree with.

Importantly, *Graelent*’s incorporation of Celtic material produces significant divergences from the other analogues found in the corpus. These variations are thought to be due to the influence of swan-maiden folklore conventions, as well as by tales of the quasi-historical fifth century Cornish king *Gradlon Mor* (Illingworth, 31, Schofield, 126). The most notable of these differences in narrative terms is the encounter between the disaffected knight and his soon-to-be lover which defects significantly from *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*. In a scene typical not only of the *Lais*, but of Arthurian literature at large, *Graelent* stumbles upon the faery maiden after pursuing a rare white hind¹²³, while in *Lanval* her handmaidens approach the lonely knight at her behest. Likewise, the lady’s nakedness is not the opulent sensuousness of Marie’s *Lanval*, but rather a voyeuristic glance at an unknowing *fée* bathing in a spring¹²⁴. Secondly, and contingently, its poet, according to some medievalists including Illingworth, chooses to depict the first meeting between the knight and the faery queen as an instance of rape¹²⁵. Illingworth suggests that the inclusion of this scene is an indicator that the *Graelent* myth is a derivative of *Lanval*, one that combines Marie’s lay with another, unknown Celtic source or sources. In particular, he cites the fact that the *fée*, initially frightened by the onlooker and the threat he poses, later confesses her love to him after he ‘*fet de li ce qu’il li plest*’ (did with her what he pleased, l.296), or in other words, rapes her¹²⁶. ‘The only satisfactory explanation of this change’, Illingworth writes, ‘from *Graelent* dominating the lady to her dominating him’ is that the lines from this point on in the lay, in which she is authoritative in both love and law, are

¹²¹ Foulet, Illingworth,

¹²² Stokoe

¹²³ ‘*Devant li la biche sailli*’ (l.213) ‘*Graalant a cele veüe / Qui en la fontaine estoit nue. Cele part vet grant aleüre, / De la biche n’ot il plus cure*,’ (l.225-8)

¹²⁴ ‘*Ne la veut en l’eve touchier, / Par loisir la lesse baingnier. / Sa vesteüre ala saisir, / Par tant la cuide retenir*.’ (l.235-8)

¹²⁵ ‘*A fet de li ce qu’il li plest. / Quant de li ot fet son talent, / Si li prie molt doucement / Que vers lui ne soit trop irie*.’ (l.296-9).

¹²⁶ Medievalists’ interpretations of this line vary. Stokoe and Schofield do not seem to interpret this line as representing sexual violence, Illingworth, writing much later, does. While I see no evidence in the text expressly stating that *Graelent*’s intentions are sinister or violent, it is difficult as a modern scholar to read this passage without such implications.

taken from the *Lanval* text. In contrast, the moments in which she embodies the swan-maiden figure are ‘totally opposed to the [*Lanval*] tradition’(32) and are inspired by other Celtic and Breton storytelling conventions¹²⁷.

Regardless of whether we accept the assertion that *Lanval* is the source for *Graelent* and not the other way around, it can be said unequivocally that it is Marie’s *Lanval* that first places the tale within the realm of the Arthurian court¹²⁸. For the *Graelent* poet, the king is simply ‘[l]i rois qui Bretaingne tenoit’, ‘the king who ruled Brittany’(l.15). McCloone indicates that *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* both operate ‘within the post-Geoffrey of Monmouth, post-Wace Arthurian tradition, in which the concerns of history subsumed into an emphasis on marvels and adventure’(3). By situating her protagonist within Arthur’s court, Marie is able to economise the plot by capitalising on pre-existing literary conventions, particularly those that envisage Guenevere as conniving and unfaithful. Stokoe importantly points out that the version of Guenevere in *Lanval*, who is left unnamed, must be inherited from Wace; ‘it was not until Chrétien [de Troyes] touched the material that [her] character was idealized’(399). This note situates the lay of *Lanval* between the Arthurian traditions that had already been established (by Wace) and those that were still emerging at the time in which Marie was writing (by de Troyes), which is typified by the depiction of Arthur as a *roi fainéant*.

While it does participate in the late medieval tradition of depicting Arthur as crippled by ineptitude, the *Launfal* and *Lanval* analogues’ vitriolic treatment of Guenevere is certainly an earlier trope. Beyond shifting locations from Brittany to Camelot (‘Karlyoun’, l.88), Chestre largely discards the Celtic influence of *Graelent* in favour of capitalising on the political associations and literary popularity of Arthurian legend. These

¹²⁷ Opposing Illingworth's view, Stokoe proposes that Marie de France wove her *lai de Lanval* from *Graelent* and ‘made those changes she considered necessary to transform the folktale into a courtly short story’(395). Superficially convincing, Stokoe’s reasoning takes for granted that that literary *translatio* is necessarily a textual process designed to improve upon past materials and rectify their ambiguities, rather than one capable of degeneration. Rather boldly, he says that ‘[i]t is very hard to conceive of a story teller so stupid that he would, by taking out every trace of Marie’s carefully constructed climax, destroy the suspense she had achieved’(402). Despite the disproven theories that Stokoe puts forward, he does make some important points. For example, he notes that there are no traces of the *Roman de Thebes* or of the Tristan cycles in *Graelent*, which have been identified in Marie’s writing of *Lanval* by Hoepffner.

¹²⁸ Although popularised in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Latin *Historia Regnum Britanniae* (c.1136), the legend of Arthur was solidified as an institution of chivalry in Wace’s highly influential Anglo-Norman *Brut* (c.1155). Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, King Arthur underwent a transformation that solidified his myth as a disseminator of English identity, as well as an inheritor of its common language. Around thirty years after Marie de France was writing her *Lais*, Layamon was translating Wace’s *Brut* into Middle English, the first of its kind as the earliest known retelling of the Arthurian cycles in that language.

Arthurian conventions emerge full-realised in Chestre's poem. By the time the *Graelent-Lanval* myth reaches the fourteenth century, the Breton and Celtic motifs of the swan-maiden had been almost completely being replaced by Marie's Arthuriana, as demonstrated by the Round Tables appearing twice and thrice in *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal*, respectively. Despite using *Graelent* as a source, therefore, Chestre eliminates various Celtic elements in favour of the chivalric (albeit satirised) Arthurian court. Here, the court appears as part of the process of re-nationalising Arthur as an English king in an English tale.

While the accusations of artlessness levelled at the *Sir Launfal* text are not put to *Graelent* to the same extent, the text has been largely overshadowed by Marie's masterful handling of her alleged Breton source. The *Graelent* poet is able to postulate on the nature of love¹²⁹ and certainly makes worthwhile updates to the ending, in which the lovers cross a treacherous stretch of river and into another land beyond Brittany¹³⁰. Burgess and Brook point out that '[t]he poet was evidently concerned about correct behaviour, even if he did not always make the judgements which the modern reader would endorse' (373), suggesting that the intended audience was a courtly one. Indeed, it is difficult to overcome the sexual violence staged by the lay, particularly in a text so concerned with the chivalry of love. The main stumbling block of the *Graelent* poet is, however, the inconsistencies that are produced out their synthesis of two folkloric figures; one, the timid Celtic swan-maiden and the other the exacting and sexually forthright faery queen of *Lanval*. The poet is unable to convincingly reconcile these conventions into a coherent figure and *Graelent*'s lady is denied the agency that she is otherwise afforded in *Sir Launfal*, *Lanval*, and *Sir Landevale*. This may explain why the text has found less favour among scholars —myself included— who may find *Graelent* unsuccessful in what I believe is a clumsy admixture of two, disparate myths.

However, acknowledging the text's issues is important to the discussion of its transliteration into *Sir Launfal*. For one, it is to Chestre's credit that he chooses to inherit

¹²⁹ 'Amor tenir n'est mie gas./ Cil doit estre de molt haut pris/ Qui s'entremet qu'il soit amis./ Tex. VC. parolent d'amor/ N'e[n] seivent pas le menor tor;/ Ne que est leal druerie; Ainz est lor rage el lor folie' (1.84-90) ('Loving is no laughing matter. A man must be of very great worth to undertake to become a lover. Five hundred men speak of love who do not know the slightest thing about it, or what loyal passion is, so mad and foolish are they', translated by Hopkins).

¹³⁰ 'En sa terre o lui l'en mena' ('she took him off to her land', 1.732).

the faery queen from Marie (by way of *Landevale*), which partially pushes back against criticisms of *Sir Launfal* as misogynistic and incoherent. Moreover, as a romance of popular origin, rather than courtly romance, its differences further sanction the idea that Chestre reroutes his protagonist away from the register of Lanval's previous iterations and instead enters into an emerging mode of textual production, one intended to reflect the interests of English middle class readership.

4.4 Middle Class Middle English

As stated, it is *Sir Landevale* that first puts the *Lanval* figure into English. However, it is *Sir Launfal* that first *anglicises* it—that is, puts it into a medium palatable to English speaking audiences. The English language between the time at which Marie was writing in the twelfth century and the time in which Chestre was writing in the fourteenth, it can be argued, underwent a transformation relating to national identity and to class. The language was likely 'the most widely comprehensible vernacular in England' (346, Angerer) at the time of both the *MSS Auchinleck* and *CCA.ii*'s production in the late fourteenth century. As Baugh and Cable state, 'French was the language of the court and the upper classes, English was the speech of the mass of people'(110). Whether intentional or not, Baugh and Cable's labelling of French as 'language' and English as 'speech' interests me. 'Language', here, I imagine as something installed and inculcated into the ruling class, who were known to send their children for schooling in France to correct the linguistic degeneration brought on by their continued diaspora¹³¹. In contrast, 'speech' I figure as a something springing forth from the subject populations, possessing sonic and spontaneous qualities. With the installation of a French-speaking nobility, English became 'an uncultivated tongue, the language of a socially inferior class'(106). For almost 200 years after the Norman Conquest of 1066, the intelligentsia residing in England would

¹³¹ Short says that by the 1160s, namely, the time at which Marie was writing, 'Anglo-Norman was already considered to be the poor relation of the linguistic family to which it belonged'(473). It is not known with certainty when Anglo-Norman came to be distinct enough from Continental French as to be considered a separate dialect, a line of inquiry that Short points out would '[oblige] us to postulate an artificial continental 'standard' language'(469). However, by citing the writings of Giraldus (fn) and Walter Map (fn), Short is able to convincingly make the claim that during this time, the language was considered by much of the Norman nobility as 'a coarse deformation of French, and to speak it was a sign both of intellectual ignorance and of social inferiority'(472). Furthermore, he recommends making a distinction 'between the written and the spoken forms of Anglo-Norman'; orthographic evidence from this does little to show how much dialectal differences were born out of accentual divergences, rather than lexical ones. Short explains how nobles living in England during the twelfth century 'were in the habit of sending their children to France... to rid them of their barbarous native French [Anglo-Norman]'(471).

have predominantly spoken the French that was natural to them¹³². As such, the language of the court and by extension of legal documents stood in opposition to the vernacular speech of the masses. Marie's Anglo-Norman, the French used by the upper nobility, symbolised social, cultural, and literary authority. Despite questions over multilingualism across social classes, it seems reasonable to say that distinctions between the language of the nobility and the speech of the masses were one way in which medieval English society was stratified.

However, by the end of the twelfth century, the fusion between the English and French through intermarriage and generations of cohabitation had resulted in a unification process between the two groups that made them almost indistinguishable. It is believed that English speakers in the 'higher reaches of the feudal hierarchy' (Short, 474) would most likely have had some understanding of French or Anglo-Norman in the later period, by virtue of proximity and practicality. By 1250, 'there was no reason for the nobility of England to consider itself anything but English' (Baugh and Cable, 119). In fact, many members of the English nobility during the thirteenth century also belonged to the class of French aristocracy and were landowners in both England and France.

Thus, although the spectre of Anglo-Norman as the old language of power may have remained, the use of English alone is not enough to determine the demographic Chestre sought to reflect in *Sir Launfal*. What, in the twelfth century, would have been financially prohibitive to an English monoglot, by the fourteenth century was reasonably attainable; the commission of a manuscript entirely in English. This has been demonstrated in previous chapters in discussion of the *MS Auchinleck*. Appearing in the decades before Chestre wrote *Sir Launfal*, the *MS Auchinleck* represented the coeval developments of an educated but non-aristocratic readership and the commercial demand for books written in English. The *MS Auchinleck*'s status as a cultural touchstone makes that language concomitant with England's fourteenth century 'middle class', even if it did not reflect the lexical reality of the time, in which subjects across all social strata used English in their everyday life. Beyond language, therefore, the material and textual qualities of its miscellany call forth an association between the emerging English intermediary class and

¹³² Rather than vitriolic or disdainful, Baugh and Cable suggest that up until 1200 'the attitude of the king and the upper classes toward the English language may be characterized as one of simply indifference' (107); they had no real reason to learn it when French was the language of their peers and of their continental affairs.

their vernacular. The text of *Sir Launfal*, too, differentially elicits its anglicised status through its criticism of class and warnings about social disunity, in addition to its aforementioned material aspects.

One such textual attribute is *Sir Launfal*'s employment of tail-rhyme stanzas with no standard number of feet throughout, a metrical form famously parodied by Chrestre's contemporary Chaucer in *Sir Thopas*. This was likely a popular poetic feature among the growing Middle English canon, as 'at least twenty-three other tail-rhyme romances [were written] in the fourteenth century' and it is similarly used in *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, and *The Earl of Tolouse*. It has been said that Chrestre's use of tail-rhyme 'masterfully satirises a bourgeois mentality' (Laskaya and Salisbury, *Sir Launfal: Introduction* from the *Middle English Breton Lays*), although the confines of such a 'technically demanding form... leads [to]... formulaic banality and sometimes [to] absurdity' (Spearing 106). Spearing points out that while in *Sir Thopas*, the tail-rhyme may be intended as comic, 'there is really no evidence for that' in *Sir Launfal* (107). Whether it is successful or not, this metrical aspect of the text is foundational to Laskaya and Salisbury's belief 'that [Chrestre likely] lived outside the aristocratic world', or at least was writing *from* the perspective of the outside. From what material evidence remains, this instance of tail-rhyme stanza is in fact a new addition to the *Lanval* corpus; all of the other extant analogues of *Sir Launfal* use the courtly octosyllabic couplets brought to the British Isles by Norman writers in the twelfth century. This sets the text apart from the *Lanval* corpus partially, as it loses the traces of musicality¹³³ engendered by the rhythmic octosyllabic tetrameter of its predecessors, which many have postulated derived from courtly lyrics set to music.

As distinct as their register and their proposed recipients are, however, the rhythmic structure of *Sir Launfal* and of *Lanval* are not so distant. The Middle English lay employs a tail-rhyme without a consistent meter; *Lanval*, *Sir Landevale*, *Graelent*, and the rest of Marie's *Lais* adhere to an admittedly more strict scheme of rhymed couplets. All alike — Anglo-Norman and Middle English, courtly and popular — share iambic feet. This is of course common enough in both English and French medieval poetry. The metrical similarity bears pointing out simply as a caveat to the claim that these forms are different;

¹³³ *Graelent* 'was evidently intended to have a musical accompaniment. In one manuscript of the poem there is a stave of music under the first verse of each paragraph' (Schofield, 122).

they *are* different, but not discontinuous or alien to one another. Green suggests that the burlesque style Chaucer exercises in *Sir Thopas* achieves humour through the contrast of tail-rhymed pairings (3). The iambic metre and ‘drasty rhyming’ (*Sir Thopas*, 1.2120, Fragment VII, Group B²) of the tale, by all accounts, heightens the satire of the piece, which parodies tales ‘of bataille and of chivalry,/ and of ladyes love-drury’ (1.894). The common thread between the metrical structure of *Sir Thopas* and *Sir Launfal* is that they both mimic courtly poetic forms, yet to varying ends; one mocking ‘romances of prys’ (1.897, *Thopas*), another imitating the ‘romaunce[s] we rede’ (1.,741 *Launfal*), but both alluding to existing metrical conventions of the chivalric romance form. The simultaneous differences and similarities between the iambic tail-rhymed and rhymed couplet forms — and the effects that their various deployments produce — reflect the ease by which the French lay metre can be adapted to the English form, and the flow of one literary convention to another in the tradition of *translatio*.

4.5 Post-Liminality

In addition the shift in language, a number narrative aspects of *Sir Launfal* confirm the hypothesis that the text was adapted into a more popular form better suited to a mercantile audience, rather than to the aristocratic recipients of *Lanval*. In fact, Chestre expands significantly on the *aventures* of his two known source texts. The 1044-line poem that remains after his rewriting only shares around 600 lines of material bearing plot similarities to Marie’s lay. With some shuffling of events, many of the plot details in *Sir Launfal* are relatively consistent¹³⁴ with Marie’s *Lanval*.

The consistencies between the two are as follows.

A knight neglected by a inept and cuckolded King Arthur rides out of the city to lament his misfortune where he encounters an otherworldly queen who takes him as her lover, lavishes him in food and wine, and offers him a coin purse with seemingly unlimited

¹³⁴ Chestre does, for example, introduce the conflict between Launfal and Arthur’s queen earlier in the narrative than Marie does. In keeping with her particularly lean storytelling style, the poetess only introduces this conflict when it becomes necessary to move the plot forward and to legitimise the character’s drives later in the text. Chestre, however, changes the narrative structure slightly to establish that the queen and Launfal have some sense of mutual dislike for one another before the scene in which he rejects her advances. This may be an inconsistency carried over from *Graelent*, in which Launfal’s rejection of the queen occurs towards the start of the text, before he has fallen into poverty, nor met his fairy lover.

credit¹³⁵. She promises unending riches and affection in exchange for his silence, — he must not tell anyone of their love, nor ‘make no bost’(l.362) of their relationship. Returning to Carlisle (‘Karlyoun’, l.88. ‘*Kardoel*’, l.5), Launfal enjoys and shares in his newfound bounty, clothing minstrels¹³⁶ and freeing prisoners¹³⁷. Later, Arthur’s queen approaches the young knight, soliciting his love which he refuses, causing an argument in which Launfal tells Guenevere that his lover’s lowliest handmaiden would be a better queen than she¹³⁸. The queen vows to have him put on trial for his offence and he winds up in a cell, from which he calls out to his fairy lover and, unanswered, realises the cost of his boast¹³⁹. At trial, Launfal’s fate appears sealed until his lady and her handmaidens arrive at court to absolve him, proving that they are in fact more beautiful than Arthur’s queen, resulting in Launfal being acquitted so that he can abscond with his new monarch and lover to her fairy otherworld.

A feature shared by both the Anglo-Norman *Lanval* and the Middle-English *Sir Landevale* is the characterisation of the protagonist as a foreigner in Arthur’s court. Lanval is a ‘[h]ume estrange... en autre tere’ (foreign man... in another land, l.36-7) and Landevale laments that he is a ‘here in uncuth¹⁴⁰ londe’(l.27). By the time the figure reaches Chestre, however, his foreignness has been elided¹⁴¹; while Launfal’s birthplace is not explicitly mentioned in the text, from details that he knew the Mayor long before¹⁴² and that, at the very least, he has been with Arthur for ten years when the story begins¹⁴³, it can be safely conjectured that he is not unfamiliar with the land nor with the court itself.

¹³⁵ ‘[A]s oft as thou puttest the hond therinne, / A mark of gold thou schalt wynne’, l.322, *Launfal*. ‘[C]um plus despendra richement, plus avrat or e argent’, ‘since the more richly he spent, the more gold or silver he would have’, l.142-3, *Lanval*.

¹³⁶ ‘Fyfty clodede gestours, l.430. ‘*Lanval vesteit les jungleurs*’, l.211

¹³⁷ ‘Fyfty delyverede povere prysouns’, l.428. ‘*Lanval acquitout les prisuns*’, l.210.

¹³⁸ “‘Hyr lothlokest mayde, wythoute wene, / Myghte bet be a Quene/ Than thou, yn all thy lyve!’”, l.697-99. “[U]ne de celes ke la sert, / tute la plus povre meschine, / vaut meuz de vus, dame reïne, / de cors, de vis e de beauté, / d’enseignement e de bunté”, ‘One thing you can be certain of; even her poorest servant girl has higher value than you, lady queen, of body, of face, and of beauty, of learning and virtue’, l.298-302.

¹³⁹ ‘He softe hys leef, but sche was lore/ As sche hadde warnede hym before.’(l.730-1)

¹⁴⁰ *Uncuth*, according to the *AND*, can mean ‘2.(a) Alien, uncustomary; foreign (to one’s nature)...(b) of a person, ship: not native, foreign; of a country, place, etc.: foreign, strange; also, as noun: a foreign land’.

¹⁴¹ In *Graelent*, the figure is a Breton knight in ‘Graalanz fu de Bretons nez’(Graelent was of Breton birth, l.5), serving the king of Brittany (‘Li rois qui Bretaingne tenoit’, the king who held Brittany, l.15). Sir Landevale’s

¹⁴² “‘Som tyme we knewe us, yore.’”(l.108).

¹⁴³ ‘The kynges stward made was he, / Ten yer, I you plyght’(l.33-4).

Moreover, Launfal tells Arthur that he must go to his father's burial ('deth hadde hyd faydr ynome- /He most to hys berynnge' (1.77-8)), before going to 'Karlyoun' (1.88, Camelot), which can be assumed to be his homestead. Since we know that Chestre sets his tale in a time when Arthur 'helde Engeland yn good lawes'(1.2), it is obvious that Launfal too is an English knight and that Chestre draws his story from 'among us'(1.24), the English-speaking audience.

While Marie's Anglo-Norman audience — the ruling class installed only a hundred years before her time— may have found kinship with the *hume estrange*, Chestre's protagonist perhaps needed to be repatriated in order to appeal to his Middle English audience. It is as such that, despite not being earliest extant version of the *Lanval* myth in the English language, *Sir Launfal* is *earliest* and *only* version of the poetic figure to himself be English.

The narrative divergences Chestre makes from the writing of Marie and of the anonymous *Graelent* and *Landevale* poets, however, go beyond eliciting the English and anglicised status of the protagonist. These changes also work to make him a figure of 'middle class' fantasy. As a byproduct, I will argue, the foregrounding of themes of class, social obligation, and the interdependence of knight and knave work to displace the rite of passage so critical to the *Lanval* lay.

For example, in *Lanval*, it is the king that overlooks the young knight¹⁴⁴, uncharitably denying him recompense for his servitude. Diverging from Marie, Chestre commutes some of Arthur's uncharitable qualities onto his wife, writing '[t]he Quene yaf yftes for the nones...Everych knyght sche yaf broche other ryng/ But Syr Launfal sche yaf nothyng'(1.67-71). In this restructuring, the theme of generosity is foregrounded from the start of the narrative and relates to the 'absence of property', a trait highlighted in Chapter 2, as pertaining to the rite of passage. The absence of property, it might seem, is what advances the protagonist's descent into liminality in both texts, designating the figures lowly status as he crosses into the faery realm. However, as I discussed in that previous chapter, the absence of property is a *condition* of liminality, not a catalyst. *Lanval*'s detachment from a previous structural mode, I argued there, relates firstly to his entry into a *locus amoenus* and secondly to his unbridling of his horse; both of which allegorise his

¹⁴⁴ '[F]emmes e tere departi / par tut, fors un ki l'ot servi' (1.17-18, 'women and lands he distributed to all, except one who had served him'), 'li reis rien ne li dona, ne Lanval ne li demanda' (1.31-2, 'the king gave him nothing, nor did Lanval beg')

marginalisation and rejection of chivalric identity. As conditions of liminality, the knight's abandonment of his symbolic *cheval* and his departure from Carlisle are not deployed to the same effect in *Sir Launfal* as they are in *Lanval*.

The passage between leaving the city, where men scorn him for his '[p]overly' (l.217) sight, and the moment where he meets the '[g]entyll maydenes two' (l.231) runs 12 lines in length. In *Lanval*, this passage runs 14 lines, a 2 line difference that is made more significant when considering that, at 1044 lines, *Sir Launfal* is almost twice the length of *Lanval*'s 646. By the same token, Marie's depiction of this journey places emphasis on the way in which her protagonist exits the city to '*esbaneer*' (l.42), amuse himself, while Chestre pays more attention to Launfal's intention 'to dryve away lokyng' (l.218) from the derisive townsfolk. Moreover, the text appears to focus on Launfal's poverty, in fact, mentioning it six¹⁴⁵ times throughout the lay. By attenuating the proportional length of this journey into the otherworld, Chestre also relegates its significance within the narrative and limits the experience of wandering modelessness¹⁴⁶ it affords its protagonist. The 'holtes hore' (l.171) or 'fayr forest' (l.222) is not the botanical *pré* of the *Lanval* lay, not the realm of liminality in which social structures can be recoded. Instead, by removing the botanical associations and shortening the passage in length, the poem refocuses the journey out of the city on Launfal's acute poverty and shame and relates this experience exclusively to his forthcoming pride and prosperity.

What then of this poverty, this absence of property, which I have otherwise argued designates the liminal subject's sanctifying experience of lowliness? How then should the experiences of the dissolution of wealth and, successively, the accrual of wealth be interpreted in *Sir Launfal*, if not pertaining to the *rite de passage*? Rather than signifying the rite of passage, I will now argue that the depiction of Launfal's successive experiences

¹⁴⁵ The six instances are as follows: "[t]ellyth no man of my poverté" (l.143), 'poverté' (l.187), 'for povert' (l.198), '[p]overly the knyght to hors gan sprynge' (l.217), '[i]n hys pover wede' (l.372), "'y was yn my poverté" (l.410).

¹⁴⁶ In *The Ritual Process*, Turner explains how the 'sacred' component' is acquired by those undergoing the rite of passage as they accede to their new positions. He says that '[s]omething of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office... [It is] a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low' (97). Therefore, it is this wandering modelessness — in another word, statuslessness — that *Lanval* experiences that not only permits him to take on a new mode, a new status, but the site of his vulnerable loneliness so averse to the human condition that later sanctifies and gives meaning to his reintegration into society.

of poverty and prosperity instead reflect the way in which the lay has been adapted to appeal to the social station of its assumed readership.

4.6 *Fyfty*

In *Lanval*, the title character's name is repeated in the scene in which, returning from his fateful venture into the faery otherworld, he lavishes wealth upon his community:

*'Lanval donnoit les riches dons,
Lanval aquitoit les prisons.
Lanval vestoit les juleors,
Lanval feoit les granz honnors,
Lanval despendoit largement,
Lanval donnoit or et argent.
N'i ot estrange ne prive
A cui Lanval n'eust donne.'* (l.209-14¹⁴⁷)

It has been suggested that the use of this technique in *Lanval* is part of Marie's mnemonic register, which preserves the protagonist's name in the mind of the reader. Whalen says that '[t]he repetitious sonority helps the audience recall this particular passage' (*Poetics*, 75). Evidently, it left a significant impression on *Sir Landevale's* Middle English translator, who preserves it as follows:

*'Landavale makyth nobile festys;
Landevale clothys the pore gestys;
Landevale byith grette stedys;
Landevale yevyth riche wedys;
Landevale rewaredith religionse,
And acquiteth the presons;
Landevale clothes gaylours;
Landevale doith each man honours.'* (l.172-80)

While much of the meaning is retained (in each he frees prisoners, clothes jongleurs, and performs great honours), the most impactful feature of the passage - 'Lanval' - is preserved almost exactly. Interesting, this feature is not preserved in *Sir Launfal*:

¹⁴⁷ 'Lanval gave costly gifts, Lanval freed prisoners, Lanval clothed the jongleurs, Lanval performed many honourable acts. There was no one, stranger or friend, to whom he would not have given gifts.' (Burgess and Busby translation, 75).

‘Launfal helde ryche festes.
 Fyfty fedde povere gestes,
 That yn myschef wer.
 Fyfty boughte stronge stedes;
 Fyfty yaf ryche wedes
 To knyghtes and squyere.
 Fyfty rewardede relygyons;
 Fyfty delyverede povere prysouns,
 And made ham quyt and schere;
 Fyfty clodede gestours.
 To many men he dede honours
 In countreys fer and nere.’(l.421-32)

Based on the assumption that ‘[t]he translator was apparently using a MS. which contained the abbreviation L. for Lanval’, Julian Harris suggests that Chestre ‘mistook this L. for .L. meaning fifty’ (25). In his footnotes, however, Harris rightly indicates that this abbreviation was not used in any of the four surviving manuscript copies of *Lanval*. Moreover, as discussed at length, it is widely accepted that Chestre bases *Sir Launfal* on *Lanval* indirectly; that is, *Sir Launfal* comes about by way of the *Sir Landevale* poet, Marie’s translator. Offering an alternative explanation, Knight convincingly argues that the changes Chestre makes to the language of the passage are due to the text being transmitted to him orally¹⁴⁸.

To entertain Knight’s theory of oral transmission, let us accept that Chestre does perhaps recall that a repetition occurred at the start of the line, albeit not exactly what it was that was repeated. I cannot help but to believe, however, that he would be likely to remember the singular repetition “Landevale”/“Launfal”— which, after all, was

¹⁴⁸ ‘The oral nature of Chestre’s familiarity with the poem is strongly suggested by the fact that the remaining portions of the lines are not constant at all, the unfixed part of the line has been altered to some extent. . . . there seems to be no artistic reason for these changes; Chestre’s new words do not seem to improve the poetry in any way. When there is such a considerable amount of substitution in the very small area which is not easy to fix in the memory, then the possibility of oral transmission becomes very strong indeed’(166).

As is typical of criticism of Chestre’s work, Knight here places emphasis on the erroneousess of his writing. I find Knight’s theories of the oral transmission entirely plausible and thoroughly convincing. However: if Chestre were, hypothetically, to forget part of the oral account of *Sir Landevale*, would it not be just as likely that he would forget the six rhymed lines, their order, and structure, as he would the name of the character, which is repeated seven times? Perhaps not; the tail rhymes geste/feste, etc, are formulaic and as such are typical in narrative poems of the time. The geste-feste rhyme, for example, is also found in *King Horn*, a popular contemporary of *Sir Launfal*. It is evident throughout *Sir Launfal* in fact that Chestre relies on borrowing materials from other writers. Moreover, besides lifting rhymes directly from *Sir Landevale* and calling upon formulaic imagery, the poet explicitly states that the text is based on what he has read: ‘[t]hus seyð the Frensch tale’(l.474), ‘[i]n romaunce as we rede’(l.741).

specifically constructed by Marie, and later imitated by the *Landevale* poet, to aid in memory recall. According to Whalen¹⁴⁹, '[t]he arrangement of [anaphoric] vocabulary' in this passage 'demonstrates Marie's concern with the auditory aspect of description and its effectiveness in helping the audience to recall key points of her tales' (*Poetics*, 76). With this in mind, it seems entirely possible, to me at least, that the change to the text is equally likely to be intentional on Chestre's part as it is to be an accidental omission, a misremembering or mishearing of *Sir Landevale*. Put more explicitly, I do not believe it unreasonable to consider that this shift in language was a conscious development in the production of an anglicised Lanval figure.

That being said, to avoid devolving into a fruitless discussion about what a poet may or may not have remembered seven hundred years ago, I will instead ask a more pertinent question: what does this language change do to the text? Namely, what does it indicate about the text's transmission into a Middle English context and the associated adaptations?

Firstly, by changing the anaphora from 'Lanval' to 'Fyfty', Chestre switches the primary subject of the stanza to the charitable deeds themselves, rather than the person who performs them. This fits with the generally accepted argument¹⁵⁰ that Chestre's *Sir Launfal* concerns the mutual dependence of societal subjects and the necessary punishment of avarice. It considers the impact a single individual's benevolence and charity can have on the community at large, rather than how it relates to the *aventure* of the individual, which is the central focus of Marie's lay form.

Moreover, in displacing the Lanval-Landevale repetition with 'fyfty', the line contributes to a tendency in *Sir Launfal* toward the quantification of time, people, and things. Besides the aforementioned listing device Chestre uses at the start of the text (apparently an original contribution and a characteristic of his writing), there are various instances of quantification throughout that do not appear in the other analogue— in fact, *Sir Launfal* contains significantly more references to numbers than any of the other

¹⁴⁹ 'Cognitive recall', Whalen continues, 'is strengthened if we are able to hear (or read) a text at the same time we see it in our minds' (*Poetics*, 76). From what Whalen here suggests, the passage in *Lanval* is consciously arranged to be preserved in the mind of the reader *or* the listener; one implication here being that the mnemonic efficacy remains whether the text is *written* or *heard*.

¹⁵⁰ This argument is put forth by Stewart and will be elaborated in the next subsection of this chapter.

versions. Excluding ‘two’ on account of its commonplaceness, *Sir Launfal* contains 28 references to numbers, a striking contrast between *Lanval*’s 6, *Graelent*’s 3, and *Sir Landevale*’s 7. Even in the instances that numbers in *Sir Launfal* correspond to references carried over from its forbear, Chestre scales up¹⁵¹ these numbers. For example, in describing the size of Guenevere’s entourage when she approaches Launfal, he takes the count from thirty (‘*trente*’, 1.247, *Lanval*) to ‘[s]yxy...and fyf’ (1.657, *Sir Launfal*).

Notably, throughout the text, Chestre details time: he sets the start of the lay in ‘the tenthe yer’ (1.37, ‘[t]en yer’ 1.33) of Launfal’s servitude to Arthur; he notes the forty day feast of Saint John’s Mass (‘[f]ourty dayes leste the feste’, 1.631, ‘[a]nd at the fourty dayes ende’ 1.634). He indicates that Launfal has ‘loved a fayryr woman...[t]hys seven yer and more!’ (1.694-6) and that, for ‘[m]ore than thys seven yere!’, Guenevere has ‘lovyd [Launfal] wyth all [her] myght’ (1. 677-8). Chestre has Guenevere swear a desire for vengeance so strong that ‘[w]ythinne the dayes fyfe’ ‘all the lond schuld of [Launfal] speke’ (1.707-8); and sets the date for Launfal’s judgement on a day ‘twelfe moneth and fourtenyght’ after the feast.

Chestre describes, in detail, how many people populate various scenes: ‘seven knyghtes’ (1.112), ‘[t]en/ [w]ell yharneysyth men/ [u]pon ten somers ryde, (1.376-8), ‘knyghtes four’ (1.756), ‘[t]welf knyghtes’ (1.786), ‘syxy ladyes and mo’ (1.642), ‘[t]en maydenes’ (1.849), ‘ten maydenes... [f]ayryr than the other ten of syght, (1.883-4).

Moreover, Chestre describes symbols of the faery queen’s wealth and status with numerical descriptors— a quantifying detail not used in any of the *Lanval* analogues. He describes the handmaidens’ ‘jolyf coronall[s each]..[w]yth syxy gemmys and mo’ (1. 239-40), Tryamour’s coat of arms which has ‘thre ermyns ypeynted well’ (1.329), her saddle bows which each have ‘twey stones of Ynde’ (1.956), and, accompanying her to Arthur’s court, the ‘[t]wey whyte grehoundys’ flanking her (1.965).

¹⁵¹ The shift in language also scales the text to fit the world established by Chestre: he has already expanded upon the Arthurian society as he finds it in *Landevale* (adding the extensive list of knights and auxiliary characters, such as the Mayor and his daughter) and it makes sense that the societal good that Launfal does should mirror that. The character also goes further a-sea than *Lanval* or *Landevale*, which is here reflected in the mention that he ‘dede honours/In countreys fer and nere’ (1.431-2). This reflects the international scope of the following passages, in which he goes to Lombardy etc to fight in tournaments. It is perhaps clever that Launfal the character becomes well-known internationally within the text, since by the time Chestre interpolates him, his tale has likewise been transmitted to Anglo-Norman, Old Norse, Picard, and Middle English-speaking audiences.

Of these passages, the symbols alluding to wealth — the well-attended feasts, the richly jewelled crowns, and exotic fabrics— are relatively easy to square within the argument I am building in this chapter about the presumed social standing of the audience receiving the lay, their language, and cultural identity. As an anglicised fantasy, I suggest that Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* is reflective of the intermediary class out of which the text emerges. The quantification —more specifically, the conversion of abstract wealth into quantifiable, recordable assets — alludes to the impulses at the epicentre of English writing in the early fourteenth century: administration and the concern with recording and legitimising wealth. Furthering that, when Launfal helps fifty of each ‘gestes’, ‘relygyons’, ‘gestours’, ‘prysouns’, ‘knyghtes and squyere[s]’(l.422-30), it is not only a expression of his wealth, but of the capacity for social generosity that his wealth affords him. The subtlety of this transition, demonstrated myopically by the conversion of the individual ‘Lanval’ into the societal ‘fyfty’, expresses the anglicisation process on the text by and large; imitative of the courtly form, yet encoded with messages appealing to newly minted, English-speaking audiences.

4.7 Conclusions

Compared to the previous example of *Le Fresne* and its anglicised sister-text, *Lay Le Freine*, *Lanval*’s transmission into *Sir Launfal* is evidently not so direct; the figure’s haphazard journey to anglicisation is reflected in the resultant product, a text scholars seem to only begrudgingly accept as a lay. Throughout this chapter, it has been my intention to avoid claims that *Sir Launfal* is ultimately an unsophisticated and inconsistent ‘disaster’(Spearing, 106) as these ideas operate on the assumption that we must measure its merits against the metrics of Marie’s writing. In spite of this intention, it has been in fact *through* such a comparison that Chestre’s anglicisation of Marie’s lay form can be revealed. Call it ‘padding’, literary *inventio*, or the surplus of sense— it is impossible to avoid the evidence that Chestre’s writing responds to Marie’s incitement¹⁵² to gloss her

¹⁵² As discussed many times in this thesis, Marie’s Prologue incites gloss, encouraging readers to add new meanings to the text which is, after all, the reason that the ancients before her wrote obscurely: ‘[t]he ancients had the custom [...] in the books that they made to speak quite obscurely for the sake of those who were to come later [...] who could] add surplus to their original sense’(‘*Custume fu as anciens, ... Es liures ke jadis feseient/ Assez oscurement diseient/ Pur ceus ki a uenir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient,/ que peüssent gloser la letre/ E de lur sen le surplus mettre*’, 1.9-16). Moreover, in her double naming —often in English, French, and Breton,— Marie alludes to the *Lais*’ circulation in various languages, thereby acknowledging her own translative practice and equally permitting further translation.

texts with new meanings. Beyond translation, his interpolation of the material is, undeniably, an anglicisation, in that he acclimates the *Lanval* myth and the lay form to the tastes of his English monoglot audiences. Successfully or otherwise, it is in *Sir Launfal* that the *Lanval* figure fully emerges into an anglicised form,— one perhaps not explicitly sanctioned by Marie, but which is nevertheless granted *by* her writing, in her invitation to gloss, translate, and add a surplus of sense.

Beyond that revelation, however, it has been impossible to separate the myth's transmission into new *linguistic* contexts from its transmission into new *social* ones. In investigating the transformation of the twelfth-century *Lanval* into the fourteenth-century *Sir Launfal*, I have to consistently consider the influence of the changed and changing literate groups that both facilitated, motivated, and —most importantly— footed the bill for such a linguistic shift. It is, therefore, not so much that the two processes of adapting the text firstly into a different language and secondly for a different economic group run parallel in *Sir Launfal*; rather, I have found that they are completely enmeshed and mutually constitutive.

If Marie writes from the epicentre of courtly power in her *Lais*, Chestre, from his marginal position, trespasses into the lay form and repopulates it with language, tropes, and imagery more closely aligned with the tastes of his English audience. From the derivative materials of Marie's *Lanval*, Chestre sculpts a version of the tale that mirrors and legitimises the wealth acquisition of a social group with newfound means and interests in producing and reading literary and historical texts. No doubt, the Middle English *Launfal*, much transformed from the knight of 'the Frensch tale'(1.474) tale two hundred years its senior, would appeal to such audiences. With its emulation of a courtly poetic form, the inclusion of *Sir Launfal* in the MS *CCA.ii* places the aristocratic lay into the hands of the newly wealthy, educated, and monoglot English class and, conversely, puts the trace of that class into the figure. As a result of the process of anglicisation, Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* is a middle class fantasy that leverages the lay form to generate and rebrand cultural memory; synthesise and legitimise literary history; and express and pursue class aspiration.

The Anglicisation of the Lais of Marie de France: Conclusions

This thesis investigated the anglicisation of the *Lais* of Marie de France; that is, the process by which the form distinctive to her was adapted into Middle English by the first half of the fourteenth century. I began by considering the lay form that is typical of Marie and which is characterised by the experience of liminality, metapoetics, memory, and the theme of transmission. I then assessed the influence of these characteristics on three Middle English lays, specifically *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Launfal*. The conclusions I drew from this analysis have factored in the two-hundred-year interval between the composition of Marie's *Lais* (1160s) and the Middle English lays¹⁵³. Additionally, I have had to remember the distance between the dates of their original composition and the time at which each lay was transcribed into their various manuscript containers. As such, this research has had to concerned itself with the material forms that the lays take as they transfer from the luxurious vellum of the *MS Harley 978*, to the codex comprising the first known English literary canon, the *MS Auchinleck*; and likewise, from the moderate-quality household book which, joining Sir Robert Cotton's foundational collection of English codices and scrolls, came to be known as the *MS CCA.ii*. The material component of this research has, I believe, greatly enriched my analysis in regards to my understanding of the contingency and hybridity of the anglicisation process.

Jonathan Gil Harris' idea around the palimpsest, for example, has helped me to recognise the polychronicity of *Lay le Freine*, both in its manuscript form and in its subsequent reconstructions. It has helped to dispel the hierarchy of source over successor which has underpinned much of the existing analysis of *LLF*. This, in turn, has allowed me to view the damage to *MS Auchinleck* as an aspect of its *mise-en-page* that can inform textual analysis rather than attenuate it.

In doing so, this thesis has, I hope, been able to celebrate the simultaneity of the twelfth and fourteenth century lays which exist on the same page — not only in print

¹⁵³ Based on the language of the text, Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that *Sir Orfeo* was most likely composed between the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. *Lay le Freine*, which only exists in the one version found in the *MS Auchinleck*, dates from the first quarter of the fourteenth century. As such, there is believed to be relatively little distance between their composition and the production of their manuscript container, between 1330-40. *Sir Launfal* and the *Lais* of Marie de France have a larger interval between their composition and manuscript production dates. *Sir Launfal* was written in the late fourteenth century and is found only in fifteenth century *MS CCAii* (c.1450). The *MS Harley 978* that contained Marie's *Lais* was produced between 1261 and 1265, around 80 years after Marie was writing.

editions of the text, as in the case of Weber's reconstruction of *LLF*, but as fluid alliances. Retaining the spectral influence of Anglo-Norman, the Middle English text demonstrates the complex and unavoidable heritages that its language contains and which are the results of the influence of *Le Fresne*. I called attention to how the text is supplemented by *Le Fresne* not only when Weber touches it, not only in the *aventure* it depicts, and not only with the double-naming it extracts from Marie; but also in the language of Middle English as a heritor of Anglo-Norman. Equally, the speech (as the fallible chaperone of meaning) and the silence (as ellipsis, agency, and liminality) depicted in *LLF* itself reinstate firstly; the ideas put forth by Marie in her *Prologue*¹⁵⁴; and secondly, those ideas encapsulated by the concept of *aventure* itself which designates the boundary of the text and in doing so alludes to that which lies beyond.

The speculation and supplementation that such material damage permits is not limited to *LLF*. *Sir Orfeo*, only extant in the *MS fAuchinleck*, is similarly shorn of its miniature, a small illumination which may, if it had remained, have provided a thematic key to the whole. This damage, in recognition of the material component of the lays, led me to consider the miscellaneity of the *MS Auchinleck*. *Sir Orfeo* is found alongside two other minstrel romances, *Kyng David* and *Syr Tristem*. As such, its relationship to musicality as a primary theme is elicited, a detail that, in the absence of an analogue actually composed by Marie, tethers it to her work. Moreover, it consolidates the text's status as a lay, as a writing mode that inherits, Bloch says, its form of 'melody or a musical air, a melody played upon a string instrument and accompanied by sung words' (30). The *Lais'* container is similarly informed by its manuscript, the *MS Harley 978*, which as a miscellany seems to indicate, on the side of the compiler at least, an interest in music. This is just one way in which I have demonstrated that the anglicisation of the lay is as much an exercise in reverie as it is in transformation.

Reverie, coming from the same root as 'revere' and by some definitions alluding to dreamlike experiences¹⁵⁵, is to fantasise about the past and the present superimposed. In

¹⁵⁴ 'The ancients had the custom [...] in the books that they made to speak quite obscurely for the sake of those who were to come later [... who could] add surplus to their original sense' ('*Custume fu as anciens, ... Es liures ke jadis feseient/ Assez oscurement diseient/ Pur ceus ki a uenir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient,/ que peüssent gloser la letre/ E de lur sen le surplus mettre*', 1.9-16).

¹⁵⁵ *OED*: 'II.4.a. 1477—A moment or period of being lost, esp. pleasantly, in one's thoughts; a daydream.'

much the same way that modern scholars may speculate about what may have been conveyed in the manuscript if it had not been damaged, the *MS Auchinleck*'s Middle English lays augment the reverie of the lay form with their own fantasies. In the case of *Lay le Freine*, it imagines the *aventure* written by Marie invoked in an English tongue; in the case of *Sir Orfeo*, it imagines the mode established by Marie to be populated with English literary figures and conventions. It is as such that it is impossible not to take into account the *MS Auchinleck* container when considering the anglicisation process. This, of course, extends far beyond the lay form itself. The compilation of the *MS Auchinleck* is ostensibly a labour driven by the desire to construct an English canon of literature. If any one individual text in the manuscript's corpus were studied in isolation or detached from its anthology, it may lose such a clear tie to the influence of language as a unifying aspect. With this, the *MS Auchinleck* lays can be considered as more than translations or imitations of Marie, rendered into English on a textual level so that English readers may comprehend them. They are included in the *MS Auchinleck* for the sake of anglicisation on a greater societal level, a product of the shift in fourteenth-century reading cultures, a change in the literate demographic which resulted in a newfound enthusiasm for codices written in English.

In regard to *Sir Launfal*, the study of the material composition of the *MS CCA.ii* has revealed how it is not only textual aspects which generate *translatio studii* as the impulse of the lay anglicisation process. For example, I argued that its title page of 'launfal miles', written in a retro-gothic script, sought to confer the prestige of older texts onto the newer one. This visual detail testifies to a manuscript producer certainly concerned with generating prestige on the page and perhaps consciously aware of the advantages of alluding to the chivalry of Rome and to earlier, more authoritative medieval texts such as the *MS Harley 978*. *Sir Launfal*, in its Arthurian setting, is reflective of the late-fourteenth century's revived interest in the legends of Arthur, which itself was an exercise in reinstating the figure as an English institution. This sense of anglicisation is confirmed by the afterlife of the manuscript which, by the seventeenth century¹⁵⁶, found itself situated

¹⁵⁶ Of the catalogues of Cotton's library I have found, Thomas Smith's *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Cottonianae* is the earliest, dating from 1696. In *MS Cotton Caligula A.ii*, it lists the '*Hiftoria Britonum, fscripta per quendam Sacerdotum, nuncupatum Lazamon, natum apud Ernlere super Sabrinum, a Bruto ad R. Cadwalladrum: lingua veteri Angliciana*', 'The History of the Britons, written by a certain Priest, named Lazamon, born at Ernlere, near Sabrina, from Brutus to R. Cadwalladrum: the language of the Old English', p34.

alongside a copy of Layamon's *Brut* in the *MS. Cotton Caligula A.ix*, the text which first made Arthur accessible to literate English monoglots.

As such, manuscript analysis can affirm that the anglicisation process goes beyond translation. Launfal is transformed into an English chivalric figure, concerned with the injustices facing a new social group of English readers. *Lay le Freine*, explaining that the '[t]he Freyns of the "asche" is a freyn'(1.231), introduces Marie's botanical economy to a more pastoral setting. Through minstrelsy, *Sir Orfeo* reinstates the societal harmony absent in Marie's lay mode and returns the form to its natal heritor. Each of them tell their tales in a conventionally English tail-rhyme. Each sets its scene in 'Ingland' (1.40, *Sir Orfeo*; 1.239, *LLF*; 'Engelond', 1.2, *Sir Launfal*). In the case of the *MS Auchinleck's LLF*, the poet is explicit about their decision to tell their tale '[i]n Ingliche'(1.25). However, it is this allusions to their Englishness and the inclusion of details relevant to English readerships that suggest the alterity of the past form. As with Marie's own acknowledgement that her *aventures* have been told in multiple tongues, they affirm that they are self-conscious *anglicisations* and by extension could perhaps be said to authorise further transformation.

The present chapter will demonstrate that the process of anglicisation is one involved in conversion, transmission, and reformation. This may seem to contradict medievalists such as Ríkharrðsdóttir and Copeland, who have argued that by translating the *Lais*, the Middle English texts 'seek to erase the cultural gap from which [they emerge] by contesting and displacing the source and substituting [themselves]'(160). This idea of displacement *does* accord with my own ideas about anglicisation. However, the operative word of this statement, in my view, should be 'seeks to'. Such a claim can be supplemented with the idea of memory—that it is, in fact, *by way* of the memory of the past text that the present one *is able* to substitute itself. Before drawing its final conclusions, therefore, this chapter will summarise the ways in which the key lay themes of aurality and memory are anglicised in the fourteenth-century texts.

5.1 Aurality

While for Marie, the claim to an aural source is a perfectly acceptable form of authorising her work, by the time of the Middle English texts, lay poets needed to cite a written source to secure their authority. The highly conventional way in which Chestre alludes to his

sources as a means to authorise the *aventure* he recounts is indeed comparable to the techniques used by Marie. The key difference between their claims to *translatio* is, however demonstrated by Chestre's emphasis on the literariness of his sources. Compare, for example, Chestre's allusion to *Sir Launfal's* past forms ("In romaunce as we rede' (1.741) and 'the Frensch tale'(1.474)) to how Marie claims to tell her lays just as the Bretons themselves once told ('*ceo nus recuntent li Bretun*', 1.642):

References to the past composers of Marie's *Lais* are almost always paired with the verb *oir*, to hear. Variations of *oir* (*oir*; *oiz*, *oi*, *oëz*, *oe*, *oïrent*, *oiez*, *oiëent*, *oieit*) appear, by my count, 70 times throughout the twelve texts. The prevalence of the term and the varying ways in which it is used demonstrates the importance of aurality in the *Lais* on three levels. In its various forms, *oir* is used nine times to describe how Marie inherits her *aventures* from tales she heard from the Bretons ('*ceo oi cunter*' ('I heard told', 1.9 in *Equitan* and 1.567 in *Yonec*)). Fifty-four times *oir* describes what is heard by characters within the narratives. She uses it a further five times to command the audience to hear or to listen to her *Lais*: '*ore oëz le comencement*' (1.56, 'now hear the beginning', *Prologue*), '*oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie*' (1.3, 'hear, lords, what Marie said' *Guigemar* 1.3), '*oëz après cument avint*' (1.85, 'hear what happened next', *Bisclavret*), '*oiez cum il est bien vengiez*' (1.1.253, 'hear how he took his revenge', *Bisclavret*), '*mes ore oëz cum l'en avint*' (1.245, 'hear what happened next', *Milun*).

Despite the literate reception of his own lay, Chestre uses a similar phrase to command the attention of his readership, albeit only once: '[n]ow herkeneth how hyt was!'(1.6). *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay Le Freine's* shared *Prologue* also conveys the sense of a listening audience: '[a]c herkneth lordinges' (1.21, *LLF*), '[a]c herkneth, lordinges' (1.23, *Orfeo*). The inclusion of these invocations suggests that the fourteenth-century texts still retain a trace of the aurality, the aural invocation, so central to Marie's lay form. With this consideration, it would appear that the fourteenth century lays share in the sense of aurality that influences the twelfth century antecedent form's use of language, as it literally and metaphorically harks back to a past lay mode.

Yet, to return briefly to the *Orfeo/LLF* prologue, just 20 or so lines before the instruction to 'herkeneth', the shared passage generates an unmistakable sense of readership: '[w]e redeth oft and findeth y-write,/ And this clerkes wele it wite,'(1.1-2 in

both texts). This literariness, the image of the reader and the writer generated on the page, testifies to a shift in the recipient reading culture of the late Middle Ages, the same literary milieu into which Chestre's lay is received.

Moreover, across *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Launfal*, the words 'here', 'herde', 'herst', and 'herkeneth' are used just twenty-two times, eleven of which in *Orfeo* due to its thematic content. In the vast majority of instances in these Middle English lays, the verb describes that which the characters within the narratives hear. Only 4 times do the poets use it in an imperative form to command the attention of the audience. Not once in any of these Middle English lays do they directly use it to indicate that the tales they recount are based on stories the poets have themselves heard told aloud.

Drawing further contrast, Marie only twice indicates that she is recording a lay that she found in writing; firstly in *Guigemar* ('[s]ulunc la lettre el l'escriture/ vos mosterai une aventure', 1.23-4, 'according to the letters that were written, I will present an adventure') and later in *Chevrefoil* ('plusurs le me unt cunté e dit,/ e jeo l'ai trové en escrit', 1.5-6, 'many people have recited it to me and I have also found it in written form'). Among the collection, these vague claims to a written source are unique; indeed, there is no evidence that versions of the *Lais* existed in writing before Marie composed them. As was discussed at length in Chapter 2, Marie does continually observe the transition between aural and literary modes throughout her *Lais*. The contingency of hearing and reading is clearly demonstrated in *Chevrefoil*, *Yonec*, and *Chaitivel*, in which each concludes with the details of how the events came to be recorded as lays; ('cil que ceste aventure oïrent /lunc tens après un lai en firent, / de la pité, de la dolur, que cil suffirent pur amur'(Yonec, 1.551-4), "[p]ur c'iert li lais de mei nomez: Le Chaitivel iert apelez", "for the lay will be named after me; it will be called *The Unhappy One*", 1.225-6). This is, of course, part of the metapoetic register of Marie's writing and as such could be seen to place emphasis on the conscious composition—the literariness—of her work. However, by looking to other metapoetic, self-effacing parts of the *Lais*, we can observe that the auality of the form is very much retained. For example, in *Guigemar*, she says that the lay 'was composed from the tale you have heard...the melody is pleasing to the ear' ('de cest cunte ke oï avez/ fu Guigemar le lai trovez...Bone est a oïr la note', 1.883-6), and in *Chaitivel*, she says 'I wish to recall a lay I have heard spoken of' ('talenz me prist de

remembre/ un lai dunt jo oï parler’, 1.1-2). Both *note* and *parler* reference that which can be heard. As such, the composition of the Anglo-Norman collection retains its tie to aurality and, in the case of *Guigemar*, to musicality.

In regard to metapoetry, it seems apparent that the three Middle English lays covered in this thesis do not convey the sonic elements critical to Marie’s Anglo-Norman form; nor which, Bloch has argued, are central to the etymological definition of the lay which is undoubtedly ‘linked to sound, to music, to song, and to poetry’ (29). Subjected to the anglicisation process, the lay form appears to shed its aurality and emerge fully into literacy. It is as such that literary allusions in *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *LLF* demonstrate that the anglicised lays claim authority by way of that which has been *written and read*, as opposed to that which has been *said and heard*. By virtue of its *translatio* from a written form to a written form, rather than an aural form to a written form, these mentions of the *romances we read* illustrate the literariness of the lay as fourteenth century readers and writers received it.

5.2 Memory

Looking to the last few lines of *Sir Launfal*, we can see that Chestre does, in the most basic metapoetic terms, explain how the text came to be presented in this form.

‘Thomas Chestre made thys tale
Of the noble knyght Syr Launfale’ (l.1039-40)

If considered alongside his initial introduction of the ‘ley... [t]hat hyght “Launval”’ (l.4-5), Chestre would appear to affirm in his concluding remark that the text is his own interpretation of an existing *Lanval* myth— it is the ‘Syr Launfale’ edition, which is to say the anglicised version¹⁵⁷. With his metapoetic comments, Chestre acknowledges his role as poet, alludes to the conventionality of his own writing, and self-consciously claims the text as a lay.

In contrast, Marie’s metapoetic technique is of a more highly developed kind than Chestre’s in that she goes much further to explain why and how her *Lais* are recorded. Often, an explanation of the lay’s production forms part of the text (‘*[d]e lur amur e de lur bien/ firent un lai li anciën;/ a jeo ki l’ai mis en escrit/ el recunter mult me delit*’, ‘Of their

¹⁵⁷ I argued, in Chapter 5, that while the *Sir Landevale* poet translates the *Lanval* myth into English, it is Chestre that consummately anglicises it.

love and good [fortune], the ancients made a lay; to have put the account of it in my own writing has brought me much delight’, 1.533-6, *Milun*) and occasionally the central figures are the ones composing and naming the lays, such as in *Chaitivel*¹⁵⁸ and *Chevrefoil*¹⁵⁹.

With similar metapoetic results, Marie even goes as far to present the image of herself putting *aventures* into rhyme, making poems of them, and working on them late into the night; ‘[r]imé en ai e fait ditié/ sovente feiz en ai veillié’ (1.41-2, *Prologue*). This technique represents the metapoetic branch of Marie’s architecture of memory which, as Whalen indicates, relates to her concern for preserving past *aventures* for future readership.

‘Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie,
Ki en sun tens pas ne s’oblie.’ (1.3-4, *Guigemar*)

‘Listen, lords, to what Marie said, who in her time will not be forgotten’

Direct references to memory (*remembrance*, [re]membre, oblier, ubliance, and sovenir (sovient)) appear in ten of Marie’s *Lais* and also crop up in the *Prologue*. As with the aforementioned elements of aurality, the poetics of memory operate on multiple levels in the *Lais*. Whether describing that which characters themselves remember or forget (‘*pur la joie qu’il ot de li/ de sun beivre ne li membra*’, 1.202-3, ‘because of the joy she brought he did not remember his drink’, *Les Deus Amanz*: ‘*idunc li remebra de li, tut li curages li fremi*’, 1.418-19, ‘then she remembered her and all her courage(s) shook (faltered)’, *Le Fresne*) or the memory of *aventures* from which the texts are crafted, the tension between *remembrance* and *ubliance* is undeniably constitutive of Marie’s lay as a distinctive form. A third layer of the ‘consciously developed poetics of memory’ (6), as Burgess and Busby describe, is that Marie explicitly states that the reasoning for recording her *Lais* is to preserve them in memory:

‘*Mut unt esté noble barun
Cil de bretaine, li bretun.
Jadis suleient par prüesce,*

¹⁵⁸ “*Dame, faites le lai novel,/ si l’apelez Le Chaitivel!*”, “Lady, make a new lay, but call it *The Unhappy One!*”, 1.207-8; “[p]ur c’iert li lais de mei nomez: Le Chaitivel iert apelez” “for the lay will be named after me; it will be called *The Unhappy One*”, 1.225-6; “[i]ssi fu li lais comenciez/ e puis parfaiz e anunciez”, ‘thus the lay began and later finished and related’, 1.231-2.

¹⁵⁹ ‘[A]sez me plect e bien le voil/ del lai que hum nume Chevrefoil/que la verité vus en cunt/ (e) pur quei il fu fet e dunt’, It pleases me and I wish to tell you the truth of the lay that people call Chevrefoil, and why and how it was made’, 1.1-4. ‘[P]ur les paroles remembrer/ Tristram, ki bien saveit harper/ aveit fet un nuvel lai;/ asez briefment le numerai:/ gotelef l’apellent en engleis./ chevrefoil le nument Franceis’, ‘to remember the messages, Tristram, who knew how to harp well, made a new lay; soon he named it; gotelef call it the English, honeysuckle call it the French’, 1.111-6.

*Par curteisie e par noblesce
Des aventures que oiënt,
Ki a plusur gent aveneient
Fere les lais pur remembrance
Que [hum] new meist en ubliance.’*

(1.1-8, ‘Many a noble baron were there of Brittany, the Bretons. Long ago they were accustomed to prudence, courtliness, and nobility. Of the *aventures* they heard, and that had reach many people, they made the lays for remembrance¹⁶⁰ without which they would be exposed to oblivion’)

*‘De l’aventure...
li anciën Bretun curties
firent le lai pur remembrer
qu’um nel deüst pas obliër’*

(1.313-4, ‘Of the *aventure*... the ancient courtly Bretons made the lay to commemorate that which should not be forgotten)

These references make up a mere handful of lines in the twelve *Lais* and *Prologue* that concern themselves with the desire to preserve *aventures* in songs or verses. If we are to accept Marie’s reasoning for composing her lays, it is carrying on the traditions of the Bretons, who composed lays for the sake of posterity. By her own account, therefore, memory and the preservation of meaning were already intrinsic features of the lay by the time the form reached her. As such, Marie presents herself as an intermediary carrying on a tradition already established within the form of the lay. It is from the memory of an *aventure* that a lay may come about; and vice versa, it is from the memory of the lay that the *aventure* is preserved. Through transmission, this relationship is both founded and perpetuated. The poetics of memory therefore becomes not only the reason that the lay can survive, but also, as Marie touches it, becomes textually and thematically elemental to the lay form.

Despite the popularity of her work, these allusions to rescuing stories from the brink of extinction would seem to suggest that at the time Marie was writing, the stories the Bretons told were outmoded; why would these *aventures* need to be pulled from the edge of oblivion if they were in popular circulation and thus likely to be remembered? In fact, Marie makes a point in the *Prologue* of mentioning that she did not choose to translate

¹⁶⁰ Laskaya and Salisbury translate this as ‘posterity’, p56.

from Latin, since this has already been done by others¹⁶¹. Clearly, she felt her endeavour to preserve the materials from the Breton storytellers was unique. *Remembrance* and the threat of *ubliance*—the lay’s impetuses to persist —become to Marie one of the form’s most typifying characteristics. It is these references which dualistically acknowledge the form’s ancestry and which emphasise, self-consciously, her own position in that lineage.

In comparison to the *Lais*, the sense that the text, the myth, stands at the brink of oblivion is not apparent in *Sir Launfal*. Only a few moments can be related to the idea of memory and remembrance. One such instance in which the thematics of memory can be observed can be found in Chestre’s closing remarks. After the climax and resolution of the lay, he explains that Launfal appears,

‘Every yer, upon a certayn day,
 Me may here Launfales stede nay,
 And hym se wyth syght.
 Ho that wyll ther axsy justus,
 To kepe hys armes fro the rustus,
 In turnement other fyght,
 Dar he never forther gon’ (l.1024-30)

The rust and tarnish to Launfal’s *armes*, which earlier in the narrative has been used to signify his loss of reputation and social standing, is used here again in the same way. Whether intended as such by Chestre or not, this can be interpreted to mean that through the *Lanval* myth’s continual transmission, the rust is kept at bay; which is to say, it remains in cultural memory and its authority is retained. This idea is of course supported by the *translatio studii* model. Considered as such, by the end of the lay, Sir Launfal comes to represent not only a singular figure, an anglicised version of the knights who came before him, but all of the Lanvals, for whom he ‘kepe[s] ... fro the rustus’. Thus the interrelated themes of memory and transmission —which were apparently constitutive aspects of the lay form before Chestre, before Marie— are stored within the poetic form *by way of* and *in spite of* its anglicisation.

¹⁶¹ ‘Pur ceo començai a penser/ d’alkune bone estoire faire/ e de Latin en Romanz traire;/ mais ne me fust guaires de pris:/ itant s’en sunt altre entremis’ (l.28-32, ‘for this reason I started to think of making some good stories and of translating from Latin into French; but this would hardly be worth anything, since others have done it before me’)

5.3 The Sense of Surplus and the Surplus of Sense

This thesis has identified numerous expressions of liminality in the lay corpus. This includes; liminal spaces, from the meadows, fortresses, and forests in which the characters experience the anguish of the rite of passage, to the yawning voids left in their texts from manuscript damage; liminal *personnae*, including the minstrels, foreigners, concubines, brides, twins, fairies, undead, condemned, disfigured, and monstrous individuals who find themselves suspended between societal structures; and the liminal form itself, which undergoes a passage from Anglo-Norman to Middle English, from aural to literary, and from individual to societal drives. As such, the lays are pockmarked by the triphasic processes of separation, transition, and incorporation.

The rite of passage is concerned with how the individual is processed from lowly to sacred in order to sanctify the relations that enmesh all subjects in a hierarchical structure. In their content, all of Marie's *Lais*, in some form or another, observe the rite of passage. As discussed at length, they focus on the events that their central figures undergo and from which they emerge, changed. They concern how these events reestablish order in the lives of the protagonists, rather than in the poetic society at large.

Of the three fourteenth-century Middle English lays discussed in this thesis, *Sir Orfeo* is undoubtedly the most interested in liminality and the ritual process its outlaw-king undergoes. In Chapter 3, I put forth a theory about a significant leitmotif in the *Sir Orfeo* lay. Noted by *undertides*, music, and the disruption of hierarchies, this tripartite occurrence characterises the minstrel-king's liminal status and his descent into disorder.

The lay clearly lays out the three stages of the rite of passage. These are, firstly, separation in which the queen is snatched by the Faery King and Orfeo goes into exile; transition, in which Orfeo exists between the opposing, symmetrical states of outlaw and king and Heurodis is frozen between life and death; and incorporation, in which the reunion of the monarchic couple is twinned with the restoration of their kingdom. Through the leitmotif, each stage in this process is underpinned by the sense of metapoetics and musicality central to my understanding of the lay form. In fact, it is by way of the minstrel song that the characters are returned to structure, as the disruptive and restorative capabilities of Orfeo's harp-playing facilitate his passage through and out of the liminal

phase. As I argued, Orfeo's musical skill is not only used to recover his wife from the Faery King, nor to reveal his minstrel and monarchic identity at the end of the lay. It is also used to restore structural balance to the text itself. Through the symmetry of the lines which depict these two climactic instances of restoration within the lay, *Sir Orfeo's* denouement and epilogue generate a sense of narrative harmony and symmetry. Thus, it depicts the restoration of linguistic and textual order to the narrative and closes the rite of passage.

Adding another layer to this harmonious resolution, *Sir Orfeo* shows a concern with origins; of returning the *aventures* heard on the tongues and harps of Breton storytellers to the minstrel figure. In this way, the Middle English text's metapoetry captures the shift in the lay mode between Marie and the fourteenth century poets and shows a concern for societal harmony, rather than individual resolution. On a formal and textual level, therefore, the text alludes to incorporation.

This contrasts the three ways in which I have identified the *Lais* of Marie de France to be primarily concerned with the liminal phase— to the interstitial experiences of the characters, to the form itself which moves between aural and literary modes, and to the transition between writer and interpreter. Note that, within the rite of passage, this is an expression of transition, *not* of incorporation— her lay form, as I have discussed, has not yet fully developed into the literary mode of *Sir Launfal*, for example.

One way in which *Lais'* demonstrate transition is from an aural to written form, as has already been discussed in the present chapter. They retain the trace of aural tradition, of the story which is heard rather than read and of the musical origins of the lay as *loïd*; contrast Marie's writing with the English lays, in which literary references far outnumber expressions of aurality.

Another way the *Lais* are transitional is in their anticipation of translation. I have put forth an argument that Marie, through her multilingual devices, authorises the further translation and transliteration of her texts. This has contradicted the claims made by Foulet, who suggested that her dual naming, for example, is merely stylistic. Across Marie's anthology of twelve texts, the explicit technique of translative doubling only appears thrice; firstly, in *Bisclavret*, in which Marie explains the Breton name for the title, 'Garwaf'

or werewolf¹⁶²; secondly, in *Laüstic*¹⁶³, which is the Breton title for the ‘*russignol en franceis*’ (1.5) or ‘*nihtegale en... engleis*’(1.6); and thirdly, in *Chevrefoil* which, as I discussed at length in Chapter 4, is mistranslated to ‘*gotelef*’(1.115). Particularly in the case of *Laüstic*, in which she offers three names, Marie shows an awareness that texts, myths, *aventures*, have been transmitted through other languages. Moreover, within a similar vein, Marie gives *Chaitivel* an alternative title, the ‘*Quatre Doels*’(1.233), the Four Sorrows. Here she does not show an interest in translative doubling, necessarily, but an example in which, in the same spirit of a translation, ‘[c]hescuns des nuns bien i afiert/ kar la matire le requiert’, 1.234-6, ‘each name is faithful and befits the matter it concerns’). As such an argument can be made for the *Lais*’ interest in these titles which gloss and add further meaning to text, as Marie shows an awareness that her adventures are fragmented across languages and modes, despite her claims to their truth.

Moreover, it is in fact Foulet who puts forth the theory that Marie inherits this translative style from Wace; what better way to demonstrate the contingency of the anglicisation process than to be able to trace the *Lais*’ poetic style back to the Norman writer of the *Roman de Brut* (1155)? The mythic origins of Britain laid out by Wace go on to directly inspire Layamon’s *Chronicle of Britain* (c.1190), the landmark text that first puts Arthur into English. Moreover, Wace’s doubling device, by way of Marie’s *Lais* (c.1160), reappear in the *MS Auchinleck*, the earliest example of a codex written exclusively in English, in *LLF*’s translation of Marie’s *Le Fresne*. Importantly, however, while the theme of doubling is certainly pertinent to the study of *le Fresne*, Marie does not tell us the Breton or English names for the ash in the lay itself. This is only to come later, in its transliteration into Middle English; the ‘[t]he Freyns of the “asche” is a *freyne*/ After the language of Breteyn’(1.231-32). Without a unanimous consensus on its meaning¹⁶⁴, this line revels in the ambiguities of language. This, I argued in Chapter 4, reflects the idea Marie puts forth in the *Prologue* about the need for future readers to gloss the texts written by the *anciens* and revels in the play of language; ‘[t]he ancients had the custom [...] in the

¹⁶² ‘*Bisclavret ad nun en bretun,/ garwaf l’apeleut li Norman*’(1.3-4, ‘Bisclavret is the name in Breton, Garwaf call it the Normans).

¹⁶³ ‘*li bretun firent un lai;/ Laüstic ad nun*’(1.2-3).

¹⁶⁴ ‘V[anhagen] and E[llis] read *freyne* as “freyne” and read her “name.” [Weber] and Z[upita] believe *freyne* means “freyne,” or “French.”’, (231n9, Laskaya & Salisbury).

books that they made to speak quite obscurely for the sake of those who were to come later [... who could] add surplus to their original sense' ('*Custume fu as anciens, ... Es liures ke jadis feseient/ Assez oscurement diseient/ Pur ceus ki a uenir esteient/ e ki apendre les deveient,/ que peüssent gloser la letre/ E de lur sen le surplus mettre*', 1.9-16).

Considered alongside the *Prologue's* indication that the *Lais* must be deciphered and glossed by those who are to come, this technique suggests that her translative doubling does just that; both decipheres the text and glosses it with new meaning. I stated in Chapter 4 that through these translative glosses, both the translating and translated language retain the power to speak; to coexist, palimpsestically, on the same page.

This brings to me to another liminal characteristic of Marie's *Lais* in particular. This is the concern with the fallible transition between writer and interpreter and between past, contemporary, and future readers, expressed so eloquently by Marie in her *Prologue*. Here, she invites readings beyond the surface of the text, to add *sen le surplus*, and to transmit her *aventures* into new writing modes. As such she alludes to an interstitial gap between *la letre* that she records and the interpreters who are to come, permitting textual and linguistic ambiguity to undergo the rite of passage and produce new meanings.

5.4 Limitations: The *Limin* of the Text

One of the primary concerns of mine while investigating anglicisation as a process has been the complicated idea of nationhood in the Middle Ages. Even before the inception of this thesis, I have been aware of the difficulty in discussing this nebulous concept in relation to the medieval past. Much of the earliest parts of my research were dedicated to investigating how others before me have attempted to sift through and distinguish medieval realities from post-medieval fantasies of what it meant to be English. To have construed these Victorian-era fantasies, which sought to reify the medieval age in England, as fact would have severely limited the applicability — and the point! — of this study. However, does this awareness of the peripheral fantasies — the ability of language to direct the reader toward misconceptions and to see their own personal plight reflected in that of the characters — not inform the very process this thesis concerns?

Looking to the surplus that language discloses has been my primary investigative method. The ambiguities of *Freyns* and *freyn*, *Bretaine* and *Bretaigne* allude to translation,

to analogues in other languages and to the contingency of the lays in *franceis* and *engleis*, for which two names, two titles can befit the matters they concern. However, by looking to the language comprising the very same texts, the limitations of such an investigative tool are exposed. *Aventure* gestures to the meanings beyond the signifier, to the non-identity of the lays and to the form itself, definitions of which remain amorphous. It is as such that Marie, on the one hand, makes claims to truth and authority; and on the other, she acknowledges the possibility of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It is this dualism that drives anglicisation as a form of *translatio*, of (mis)interpreting authoritative texts.

The anglicisation of the *Lais* of Marie de France is the process by which the permission granted by Marie to mis/interpret texts, to gloss them, interacts with that which has escaped language, that which cannot be anticipated. This, as Bloch so rightly describes, is the *aventure*— ‘from the Latin *ad + venire*’(28)— component of the lays. Yes, anglicisation ostensibly describes the way in which writers convert texts into English and put English texts into the lay form, to make them accessible, possess-ible, amenable to English readers. More than that, however, it is to *incorporate* them: to return them to structural harmony in which the liminal experience has made the ensuing structure sacred, reminding it of its rite of passage, its experience of the interstitial mode, the reverie of the *anguisse* of alterity, the spectral tether to the past, to analogue, to language, to *remembrance*, and to Marie.

Marie’s *Lais* glimpse the interstitial period of the protagonists’ lives, the moments in which they exist in a zone of indistinction between structures, identities, and societies. They are experiments in liminality. Conversely, the Middle English lays are experiments in reincorporation: they depict the return to structural harmony and they concern resolution and the return to origins. However, they are also haunted by the experience of the liminal — that which they were before, during the transitional passage that Marie’s form generated. This haunting alterity is the grain of the Anglo-Norman lays which persists in the Middle English ones. Such is the process of the anglicisation of Marie *Lais*, which secures a literary tether to an aural tradition and inherits from a language it seeks to displace.

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