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A QUEER OMISSION IN *SIR ORFEO*

BY RORY G. CRITTEN

Abstract: *Sir Orfeo* is a retelling of the Orpheus myth that allows the hero to keep his bride. This paper counters readings of the poem as a vindication of married love by focusing on its reception in the shadow of a significant omission: both Virgil and Ovid state that after losing Eurydice, Orpheus gave up loving women; Ovid adds that Orpheus loved boys. The significance of these missing conclusions is explored for readers of the poem from its scribes to their patrons and their patrons' families. The paper shows the usefulness of a reception-oriented approach for queer readings of the text.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was transmitted to the Middle Ages through the versions by Virgil and Ovid. In book IV of Virgil's *Georgics*, Aristaeus the beekeeper learns that the death of his swarm has resulted from Orpheus's anger: it was Aristaeus who chased Eurydice through the garden where she was bitten by a snake and died. Although Orpheus descended to the underworld and freed Eurydice with his song, he lost her forever when he ignored Proserpina's command and turned to look at her on their return to the world of the living. Riven by grief at this second loss and, Virgil says, unconsolated by any thoughts of love or marriage, Orpheus wandered far and wide until he was caught and torn to pieces by a group of women celebrating the rites of the god Bacchus.¹ Ovid adapts Virgil's version of the myth in the *Metamorphoses*, where, amongst other alterations, he adds a detail regarding Orpheus's later career. In book XI of his poem, Ovid attributes the Bacchantes' murderous rites to their wounded pride: after losing Eurydice for a second time, Ovid's Orpheus rejects the company of women and introduces his countrymen to the practice of loving boys.²

The *Metamorphoses* was better known than the *Georgics* in late-medieval England, where the fourteenth century sees a boom in the acquisition of manuscripts containing Ovid's poem.³ In combination with the popularity of the *Metamorphoses*, the inclusion of an abbreviated version of the Orpheus myth in Boethius's

Consolation of Philosophy ensured the story's deep cultural penetration in England and throughout the medieval west.⁴ Boethius also began a tradition of moralizing the story that would likewise attach to the Ovidian text. For Boethius, Orpheus is like the man who stands on the brink of realizing the transitory nature of Fortune's gifts but who at the last moment returns to worldly pleasures. The Ovidian commentators developed this moral alongside more positive interpretations. Orpheus's descent to the underworld might be read as a prefiguring of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, for example, or his attempts to regain Eurydice might be compared to an artist's struggle to unite technical skill with moral sense and theoretical understanding.⁵

Another avenue of reception was opened by creative responses to the myth, which took the form of free-standing lyrics, illustrations in manuscripts, and vernacular adaptations.⁶ The Middle English *Sir Orfeo* belongs in this line. The text is anonymous and is usually thought to have been written at the opening of the fourteenth century; it may translate a French source that has since been lost.⁷ A rich legacy of philological scholarship traces the ways in which *Sir Orfeo* rewrites its classical antecedents by incorporating local English and Celtic elements. In this version of the myth, Orpheus becomes an English monarch; instead of dying from a snake bite, his wife, Heurodis, is kidnapped by a fairy king; rather than departing in search of Heurodis, Orfeo endures ten years of self-imposed exile before rediscovering her by chance; and, most crucially, where Orpheus loses Eurydice forever, Orfeo charms the fairy king with his song, returns to his kingdom with his wife, and picks up at the end of his story where he had left off at Heurodis's abduction.⁸

Orfeo's successful recovery of Heurodis is not unparalleled in medieval retellings of the Orpheus story but it does contrast sharply with the Virgilian, Ovidian, and Boethian versions.⁹ Recent years have seen a shift in the interpretation of this divergence. Until the turn of the millennium, commentators tended to take the poem's conclusion at face value and to celebrate the text's double reunion of husband and wife and king and kingdom.¹⁰ Since then, readers have begun to pick out darker tones in the poem's ending. Oren Falk observes that, unlike many of their splendidly procreative peers in medieval romance, Orfeo and Heurodis remain childless at the end of their story, and that however successful Orfeo may have been in winning back his wife, his lineage ends with him.¹¹ Tara Williams wonders about the troubling similarity between the

courts of the fairy king and of Orfeo, noting that both men abduct Heurodis to their respective kingdoms at different moments in the poem.¹² James Simpson accepts that the ending is restorative but argues that the course of events described in the poem highlights the fundamental vulnerability of the hero's status quo.¹³

This paper develops the insights of the more skeptical readers of *Sir Orfeo* by considering an absence in the poem's telling of the Orpheus story that has as yet passed unremarked. The ostensibly happy end that concludes *Sir Orfeo* misses the continuation popularized in the Ovidian version of the myth in which Orpheus gives up the love of women and instructs the Thracians in the practice of loving boys. Concentration on this queer omission strikes me as a potentially fruitful means of approaching *Sir Orfeo* because at least one influential classicist reads the whole Ovidian narrative in the light of this development. For W. S. Anderson, Orpheus's queer turn is a crucial part of Ovid's parodic representation of the Virgilian hero as an insufficient husband. "Whereas Virgil had made his central object the portrayal of irrational love as 'furor,' faulty though pathetic," Anderson writes, "Ovid inspects Orpheus' love and finds it wanting."¹⁴ The homophobic undertones in Anderson's argument mean that he is unlikely to find many supporters now: Anderson seems to be arguing that in rejecting marriage, Orfeo betrays a fundamentally immature outlook.¹⁵ It is the recognition of a profound continuity in Ovid's depiction of Orpheus that this enquiry proposes to keep and develop.

In what follows, I offer a possible reason for the omission of the Ovidian continuation in the Middle English poem. At the same time, I ask what it means to tell the Orpheus story without the final, clarifying moment of Orpheus's queer turn. The argument begins with an interpretation of *Sir Orfeo* that focuses on the text's depiction of the protagonists' marriage. The initial claims will be that the couple's estrangement begins before Heurodis's abduction and that the final reunification of Heurodis with Orfeo is imperfect. I then go on to argue that if Orfeo and Heurodis's marriage fails, it is not because they do not seek its success. Instead, the poem's protagonists will be shown to inhabit a world where speech and action are inhibited by a taboo that reflects the treatment of same-sex attraction in late-medieval confessional practice and canon law. The final section of the paper attempts an account of the poem's reception amongst its medieval readers, running from the classically educated scribes that copied the text to the

children that made up an important part of the romance's early audiences. A global aim of the argument will be to demonstrate the usefulness of a reception-oriented approach for queer readings of the Middle English poem.

I. AN ESTRANGED MARRIAGE

While traditional readings of *Sir Orfeo* describe a story in which conjugal love vanquishes the powers of adversity, the poem itself repeatedly depicts its protagonists as mutual strangers. At three key moments, Orfeo has difficulty recognizing his wife. The first of these occurs shortly after the action begins. After falling asleep under a grafted tree, we are told, Heurodis awakens with a terrible cry, rubs her hands and feet, scratches her face until it bleeds, and tears her robe to pieces. Arriving on the scene, Orfeo addresses her:

O lef liif, what is te,
Pat euer 3ete hast ben so stille,
& now gredest wonder schille?
Bi bodi, þat was so white y-core,
Wip þine nailes is al to-tore.
Allas! þi rode, þat was so red,
Is al wan, as þou were ded;
& al-so þine fingres smale
Beþ al blodi & al pale.
Allas! þi louesom eyzen to
Lokeþ so man doþ on his fo!
A! dame, ich biseche merci,
Lete ben al þis reweful cri,
& tel me what þe is, & hou,
& what þing may þe help now.
(A, 102–116)¹⁶

Orfeo is overwhelmed by his wife's crisis and struggles to connect the woman he meets with the woman he thought he knew. Heurodis, who had always been so quiet, now cries out shrilly; her exquisite, white body is scratched to pieces; her ruddy complexion has taken on a deathly pallor; and her slender fingers are covered in blood. The way that Orfeo asks after Heurodis reflects his newly split perspective on her. When he asks "what is te?" and begs her "tel me what þe is," Heurodis is the grammatical indirect object of his enquiry; his question, literally, is "what is with you?" Orfeo sees something else alongside his wife, and the picture is troubling. Her beautiful eyes look at him as a person does their enemy.

After Heurodis has calmed down, she tells her husband about her dream: she was taken by a fairy king to visit his palace and told that she must follow him there the next day. Orfeo surrounds Heurodis with ten hundred knights, but she is magically plucked from their midst. The hero is overcome with grief. After putting his steward in charge, he leaves for the wilderness on barefoot, promising never again to set eyes on a woman. During the ten years of self-imposed exile that follow, Orfeo sees his wife by chance among a group of sixty ladies out hawking by a river. Again, Orfeo struggles to bring Heurodis into focus:

He aros, & pider gan te.
To a leuedi he was y-come,
Biheld, & hap wele vnder-nome,
& sep bi al ping þat it is
His owhen quen, Dam Heurodis.
3ern he biheld hir, & sche him eke,
Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke,
For messais þat sche on him seiþe,
Þat had ben so riche & so heiþe.
Þe teres fel out of her eiþe.

(A, 318–27)

Orfeo takes time to recognize his wife. The process via which this happens is split into three phases. He beholds; he takes good note; and only then does he see what all the evidence points towards: that this is his own queen. The switch into the present tense (*sep*) in line 321 highlights what for Orfeo is a moment of surprise. The word that describes the way in which Orfeo looks at Heurodis is difficult to translate. As an adverb, *3ern* may be a temporal marker, indicating simply that Orfeo beheld Heurodis at once, or it may say something about the manner of his looking, either enthusiastically, earnestly, or keenly.¹⁷ The through-rhyme in lines 325–27 slows the pace of the poem and intensifies the moment of Heurodis's reaction to the meeting.¹⁸ Her immediately emotive response contrasts with Orfeo's inscrutable perspective on his wife. Whatever Orfeo sees or starts to see in this moment, Heurodis captures her husband's experience in one weeping glance.

Having recognized Heurodis, Orfeo pursues her and the hawking ladies through a magical hill and into a crystalline palace. The scene that greets him there is horrific. He finds a collection of people who seem dead but who are really being kept in a sort of suspended animation. Some of them are headless, some armless,

some wounded, some mad and bound; some sit armed on horse-back; some choke as they eat; some are drowning in water; some are shriveled by fire; and there are women in labor, some dead and some mad. There are also a great many people who have been taken to the fairy king's palace in their sleep. Amongst this group, Orfeo spots Heurodis. In this final scene of partial recognition, Orfeo identifies Heurodis not from her face or her posture but from her clothing:

Per he seize his owen wiif,
Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,
Slepe vnder an ympe-tre:
Bi her clopes he knewe þat it was he.
(A, 405–408)

The fact that Heurodis is discovered amongst so many tortured souls suggests that her existence with Orfeo was, in its own way, similarly agonizing.

The picture that is emerging is of a marital relationship that is conducted at a distance even before Heurodis's abduction. Orfeo's first cause for surprise when he meets his wife after her crisis is her vocalicity; later in the same episode, Heurodis points out that they have never fought: "ones wroþ neuer we nere" (A, 122). Even the lines that Orfeo chooses to express his devotion to his wife lack ardor. Where will you go? He asks, upon learning of her forced departure. Wherever it is, he'll go with her: "Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe, / & whider y go þou schalt wiþ me" (A, 129–30). These lines echo the Old Testament Book of Ruth (1:16). In the Douay-Rheims version, they read: "For whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."¹⁹ In the Old Testament, this promise serves to strengthen the bond between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Noemi. Having lost both her husband and her two sons, one of whom was Ruth's spouse, Noemi resolves to leave Moab, her adoptive home, and to return to her native Bethlehem. Although Noemi attempts to release Ruth from her obligations to her, Ruth insists on accompanying her late husband's mother. These lines are a moving declaration of loyalty, certainly, but in their biblical context, at least, they are no declaration of romantic love. The deployment of the citation from Ruth at this moment suggests that Orfeo cares for his wife but that conjugal intimacy with her eludes him. On my reading of the poem, this flaw in the marriage is a source of confusion for both husband and wife.

Orfeo's estrangement from Heurodis is clearest at the conclusion of the text. At this point in the story, his wife is rescued from the fairy king only to slip out of view in the narrative, which goes on to relate Orfeo's testing of his steward while masquerading as a minstrel. The emotional focus of the poem falls on the steward. It is he who admits his disguised master to court out of respect for the memory of his departed lord; who falls into a swoon when he thinks that Orfeo is dead; and who reacts so exuberantly on realizing Orfeo's return: "ouer & ouer þe bord he þrewe" (A, 578)! These lines are followed by a series of intimate scenes in which Orfeo is led to his chamber and bathed, shaved, and dressed in his kingly robes. In all of this, Heurodis is almost forgotten. It is Orfeo's people who bring Heurodis into town and it is they, not the couple, who are shown weeping tears of joy at the reunion:

& seþþen, wiþ gret processiou,
 Þai brouzt þe quen in-to þe toun,
 Wiþ al maner menstraci.
 Lord! Þer was grete melody!
 For ioie þai wepe wiþ her eize
 Þat hem so sound y-comen seiþe.
 (A, 587-92)

Finally, at the close of the text, the focus of the poem is clarified. It is Orfeo, not Heurodis, who has been rescued: "Þus com Sir Orfeo out of his care: / God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!" (A, 603-604).

II. NEGATIVE DARING AND CONFSSIONAL TABOO

I am not the only reader to sympathize with Heurodis's treatment in *Sir Orfeo*.²⁰ I am keen to emphasize, however, that the blame for this situation should not be left solely with the hero. Orfeo's kingdom is characterized by an atmosphere of restraint that is repeatedly shown to impede action and speech; it is as if all the poem's players, including Orfeo, are living under a spell. The operative modal verb in the poem is *durren*, "to have the courage to do" or "to dare."²¹ The verb appears in the negative six times in the text's six hundred lines:

(1) Þe maidens durst hir nouȝt awake.
(A, 73)

(2) Þe tvo maidens hir biside
No durst wiȝ hir no leng abide.
(A, 83–84)

(3) And ich answerd at wordes bold,
Y no durst nouȝt, no y nold.
(A, 139–40)

(4) Allas! To long last mi liif,
When y no dar nouȝt wiȝ mi wiif
(No hye to me) o word speke.
(A, 335–37)

(5) Y no fond neuer so fole-hardi man
Þat hider to ous durst wende,
Bot þat ichim wald of-sende
(A, 426–28)

(6) No forþer þan þe tounes ende
For knoweleche no durst wende,
Bot wiȝ a begger, y-bilt ful narwe,
Þer he tok his herbarwe.
(A, 481–84)

Of these quotations (1) and (2) describe the behavior of Heurodis's maidens at the beginning of the poem: they dare neither to wake Heurodis when she falls asleep under the grafted tree nor to stay with her once her crisis begins. Citation (3) gives Heurodis's response to the fairy king's men, who summon her in her dream to visit their master; Heurodis replies that she does not dare to go with them. In citation (4), Orfeo wonders at his silence during his meeting with Heurodis in the wilderness: why didn't he dare to speak to her, and why didn't she dare speak to him? Citation (5) gives the fairy king's surprise to find Orfeo in his court, where no one has previously dared to come without his summons. Citation (6) describes Orfeo's decision to disguise his identity on his return to his kingdom: he stays with a beggar because he doesn't dare risk immediate identification.

Credit accrues to Orfeo in this list of citations. Only he dares break the mold that determines the actions of his co-protagonists; in visiting the fairy king, he takes a risk. But in all the other cases, it is striking that not daring is given as a justification for an absent

reaction. Why don't Heurodis's maidens dare to help her? Why don't Orfeo and Heurodis dare to speak to each other in the wilderness? And why doesn't Orfeo dare to assume his identity directly on his return to his kingdom? For Orfeo's moment of courage is short lived. The last instance of not daring belongs to him, and even when he does finally reveal his identity to his steward, his speech takes the form of a lengthy hypothetical:

3if ich were Orfeo þe king,
& hadde y-suffred ful 3ore
In wildernisse miche sore,
& hadde y-won mi quen o-wy
Out of þe lond of fairy,
& hadde y-brou3t þe leuedi hende
Ri3t here to þe tounes ende,
& wiþ a begger her in y-nome
& were mi-self hider y-come
Pouerlich to þe, þus stille,
For-to asay þi gode wille,
& ich founde þe þus trewe,
Þou no schust it neuer rewe.

(A, 558–70)

On one level, of course, these lines are designed to test the loyalty of Orfeo's steward, who is here challenged to recognize his missing master. On another, they indicate the protagonist's shady sense of his own identity. At this moment, it seems, Orfeo has only one foot in his own story. The couching of Orfeo's news in the subjunctive throws doubt over his supposedly triumphant return.

One way of understanding character motivation in *Sir Orfeo* relates to the part of the story that the Middle English poem does not tell: the Ovidian continuation in which Orpheus turns to the love of boys. After losing Eurydice for the second time, Ovid tells us, Orpheus took refuge in the Thracian mountains and, by the time three years were up, he had shunned all love of womankind, "seu quod male cesserat illi, / sive fidem dederat" [whether because of his ill success in love, or whether he had given his troth once and for all].²² These lines embroidered upon Virgil's comment in the *Georgics* that "nulla Venus, non ulli animum flexere hymenaei" [no thought of love or wedding song could bend his soul].²³ In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid restored to Orpheus a reputation for loving boys that had belonged to him at least since the third century BCE, when the Greek poet Phanocles wrote about his story.²⁴

As I have noted, for at least one reader of Ovid, Orpheus's love of boys is less a conversion than an aspect of a consistently portrayed character. This paper argues not that Ovid's Orpheus is consistently immature, as Anderson seems to say, but that he is consistently queer. In this case, Orpheus's problem in the *Metamorphoses* is not that he lacks the wisdom to love Eurydice properly but that he realizes his same-sex attraction too late. I posit that this is the scenario further developed in *Sir Orfeo*, where Orfeo never realizes his same-sex attraction and the atmosphere of negative daring just described prevents the poem's protagonists from tackling the matter of Orfeo's estrangement from his wife directly. On this reading, Heurodis's servants see their mistress's discomfort but are unable to act upon it or to raise the issue with her; Heurodis is trapped by a compulsion to remain by her husband, even in her dreams; and Orfeo is rendered mute before his wife and is unable to assume his identity straightforwardly on his return to his kingdom.

No doubt some readers will object to this interpretation. Since Foucault, it has been usual to assert that queer biography is unthinkable before the nineteenth century: while there may be homosexual acts, there were no homosexual identities.²⁵ Foucault's views on sex and gender have not gone unchallenged by medievalists; most notably, Carolyn Dinshaw has led the way for scholars attempting to chart continuities as well as ruptures across pre- and postmodern experiences of sexuality.²⁶ But I am also at odds with Robert Mills's more recent reading of the Orpheus myth. Mills argues that Ovid presents Orpheus's love of boys as a pale imitation of his first affection for Eurydice; on his reading, Ovid renders Orpheus's queer turn as a bleak interlude preceding the final joining of the couple in the underworld.²⁷

I am less sure than Mills that Ovid's moving description of Orpheus and Eurydice's final union is a reunion:

Umbra subit terras, et quae loca viderat ante,
cuncta recognoscit quaerensque per arva piorum
invenit Eurydicen cupidisque amplectitur ulnis;
hic modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo,
nunc praecedentem sequitur, nunc praevious anteit
Eurydicenque suam iam tuto respicit Orpheus.

[The poet's shade fled beneath the earth, and recognized all the places he had seen before; and, seeking through the blessed fields, found Eurydice and caught her in his eager arms. Here now side by side they walk; now Orpheus

follows her as she precedes, now goes before her, now may
in safety look back upon his Eurydice.]²⁸

It is possible, after all, that the parity and proximity enjoyed by the protagonists at the end of their story was only to be achieved in death. Otherwise, Mills's argument that any same-sex desire in Orpheus's case would be secondary or imitative of an earlier straight attachment seems a poor fit at least with *Sir Orfeo*, a text whose heterosexual credentials are so shaky. Above I showed how the poem presents Orfeo and Heurodis's marriage as a failed imitation of conjugal unity.

My reading of the Middle English poem takes its inspiration from developments in the practice of confession and canon law. Regarding confession it has been observed that, into the eleventh century, sex acts between men might be spelt out quite bluntly by confessors addressing their spiritual charges.²⁹ Later in the Middle Ages, however, references to sex between men increasingly partake of a trope of unspeakability, whereby confessors refrain from explicit descriptions of sexual sin lest penitents be given new ideas.³⁰ Thus when John Mirk treats the topic of the sin against nature in his late-fourteenth-century *Instructions for Parish Priests*, he notes that he has read about it, but advises that such knowledge should be kept from penitents:

Also wryten wel .I. fynde,
That of synne aȝeynes kynde
Thow schalt thy paresch no þynge teche,
Ny of that synne no thyng preche.³¹

Mirk was no innovator in this regard. The silencing of same-sex desire in the confessional is thought to have been completed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, when yearly confession was mandated for all Christians.³² Its effects were thenceforth liable to extend into the imagining minds of every western medieval man and woman. In a parallel move that is now well known to historians of sexuality, the church intensified its persecution of people accused of sodomy, that category of sin whose referents included but were not limited to same-sex sex acts.³³

This paper proposes that the distance between Orfeo and Heurodis and the silence surrounding it can best be understood now in the contexts provided both by the silencing and stigmatizing of same-sex activity in later medieval culture and by the poem's

missing Ovidian continuation. In one and the same move, the version of the myth told in *Sir Orfeo* readapts the Ovidian conclusion in favor of the central couple and the hero's sexuality is driven underground.³⁴ My argument in favor of the partial adaptation of the Orpheus myth in *Sir Orfeo* presupposes that whoever wrote and/or translated the text knew the Ovidian version well.³⁵ This *a priori* determination recognizes not only the ubiquity of the *Metamorphoses* in later medieval culture but also the fundamental role played by Latin instruction in the acquisition of vernacular literacy and the enduring importance of the *Metamorphoses* in medieval Latin teaching.³⁶ Furthermore, it puts the originator of *Sir Orfeo* in the same category as two later fourteenth-century writers whose Ovidianism has never been questioned. Both Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower made significant capital out of their manipulation of Ovidian material; Chaucer in particular would become the teller par excellence of unfinished Ovidian tales, most memorably in *The Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women*.³⁷

Henceforth my focus shifts from the inception of *Sir Orfeo* to its reception. In what follows, I consider some of the readings of the poem that were available to its medieval audiences, whose familiarity with the Ovidian source material will have varied. The claim will thus not be that the foregoing interpretation coincides with all medieval readings of the text. Indeed, if the taboo on discussion of men's same-sex relations was real, then it will have been difficult to see around, in a poem or elsewhere. Instead, my reception history lays out some of the ways in which medieval readers might have made sense of *Sir Orfeo* and its awkward central relationship, either through reference to the Ovidian version and the commentary tradition that it attracted, or via comparison with historical events. The youngest readers of the poem will have had less easy access to either of these frames of reference. The paper concludes with a consideration of their experiences of the text.

III. SCRIBES AND OTHER EARLY READERS

Some parameters for the medieval reception of *Sir Orfeo* can be established by studying the manuscripts in which the poem survives, of which there are three: (1) Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auchinleck Manuscript, a collection of hagiographies, romances, and devotional and moral texts that was made in London in the 1330s (A); (2) the early

fifteenth-century book that is now London, British Library MS Harley 3810, Part I, where *Sir Orfeo* heads a collection of devotional and instructional materials (*H*); and (3) Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, which was made c. 1500 in Leicestershire, and which juxtaposes romances with examples of conduct literature, short prayers, and moral exempla (*B*).³⁸

We can be reasonably sure, for example, that the scribes who copied *Sir Orfeo* knew the Ovidian version of the myth and could interpret the text in its light. Scholarship on the copyists of Middle English literature insists that these men were more used to writing administrative texts.³⁹ Paleographers suggest, for instance, that the main scribe of the Auchinleck Manuscript, who copied *Sir Orfeo*, was specialized in legal, business, and documentary inscription.⁴⁰ This kind of work required a firm grounding in Latin, and, as I have already remarked, Ovid remained central to the Latin curriculum throughout the Middle Ages. The scribes of the Harley and the Ashmole books are also likely to have received this education. The copyist of Ashmole 61 demonstrates an independent awareness of the Orpheus myth where he adds lines to his text describing Orpheus's taming of the animals that are attracted by his harping (see *B*, 279–80).⁴¹ One attempt to identify this scribe, who signs his name “Rate” nineteen times in the manuscript, concludes that he was most likely an unbeneficed cleric of the sort that composed and copied so much of Middle English literature.⁴² The Harley book can also be connected to a clerical milieu. An early ownership mark in that manuscript places it in the possession of one William Shaw, who held a living at the church of Baddesley Clinton in Warwickshire.⁴³

The authorial practice of Chaucer and Gower suggests that many other early readers of *Sir Orfeo* could be counted upon to spot its deviations from Ovidian precedent. Readers like those anticipated by Chaucer and Gower were well placed to perceive the ghostly presence of the Ovidian continuation in the portion of the narrative that *Sir Orfeo* does give. Like modern commentators, they may have heard echoes of Orpheus's abandonment of women in Orfeo's promise never to set eyes on another woman after losing Heurodis (see *A*, 211). They may also have recalled the description of Orpheus's fate in the hands of the Bacchants where Orfeo pretends to have discovered his own corpse in the wilderness during his testing of the steward. When the steward asks Orfeo-as-minstrel where he got his harp, which looks rather

like his lord's, Orfeo replies that he found it beside the body of a man who had been torn to pieces by lions and gnawed at by wolves (see A, 548–49).⁴⁴

Readers who knew the Orpheus story probably had some familiarity with the commentaries that accompanied it and might resolve the portrait of Orfeo by means of this interpretative tradition, reading the hero either as a type of Christ, or of the poet. Resonances with current events were another means of securing the text's meaning. The parliament at which Orfeo abdicates in favor of his steward has been found to recall that of 1327, at which Edward II was forced from the throne.⁴⁵ The demonstration of Orfeo's preference for his steward over his wife at the end of the text is also likely to have recalled that king's controversial relationships with his favorites, Piers Gaveston and the Younger Dispenser. For readers of *Sir Orfeo* who were intimate with the English court, the description of Orfeo's neglect of Heurodis at his homecoming may have recalled with special clarity the feast that followed the wedding of Edward and his wife Isabella in 1308. On that occasion, the king was said to have overlooked Isabella in favor of Gaveston, who outshone the new queen in a purple garment trimmed with pearls. The tapestries made to celebrate the event said it all: they bore the arms not of England and France, Isabella's homeland, but of Edward and Gaveston.⁴⁶

Amongst a classically educated readership that was in touch with developments in national politics, a connection between Orpheus and Edward II was easily drawn. In his rendition of the king's last days in prison in Kenilworth, for example, the chronicler Geoffrey le Baker says that Edward chanted loving sermons in anticipation of a visit from his wife and son, all to no avail, "tamquam alter Orfeus," that is, like another Orpheus.⁴⁷ This connection is likely to have been interpreted differently at different times. For the poem's first readers, the romance may have participated in royalist hopes for a restoration and correction of Edward's marriage and his rule.⁴⁸ Those encountering *Sir Orfeo* later in the fourteenth century, like the readers of the Auchinleck Manuscript, met the poem in the context of Edward III's attempts to sanitize his father's reputation while the infamous rumor of his sodomitical murder was beginning to circulate.⁴⁹ At the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the Harley book was made, *Sir Orfeo* could be read in the midst of the Lancastrian propaganda that was produced following the deposition of Richard II and that attached Edward II's reputation for

sodomy to the more recently ejected king.⁵⁰ Then at the opening of the sixteenth century, five depositions later, when the readers of Ashmole 61 encountered the poem, the example of service rather than blood winning the crown might have seemed less controversial, or perhaps even preferable to traditional agnatic succession.⁵¹

In each of these scenarios, comparisons between *Sir Orfeo* and historical events have the potential to illuminate both the poem and royal politics. The strangely distant relationship between Orfeo and his wife is made comprehensible via parallels with unusual royal marriages: the breakdown in Edward II's marriage was public knowledge and Richard's second wife was only six when she married the king.⁵² Attitudes variously sympathetic or critical towards those royal unions might be fostered through readings of the poem. A sixteenth-century Scottish version of *Sir Orfeo* makes this link clearer. There the heroine is given the name shared by the wives of both Edward II and Richard II, Isabelle.⁵³

Amongst the poem's medieval readers, those who encountered the text in the Auchinleck Manuscript were perhaps most likely to connect it with dynastic politics. The first owners of the book are unknown but their proximity to London and their wealth are evidenced both in the dialects of the manuscript's scribes and in the great expense that its production must have incurred: Auchinleck is a large, parchment manuscript that at one point included many miniatures.⁵⁴ Book historians argue variously for a mercantile, noble, or even a royal purchaser, perhaps Edward III's queen, Philippa of Hainaut.⁵⁵

The readers of the Harley and Ashmole manuscripts came from further down the social scale and encountered *Sir Orfeo* at a remove from London. As well as the early ownership mark in the Harley book, the dialect of the manuscript's scribe allows for the location of his work in Warwickshire. The texts that follow *Sir Orfeo* in the codex include an exemplum in which a woman sacrilegiously buries a consecrated wafer beneath a pear-tree; at Christmas the tree bears both fruit and a bleeding Christ child, which prompts a reconversion of the sinner. Subsequent poems in the codex offer proverbial advice and insist upon the importance of fasting on Fridays.⁵⁶ The intention of the Harley compiler may have been to use *Sir Orfeo* alongside these exempla and conduct texts in the context of basic Christian instruction, perhaps with the oral addition of elements from the glossing tradition mentioned above. Scotland again provides an instructive parallel here. When

the later fifteenth-century Scottish schoolmaster Robert Henryson composed his version of the Orpheus myth, he amplified his conclusion with a paraphrase of the popular Boethian commentary by Nicholas Trivet.⁵⁷

A pedagogic aim on the part of the scribe of the Harley book would explain a series of variants in his text that normalize Orfeo and Heurodis's relationship and emphasize their parity. After the line giving Heurodis's observation that she and Orfeo have never fought, the Harley text highlights the heroine's claim that her husband has loved her where this claim is tacked on almost as an afterthought in the Auchinleck redaction. The claim is entirely absent in the Ashmole text:

Neuer ʒit wroth we ner;
Euer ʒit þou hast loued me,
 With alle my hert so haue y þe
 (H, 120–22)

Ones wroþ neuer we nere, Bot euer ich have y-loued þe As mi liif, & so þou me. (A, 122–24)	Euer j haue louyd þe all my lyfe; Be-twen vs was neuer stryfe, Neuer seth we wedyd were. (B, 109–111)
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The Harley text has lines absent in the other redactions that insist upon the mutual recognition of wife and husband in the wilderness:

But þer myʒt non with oþer speke
(þey sche hym knewe & he hur eke)
 For myssis þat sche on hym sye.
 (H, 309–311)

Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke, For messais þat sche on him seiʒe. (A, 324–25)	And neuer a word to oþer þei speke, For þe pouverté þat sche on hym se. (B, 326–27)
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Also uniquely, the Harley text has Orfeo cry when he sees his wife for the first time after their separation:

þe teris ran down by hur yʒe
So dede of hym when he hur sye
 Þey made hur a-wey þere ride.
 (H, 313–15)

þe teres fel out of her eiʒe: þe oþer leuedis þis y-seiʒe. (A, 327–28)	The terys ran doune be hyr eyʒe: The ladys be-held, & þat they seiʒe. (B, 329–30)
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Finally, in the Harley redaction, the poem's closing lines describe the story as being about both Orfeo and Heurodis, where the Auchinleck and Ashmole texts single out Orfeo:

Pus cam þey out of care:
God ʒeve vs grace wele to fare.
(H, 504–505)

Pus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:	Thus endys here “Orfeo þe Kyng”
God graunt ous alle wele to fare!	God grante vs all hys blyssing.
(A, 603–604)	(B, 596–97)

If these alterations were not made by the Harley scribe himself, but by the maker of his exemplar, they probably made the text more amenable to his aims. They straighten a text whose central relationship is more equivocally described in the other surviving copies.⁵⁸

Ashmole 61 is another provincial production. The dialect of its scribe, Rate, allows for his location in Leicestershire, and because he signs his name so often, makes frequent mistakes in copying, and adorns his texts with idiosyncratic images of roses and grinning fish, it is usually assumed that he made the manuscript for his own use. If he wasn't a household cleric, he may have been a merchant. The format of the manuscript, which resembles ledgers used to keep accounts, suggests a mercantile provenance, and the mix of moralizing and entertaining texts that it compiles has led to the much-cited assertion that its contents were “selected and edited . . . for family reading.”⁵⁹

Indeed, notwithstanding their dispersion across time, space, and social class, the presence of children is a constant amongst the readership of the three *Orfeo* manuscripts. Ashmole 61 contains a series of conduct texts that explicitly address boys and girls, including *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*; other texts in the manuscript feature children in important roles within families, such as the saint's life *Saint Eustace* and the romance *Sir Isumbras*; others still fictionalize the process of maturation, such as the romance of *Lybeaus Desonnus*.⁶⁰ Unique variants in the Ashmole text of *Sir Orfeo* gel with the volume's interest in family life where emphasis is laid on the fact that Orfeo and Heurodis are not just together but “wedyd” (B, 111). Rate's desire to provide materials for young readers in Ashmole 61 is matched by the compiler of the Harley book, whose address to children is made explicit in the direction of its advice on holy Fridays to audience members both “ʒonge and olde” (H, 1).⁶¹ Successive medievalists have likewise claimed the streamlined narratives and catechetical texts in the Auchinleck Manuscript as early examples of children's literature; the names of members of the Browne family have been added to the book in a

fifteenth-century hand, providing further evidence for the book's reception by an intergenerational readership.⁶²

Admittedly, the audience for these books may have been stratified: some of their texts may have been destined for adults, others for children.⁶³ But who chooses what text is suitable for whom might change from moment to moment and the instant when an individual passes from one group into another is open to negotiation. The presence of *Sir Orfeo* among so much writing that is manifestly directed towards younger audiences is an incitement to think about what such audiences might have made of the poem. Above, I suggested that adult readers could anchor their reactions to *Sir Orfeo* in their broader knowledge of the Ovidian myth and the commentary tradition attaching to it, or through comparison with historical events. How might children not having access to these frames of reference have understood the text?

It is a critical commonplace now that *Sir Orfeo* resists interpretation.⁶⁴ For children receiving the poem outside the literary-historical, ethical, and political frameworks available to their parents and other older readers, the text may have seemed especially strange. Younger readers of the romance were met with a series of awkward situations: a distressed wife, who cannot be comforted by her despondent husband; an estranged couple who don't speak at a fortuitous meeting; a paranoid king who subjects his steward to a cruel trick and neglects his queen at their dual coronation; and, strangest of all, a household without any children. After their coronation, we are told, Orfeo and Heurodis lived "long after-ward" but, in the absence of an heir, "seppen [afterwards] was king þe steward" (A, 595–96). Queer stories are so often only partly told; I am reminded as I write this of my own confused reading of celebrity AIDS obituaries in the 80s and 90s. Those stories seemed to be saying so much more than the words that had made it onto the page, but I couldn't figure out what. The experience that I am positing for some of the medieval children who encountered *Sir Orfeo* is somewhere in this vein.

At the end of this survey of the *Orfeo* manuscripts, I am keen to draw out the potentially destabilizing effects of the poem for younger readers because household books like the Auchinleck and Ashmole codices in particular are often read as reinforcing the Christian family values of marriage, lineage, and routine piety.⁶⁵ The Auchinleck Manuscript and Ashmole 61 do perform this function, at least in part. It would be futile to attempt a reading of

their prayers and conduct texts against the grain. But the romances transmitted in these books are less easily accounted for.⁶⁶ I have argued that *Sir Orfeo* can be read as a register of the insistent presence of same-sex desire on the edges of an increasingly exclusionary culture. Consideration of the potential reactions of late-medieval children to *Sir Orfeo* alongside those of their parents and other adults suggests both the work that is necessary to domesticate that presence and the limits of a process of acculturation that must be reiterated with the arrival of each new generation. Thinking about children as readers of *Sir Orfeo* can thus help us to recover the queerness of the text from a locatable medieval perspective. In this way, a layered account of the poem's early reception can add valuable support to queer readings that seek to address the tensions characterizing its central marriage.

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NOTES

An early version of this paper was given to members of the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English at the University of Bern in April 2022. I am grateful to my audience on that occasion for helpful feedback, and to Prof. Anita Auer, who invited me to speak to SAUTE.

¹ See Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), *Georgics*, IV:453–527.

² See Ovid, *Metamorphoses: Books IX-XV*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), XI:1–66. Ovid recounts the earlier part of Orpheus's story in book X of the poem.

³ See Kathryn L. McKinley, "Manuscripts of Ovid in England 1100 to 1500," *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700* 7 (1998): 41–85. On the narrower transmission of the *Georgics* in the Middle Ages, see L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 273–90.

⁴ See Boethius, *The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), *Consolation*, III:m.xii.

⁵ See John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 86–145; and Patricia Vicari, "Sparagnos: Orpheus Among the Christians," in *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. John Warden (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), 63–83. More recently, see too *L'Orphée de Boèce au Moyen Âge: traductions françaises et commentaires latins (XIIe-XVe siècles)*, gen. ed. J. Keith Atkinson and Anna Maria Babbi (Verona: Edizioni Fiorini, 2000); and Kathryn McKinley, "The Medieval Commentary Tradition 1100–1500 on *Metamorphoses* 10," *Viator* 27 (1996): 117–49.

⁶ See Friedman, 146–210; and Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2015), 139–75, discussed below.

⁷ See *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), xxvii–xli, and the discussion below.

⁸ On the poem's reworking of its sources, see J. Burke Severs, "The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*," in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 187–207; Constance Davies, "Classical Threads in *Orfeo*," *Modern Language Review* 56.2 (1961): 161–66; and Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the *Taken*," *Medium Aevum* 33.2 (1964): 102–111. More recently, see too Roy Michael Liuzza, "*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21.2 (1991): 269–84; and Neil Cartlidge, "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 195–226.

⁹ For a survey of medieval versions of the myth that end happily, see Peter Dronke, "The Return of Eurydice," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 23 (1962): 198–215. John Heath overturns the old view that these medieval retellings returned the myth to a pre-Virgilian form that ended with the success of Orpheus's rescue. See "The Failure of Orpheus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 124 (1994): 163–96. The happy endings identified by Dronke are thus marginal to the larger Orpheus tradition at the same time as they are idiosyncratic in the Middle Ages.

¹⁰ See, for example, Peter J. Lucas, "An Interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*," *Leeds Studies in English* 6 (1972): 1–9; A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 56–82; and Derek Pearsall, "Madness in *Sir Orfeo*," in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays in Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows, Rosalind Field, Gillian Rogers, and Judith Weiss (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1996), 51–63.

¹¹ See Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30.2 (2000): 247–74.

¹² See Tara Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*," *Philological Quarterly* 91.4 (2012): 537–68.

¹³ See James Simpson, "Cognition is Recognition: Literary Knowledge and Textual 'Face,'" *New Literary History* 44.1 (2013): 25–44.

¹⁴ See W. S. Anderson, "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid: *fleBILE nescio quid*," in *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth*, 47. See too the commentary in William S. Anderson, *Ovid: Metamorphoses, Books 6–10* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1972); and William S. Anderson, "The Artist's Limits in Ovid: Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Daedalus," *Syllecta Classica* 1 (1989): 1–11.

¹⁵ Anderson's latent homophobia was given much freer rein by his immediate successors. For a description of Ovid's Orpheus as an "effeminate, gynophobic pederast," see John F. Makowski, "Bisexual Orpheus: Pederasty and Parody in Ovid," *The Classical Journal* 92.1 (1996): 27.

¹⁶ The poem is cited throughout from the parallel text edition of *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss. Unless otherwise noted, I refer to the Auchinleck redaction (A). The manuscript transmission of the poem is discussed below.

¹⁷ See *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), s.v. *yerne*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>.

¹⁸ On the careful deployment of rhyme in the poem, see Daniel Sawyer, "Verse-Craft, Editing, and the Work: Shadows of *Orfeo*," *The Review of English Studies* 73.309 (2022): 219–38.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible: Douay Version* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956).

²⁰ Alongside Williams see, for example, A. C. Spearing, "*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender," in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 258–72; D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The*

Middle English Household Imaginary (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 55–59; and Elliot Kendall, “Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny in Sir Orfeo,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35 (2013): 289–327.

²¹ See *MED*, s.v. *durren*.

²² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X:80–81.

²³ Virgil, *Georgics*, IV:516.

²⁴ See Jan Bremmer, “Orpheus from Guru to Gay,” in *Orphisme et Orphée en l’honneur de Jean Rudhardt*, ed. Philippe Borgeaud (Geneva: Droz, 1991), 13–30.

²⁵ See Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), esp. 36–49.

²⁶ See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), esp. 1–54.

²⁷ See Mills, 133–39. Independently, Matthew Fox arrives at a similar conclusion in “The Bisexuality of Orpheus,” in *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and James Robson (London: Routledge, 2015), 335–51.

²⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI:61–66.

²⁹ On the early medieval English context, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 138–83.

³⁰ See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), 92–113.

³¹ *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, rev. ed. F. J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. o.s. 31 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1902), 222–25. For further discussion of this passage, and for a catalogue of similar moments in contemporary English penitential materials, see Tom Linkinen, *Same-Sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2015), 85–109.

³² On this coincidence, see Larry Scanlon, “Sex and Sexuality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. Ralph Hexter and David Townsend (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 447–64.

³³ For the classic account of this development, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 269–334. More recently, see too Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Regulation of ‘Sodomy’ in the Latin East and West,” *Speculum* 95.4 (2020): 969–86.

³⁴ In a parallel development, Mirk proceeds directly from his treatment of the sin against nature into a defense of marriage:

But say þus by gode a-vys,
þat “to gret synne forsoþe hyt ys,
For any mon þat bereth lyf
To forsake hys wedded wyf
And do hys kynde other way,
þat ys gret synne wyþowte nay.”

(226–31)

³⁵ It seems likely that the immediate source for the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* was a text written in the French of England, as is the case for so many of the other items compiled in the Auchinleck Manuscript (for example *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, and *Lay le Freine*). The Middle English translator might have followed this putative French source quite closely. The most recent research into the differences

between Auchinleck's Middle English romances and their French antecedents demonstrates that the English touches inhering in the Middle English texts—one thinks here of *Sir Orfeo's* location in Winchester (see A, 49)—were already present in the French originals. See Ivana Djordević, "Nation and Translation: Guy of Warwick Between Languages," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 57 (2013): 111–14.

³⁶ See Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools from Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 53–68 and 86–127; and Rita Copeland, "The Curricular Classics in the Middle Ages," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature, vol. 1: 800–1558*, ed. Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 21–34.

³⁷ See Kathryn L. McKinley, "Gower and Chaucer: Readings of Ovid in Late Medieval England," in *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, ed. James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, and Kathryn L. McKinley (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 197–230; and Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Ovid and Ovidianism," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception*, 187–208.

³⁸ For a recent reading of *Sir Orfeo* across these manuscript contexts, see Michelle De Groot, "Compiling Sacred and Secular: *Sir Orfeo* and the Otherworlds of Medieval Miscellanies," in *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts, and Early Prints*, ed. Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 191–208; see too Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal: McGill Univ. Press, 1995), 96–100. Rhiannon Purdie detects evidence of oral transmission in the variants that characterize the extant manuscript texts; her work suggests that the diffusion of the poem was broader than can now be traced. See "King Orpheus and *Sir Orfeo*, Scotland and England, Memory and Manuscript," in *The Transmission of Medieval Romance*, 15–32. The sigla A (Auchinleck), H (Harley), and B (Ashmole) are Bliss's. I use them throughout in my comparative work on the texts of *Sir Orfeo*.

³⁹ See, for example, Andrew Prescott, "Administrative Records and the Scribal Achievement of Medieval England," in *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700* 17 (2012): 173–99.

⁴⁰ See Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 126, citing Malcolm Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands 1250–1500* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), xvii.

⁴¹ See Lynne S. Blanchfield, "The Romances in MS Ashmole 61: An Idiosyncratic Scribe," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1991), 70.

⁴² See Blanchfield, 79–86.

⁴³ The ownership mark is transcribed in *Sir Orfeo*, xi.

⁴⁴ On these echoes, see Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, 59; and Liuzza, 276.

⁴⁵ See L. H. Loomis, review of *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55.2 (1956): 290–92.

⁴⁶ See Seymour Phillips, *Edward II* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 145–46.

⁴⁷ *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 29. Discussed in Falk, 262–65.

⁴⁸ So Edward D. Kennedy, "Sir Orfeo as *Rex Inutilis*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 17 (1976): 88–110.

⁴⁹ See W. M. Ormrod, "The Sexualities of Edward II"; and Ian Mortimer, "Sermons of Sodomy: A Reconsideration of Edward II's Sodomitical Reputation," both in

The Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives, ed. Gwilym Dodd and Anthony Musson (York: York Medieval Press, 2006), 22–47 and 48–60.

⁵⁰ See Sylvia Federico, “Queer Times: Richard II in the Poems and Chronicles of Late Fourteenth-Century England,” *Medium Aevum* 79.1 (2010): 25–46.

⁵¹ See Kendall, 303–304.

⁵² On Richard’s second marriage, see W. M. Ormrod, “Monarchy, Martyrdom and Masculinity: England in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. H. Callum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2004), 179–83.

⁵³ For an edition of the Scottish poem, see *Shorter Scottish Medieval Romances: Florimond of Albany, Sir Colling the Kyncht, King Orphius, Roswall and Lillian*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie, Scottish Text Society, 5th series 11 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2013). For discussion of the heroine’s changing name, see Ellen M. Caldwell, “The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 43.3 (2007): 291–310. The heroine is also called Isabelle in a Shetland ballad, *King Orfeo*, which was recorded in the nineteenth century. For extracts from the ballad, see *Sir Orfeo*, li.

⁵⁴ See the description of the Auchinleck Manuscript that accompanies the online facsimile-edition of the codex by David Burnley and Alison Wiggins (2003) at <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/>.

⁵⁵ See Carol M. Meale, “Deluxe Copies of Middle English Romance: Scribes and Book Artists,” in *The Transmission of Medieval Romance*, 91–115.

⁵⁶ For an edition of these texts, see Richard Jordan, “Kleinere Dichtungen der Handschrift Harley 3810,” *Englische Studien* 41 (1910): 253–66.

⁵⁷ For an edition, see *Robert Henryson: The Poems*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

⁵⁸ An anonymous reader of this article for *ELH* suggests that the variants I highlight are more convincing as evidence that the Harley text “inks in” mutuality between Orfeo and Heurodis than that mutuality is absent in the other manuscripts. Herein, I would argue, lies the problem with heterosexist readings of the poem: they rely on seeing evidence of marital success where the poem is reticent, at least in the form in which it is most often cited. What these readings supposedly “ink in” might more accurately be described as drawing anew. Notwithstanding this disagreement, I am grateful to the reviewer for their generous and thought-provoking report on my text.

⁵⁹ Malcolm Parkes, “Literacy of the Laity,” in *Literature and Western Civilization, vol 2: The Mediaeval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1973), 569.

⁶⁰ The complete Ashmole manuscript is edited in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. George Shuffelton (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2008).

⁶¹ Cited from R. Jordan, 262.

⁶² See Linda Olson, “Romancing the Book: Manuscripts for ‘Euerich Ingliche,’” in *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2012), 95–151; and Philippa Hardman, “Popular Romances and Young Readers,” in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 150–64. On the Browne family as readers of Auchinleck, see too Nicole Clifton, “*The Seven Sages of Rome*, Children’s

Literature, and the Auchinleck Manuscript,” in *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 189.

⁶³ George Shuffelton explores this possibility with reference to Ashmole 61 in “Is There a Minstrel in the House?: Domestic Entertainment in Late Medieval England,” *Philological Quarterly* 87.1–2 (2008): 51–76.

⁶⁴ For an eloquent statement of this position, see Alan J. Fletcher, “*Sir Orfeo* and the Flight from the Enchanters,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000): 141–77. On the poem as a deliberate attempt to subvert the commentary tradition, see too Jeff Rider, “Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 24.4 (1988): 343–66.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Cathy Hume, “The Auchinleck *Adam and Eve*: An Exemplary Family Story,” in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*, ed. Susanna Fein (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 36–51; and Myra J. Seaman, “Late-Medieval Conduct Literature,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700–1500*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 121–30. Seaman develops her account of Ashmole 61 in her monograph, *Objects of Affection: The Book and the Household in Late Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2021).

⁶⁶ See further Rory G. Critten, “Bourgeois Ethics Again: The Conduct Texts and the Romances in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61,” *Chaucer Review* 50.1–2 (2015): 108–133.