

Verse Craft, Editing, and the Work: Shadows of *Orfeo*

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[abstract]

The notorious divergence between the three extant texts of *Sir Orfeo* has tripped up some past studies and seemingly makes the poem forbidding ground for literary criticism. Yet study of those texts informed by Paul Eggert's recent revitalization of the concept of the 'work' reveals that some aspects of form and versification persist surprisingly well across the three known copies. Criticism has frequently noted the two points in *Sir Orfeo* which use descriptive comparisons to Paradise. The standard referencing edition, however, presents the first paradisiacal comparison with deceptively little information about its textual state. Scholars, even those alert to manuscripts, have consequently erred when discussing the relevant passages. Attention to aspects of the poem's versification such as through-rhyme, rhyme-pairing, and rhyme-breaking can offer a partial solution to the problem. This insight opens up a broader approach to reading the verse-craft of *Orfeo* across its extant witnesses. A study of the poem's use of comparison offers a trial of that approach. Though individually formulaic, the poem's comparisons would have had a significant cumulative effect on readers. This effect has implications for scholarship's understanding of the figure of Orfeo and of the poem as a whole. Future research on this text might fruitfully attend more closely to textual problems, to verse form, and to the relationship between the two; future studies of Middle English texts in general might benefit from the concept of the work.

[article]

In al þe world was no man bore
 þat ones Orfeo sat bfore
 (And he miȝt of his harping here)
 Bot he schuld þenche þat he were
 In on of þe ioies of Paradis,
 Swiche melody in his harping is.

Thus *Orfeo* describes its hero's extraordinary musical skill in the standard referencing edition, that edited by A. J. Bliss.¹ Later, when Orfeo enters the poem's fairy land, the poem offers an extended description of the decoration of the fairy king's castle, followed by the remark that

No man may telle, no þenche in þouȝt,
 þe riche werk þat þer was wrouȝt:
 Bi al þing him þink þat it is
 þe proude court of Paradis. (373–6)

Scholarship has repeatedly linked these two mentions of 'Paradis', the only two instances of the word in the poem.² Ben Weber offers a particularly pithy reading of the interaction between these two passages: by describing craft, invoking 'Paradis', and using the verb *think*, he proposes, they 'draw attention to the problem of perception and the illusions that perception can create'.³

Yet opacity in Bliss's presentation of the opening passage has sometimes led scholars to err in their handlings of these mentions of 'Paradis'. The edited text obscures the fact that no extant copy of the poem contains both mentions. A fresh examination of the problem in fact strengthens the case that these comparisons to 'Paradis' are textually secure. The process

highlights the craft discernible in the poem's verse, and opens up space for a broader exploration of that craft. Despite the notorious divergence of the poem's three witnesses, some aspects of the construction of *Orfeo* survived surprisingly well during transmission. These aspects include rhyming techniques and the use of imaginative comparison. Through attention to the poem's verse-craft, criticism might develop a more precise capacity to study the poem as a poem.

That is an adventurous statement. Scholarship holds a long-standing consensus about the difficulty of close literary-critical attention to most Middle English romances (and perhaps most insular romances in general). This difficulty is pithily summed up by A. S. G. Edwards. In romances, he remarks,

[t]he realities of composition and transmission serve, in many instances, to render at best indeterminate notions of purposive design and texture. And where texts cannot be established with even relative conviction, where, indeed, the concept of a text at all is difficult to sustain, critical activity becomes futile if it acknowledges the historical circumstances of the received text.⁴

As Edwards's 'many instances' acknowledges, a few romances do survive in more promising evidential states. When just one relatively coherent text survives, as in the case of the poem now called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a rich interpretative critical tradition can arise. Some texts known in multiple witnesses might permit more-critical editions, such as Rosamund Allen's ambitious edition and study of *King Horn*.⁵ Most Middle English romances fit Edwards's description, however, and Jennifer Fellows has laid out and defended the alternative approach to editing which romance scholarship has generally taken. Given the profound changes wrought in many romances by scribes, redactors, or scribe-redactors, and given the legitimate interest of the forms in which a romance was transmitted and provably received—those forms exemplified by surviving copies—Fellows argues cogently that

researchers can sensibly treat, and edit, the manuscripts we have as ‘in effect alternative *authorial* versions’.⁶ Fellows has instantiated her argument in a fine edition of *Sir Bevis of Hampton*.⁷ Alison Wiggins has more recently surveyed the landscape of and prospects for the editing of romances. She rightly emphasizes the continuing inevitability, and genuine scholarly value, of single-witness and parallel-text editions. She also points out the useful role that digitized editions and fully digital editions—two distinct things—have come to play in research and teaching around Middle English romances.⁸

Scholarship normally files *Orfeo* with *Bevis* as a poem best handled through parallel texts or single-witness editions.⁹ Publications of *Orfeo* since A. J. Bliss’s edition have fallen into two groups, either anthologizations or re-presentations for novice readers (both types are worthwhile contributions). The poem’s textual state has largely rested for five decades, with scholarship since Bliss tending to pursue possible sources rather than textual-critical interventions.¹⁰ Criticism examining romances in general often sidesteps questions of poetry and verse-craft, and many studies fruitfully take romances as repositories of historical-cultural information.¹¹ As the interpretations referenced throughout this article show, criticism on *Orfeo* in particular somewhat bucks this trend, but nevertheless has a nervy relationship with the poem’s textual states.

I suggest in what follows, however, that studies of *Orfeo* could develop a sharper sense for which parts of the three extant texts might represent the poem as one entity. Paul Eggert has proposed that literary studies, having fruitfully turned for some time to texts and documents, might now recall a sense of ‘the work’.¹² Eggert posits his revitalized concept of the work not as an ideal, but as ‘a regulative idea’ for the ongoing relationship between readers’ experiences and a set of witnesses.¹³ Eggert examines modern writings, but Lawrence Warner has drawn on this idea of the work in discussing the B text of *Piers Plowman*.¹⁴ The field of Middle English studies does have a pre-existing scepticism about

older concepts of the work, well represented by Tim William Machan's writing on this topic: Machan points out that the very existence of much Middle English literature sits rooted in the period's lack of the concept of the vernacular work.¹⁵ Research must, though, accept some anachronism: we study Middle English for twenty-first-century reasons. Moreover, Eggert's refreshed, process-driven concept of the work differs from the idealizing concept which Machan traces back to early humanism: for Eggert, editors 'are agents in the ongoing life of the work, not its embalmers'.¹⁶ Scholarship can trace more than has previously been suspected of the work discernible in the three surviving copies of *Orfeo*.

Having laid out this approach, I then test it by turning to comparison, a feature of the poem which contextualizes the two mentions of Paradise. This final movement in argument is more interpretative. Even if its arguments about simile do not convince everyone, however, the fact that they can be made at all shows how we might know more about *Orfeo* than we thought. Scholars can say more about comparison and perception in this elusive text: we can be encouraged to read it through careful attention to its textual state in fruitful interplay with its literary aspects; and we can think more carefully and explicitly about which view of the poem—a view instantiated by one among its three manuscripts, or a view cautiously gathered from all three manuscripts—best suits different types of criticism. Through attention to such aspects of verse-craft as rhyming habits and figurative comparisons, we can catch shadows of *Orfeo* as a work.

Trouble in 'Paradis'

Although criticism often invokes the two paradisiacal comparisons together, no surviving witness to the text of *Orfeo* contains both. The poem's editorial history has obscured this from even scholarly readers. The surviving copies of the poem are:

1. Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1 (the 'Auchinleck Manuscript', henceforth 'A');
2. London, British Library, MS Harley 3810 (henceforth 'H'); and
3. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (henceforth 'B').

The second mention of 'Paradis' constitutes the simpler of the two cases: neither H nor B delivers this second instance, leaving A as the only witness that offers it.¹⁷ The first mention demands significantly more explanation. The copy of *Orfeo* in A is acephalous, for the leaf presumably containing the opening lines was cut out, perhaps to extract an attractive miniature.¹⁸ Another text in A, *Lay le Freine*, begins with a twenty-two-line prologue which seems related to the prologue preceding *Orfeo* in HB.¹⁹ Bliss adopted nineteen of the first twenty lines of *Lay le Freine* in A as the text's beginning. He eliminated the one remaining line, judging it spurious, and supplied three additional lines (14–16) from HB, which he suggested had disappeared from A's text of the prologue in *Lay le Freine*. The couplet giving the poem's title is a chimera. In A's text of *Lay le Freine* it reads 'Ac herkneþ lordinges sothe to sain / Ichil zou telle lay le frayn.'²⁰ In Bliss's *Orfeo* this becomes 'Ac herkneþ, lordinges [þat beþ trewe,] | Ichil zou telle [Sir Orfewe' (23–4). So far, the textual terrain is complex but understandable, and Bliss's emendations are explicitly signalled in his text of A by square brackets, reproduced in the above quotation. Unfortunately, from this point on the signalling of interventions in Bliss's edition becomes harder to spot: the absence of a closing square bracket after 'Sir Orfewe' says—or rather, does not say—something important.

From 'telle' in the middle of the twenty-fourth line of his edition up to the end of the thirty-eighth line, and in the three lines he had added earlier, Bliss created a text 'conjecturally reconstructed in the dialect and orthography of [A], on the basis of [H] with some readings of [B]'.²¹ A single pair of square brackets marks this series of interventions in his edition: one in the middle of line 24, and one at the end of line 38. Since these square

brackets are distant from each other, since the first one appears in the middle rather than at the start of a line, and since that first square bracket opens what initially looks like a reasonable local emendation—of course Bliss will emend the title ‘Lay le Frayn’ to ‘Sir Orfewe’!—readers all too easily slide past these warning signs. Compounding the problem, Bliss did not include in his edition his (reasonable) notes justifying these emendations, because he had published them in an earlier article.²² This article’s subsequent history has piled further obscurity upon it: the journal concerned, *English and Germanic Studies*, has ceased, and has not yet, to my knowledge, become available digitally, excluding any reader who cannot access a library which has retained the volume for 1952–53. I myself read this article in a deaccessioned library copy. The study of these lines might be one corner of scholarship inadvertently shaped by decision-making in libraries facing difficult choices about budgets and space. The gradual digitization of past journal issues has brought many gains, but has sometimes also made the scholarship that remains only in print less accessible by comparison.

From line 24 to line 38, Bliss selected substantives from H and B in a granular way.²³ The lines with which this article began deserve a re-presentation here, with the following clarifications:

1. substantives taken from B underlined; substantives taken from H not underlined;
2. a plus sign (‘+’) where Bliss has emended H by elimination of the phrase ‘joy and’;
and
3. square brackets for Bliss’s proposal for the first word of the first of these lines in H,
which is illegible.

[In] al þe world was no man bore

þat ones Orfeo sat bfore

(And he miȝt of his harping here)

Bot he schuld þenche þat he were

In on of þe ioies of Paradis,

Swiche + melody in his harping is.

In his edition, then, Bliss made five silent emendations to the text of H here, within the explicit, over-arching emendation he chose to make by supplying these lines from HB in the first place.

To add further complexity, Bliss also reordered the text as found in H. The opening of *Orfeo* can be divided into a prologue (lines 1–24), together with, in Bliss’s terminology, a ‘harper section’ (lines 25–38), and a ‘king section’ (lines 39–46). These appear in the witnesses thus:

1. A: prologue (only in *Lay le Freine*); king section (at the top of folio 300 recto, as the very first lines unquestionably present in A’s copy of *Orfeo*)
2. H: prologue (H1–24); king section (H25–32); harper section (H33–46)
3. B: prologue (B1–26); harper section (B27–40)

Today, A lacks the harper section. However, Bliss argued plausibly that the probable number of lines occupying one column of the missing leaf at the start of the text in A is best explained by postulating that the leaf contained the prologue followed by the harper section.²⁴ One normal column at this point in the manuscript would contain forty-four lines. Bliss suggested that the ‘prologue section’ and ‘harper section’ took up thirty-eight of these, and that an opening illumination and a rubricated title—again, normal at this point in the manuscript—occupied the space of the first six. His provision of lines 25–38 in the main text of his edition from HB therefore also constitutes a kind of rearrangement, since H, which he took as a base text at this point, places these lines after the king section, while B lacks the king section and so gives no evidence about the ordering of the two.

I do not recapitulate Bliss's processes at length here to criticize them. At each stage, his choices were logical. True, his final text makes an argument about probabilities, but the same can be said of all scholarly editions. Even a facsimile of a manuscript witness makes several implicit arguments when taken as a representation of a text: that, for example, seeing the text rather than hearing it is an authentic experience, and that authenticity is achievable and important. Although the placement of some of Bliss's textual-critical notes in a separate article causes problems today, this separate, earlier publication originally allowed for scrutiny of his hypotheses before he fixed them in his final text. The present argument shows just how many choices must, in any edition, underpin the seemingly innocuous opening comparison of Orfeo's musical skill to the joys of Paradise. The description of the illusory artifice of Orfeo's harping falls, aptly, into the most artificial part of the entire poem. These lines, as printed in Bliss's edition of the poem, effectively constitute an argument about the historical state of A before its two-hundred-and-ninety-ninth folio was removed. Research should bear this in mind.

In literary-critical treatments of the harp section and of the perception of Paradise, Bliss's emendations have not always engendered quite the full measure of critical caution that they deserve. Seth Lerer, for example, declares that he will interpret 'the Auchinleck version of the poem' and then quotes lines 33–8 without qualification. He also writes that '[t]hrough the repeated use of the word "melody", the Auchinleck narrator punctuates the progress of Orfeo's journey. Only in his text does the word appear in all five scenes of musical performance.'²⁵ Yet the word 'melody' in line 38 does not come from A, but from the evidence of HB (which do not agree on whether the phrase is 'melody' or 'joy and melody'). Furthermore, since 'melody' is not a rhyme-word in this passage, we can have less confidence in its presence on A's lost folio 299. Lerer is far from alone in running into this problem: other scholars can be found declaring their use of A and then quoting without

qualification from Bliss's HB text of the poem's opening.²⁶ A. C. Spearing doubted the significance of the second instance of 'Paradis' on the grounds that it 'is found in only one of the three manuscripts of the poem'—quite true—but also on the grounds that 'we find a very similar turn of phrase applied in all three manuscripts to Orfeo's harping'—untrue, for this is another reference to the part of the opening lines concocted from HB.²⁷

These critics offer fruitful readings of the poem. Such local errors, flaws in specific arguments, hardly devalue their larger findings. Indeed, the persistence of this problem in scholarship does not highlight scholars' foibles, but rather shows how much trouble these opening lines can cause, even for real experts. The conjectured opening lines appear in the standard referencing edition, Bliss's, and they are adopted with appropriate credit in the edition most easily found today, that produced by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. The Laskaya-Salisbury edition has a particularly important status, because it also exists online through the excellent Middle English Texts project, and because at the time of writing it is the first full text of the poem which an internet search for 'Sir Orfeo' will discover.²⁸ These footholds in the most authoritative edition and the most accessible edition have hidden the insecurities lurking in lines 25–38. The majority of editions exclude these lines. Laskaya and Salisbury conscientiously observe this in their introduction, and make clear in their bibliography what each previous edition did with the poem's opening.²⁹ A welcome recent presentation of the poem for a general readership compromises, starting the poem proper with the first surviving line in A, Bliss's line 39, but summarizing the absent prologue within square brackets.³⁰ Barring the rediscovery of folio 299 of A, the mystery of exactly what this text's opening lines were will remain a snare for readers.

Verse-craft's utility

In the absence of other evidence, textual evaluation of *Orfeo* lines 25–38 can consider the poem's intrinsic formal features. If both instances of 'Paradis' were originally present in the poem, they formed something more developed than the repetition of a lexical item, or even, as in Weber's account, two lexical items, *Paradis* and *thinken*. Though to my knowledge no past scholarship explicitly notes the fact, if both instances are part of the poem's text, then the poem repeats not just an idea, but a rhyme: first *is:Paradis*, then *Paradis:is*. Was the original poet of *Orfeo* inclined towards this sort of repeated rhyme pairing? Attention to craft in rhyme in general and to similar rhyme pairings in particular, grounded in the examination of more secure parts of the text, can strengthen or defeat this idea.

The poem as it survives certainly does suggest some thoughtful craft in rhyme. For instance, in all three witnesses the only two points at which the text indulges in through-rhyme—that is, multiple contiguous couplets rhymed on the same sound—convey moments of high drama: Heurodys silently weeping at the sight of Orfeo in the wilderness, and Orfeo demanding his boon from the fairy king.³¹ Somewhat unusually for an English poem in pre-Chaucerian couplets, *Orfeo* also features rhyme-breaking.³² In a rhyme-break, a major syntactic division falls at the end of a couplet's first line, breaking the couplet's two rhymes apart and associating them with separate syntactic units. For example, a rhyme-break occurs in all three texts of the poem when the fairy king gives in to Orfeo's demand, with a couplet neatly halved by the end of a syntactic unit and (in this example) also the end of direct speech:

þe king seyð: 'Seþþen it is so
 Take hir bi þe hond and go:
 Of hir ichil þatow be bliþe!
 He kneled adoun and þonked him swiþe.

His wiif he tok bi þe hond

And dede him swiþe out of þat lond. (469–74, H432–6, B458–63)

In this instance, Bliss's full stop after 'swiþe' could just as well be a comma, while no such flexibility is possible after 'bliþe'. Rhyme-breaking has received more study in Old French and Middle High German couplets, but Ruth Evans has highlighted its significance for Middle English versification, a subfield where it probably deserves more attention and perhaps a dedicated survey.³³ That future work aside, the rhyme-breaking in *Orfeo* matters because it appeared less commonly in English verse at this time, because it called for some craft from the poet, and because it persists across witnesses. Through-rhyme and rhyme-breaking show that this poet did rhyme deliberately.

Furthermore, some other repetitions of rhyme pairs, more textually secure than the first *is:Paradis* rhyme, suggest that the poet deliberately used the technique of repeated rhyme pairs in particular. *Steward*, for example, only appears line-finally twice, and both times it rhymes with a word tightly connected to the steward's role in the plot, *afterward*.³⁴ *Priis* occurs twice as a rhyme word, in both cases rhymed with *Heurodis*. This rhyming pair too repeats in close proximity.³⁵ Both pairs, *steward:afterward* and *priis:Heurodis*, also reverse in their second appearances, just as the pair of *is* and *Paradis* does if we admit it to the poem. Similarly, *liif* and *wiif* only appear as end-rhymes when they rhyme with each other, on four separate occasions, in an insistent repetition which seems closely bound up with the plot.³⁶

No doubt convenience and habit affected the choices of these rhymes. Certainly the rhyme of *afterward* and *steward* must have suited the poet, given that the steward twice rules after Orfeo. Since Orfeo must frequently mention his *wiif*, *liif* was undoubtedly a helpful word to have to hand. In the *Paradis:is* and *is:Paradis* rhymes, the use of the copula also helps the poet escape bathos: it is hard to find an open-class rhyme word for Paradise which

does not in some way fail to measure up to its partner. Like any poet working with obligatory end-rhyme, the *Orfeo*-poet undoubtedly had a mental stock of habitually useful rhyme pairs, the mnemonic precursor to a rhyming dictionary. It was precisely this predictable, formulaic quality which Spearing was eager to distinguish in the poem, and then avoid, in his remarks on the paradisiacal passages.³⁷ However, we cannot finally separate convenience and craft in rule-bound verse. Repeated rhyme pairs both assisted the poet and constituted part of the text's elegance. The *liif:wiif* rhyme, for instance, might well have originated in habit, but it nevertheless provides an important and pleasing effect of texture enhancing theme. So too *Priis* helpfully rhymes with *Heurodys*, but also fits well with an important issue in the poem: what one values. Even readers who do not accept the case for the semantic force of these repeated pairings must agree that the poet deployed pairs of rhymes repeated and sometimes reversed. This fact in turn strengthens the likelihood that A did once contain the first *is:Paradis* rhyme pair and that, before that, the poet originally composed both rhyme pairs. Given that rhyme words tend to resist change in transmission more than other parts of texts—the 'sticky right edge' effect—we should stay cautious about the wording of most of each line on the missing leaf of A, but we can have some confidence that an *is:Paradis* couplet probably did exist on that leaf.

This argument is not circular, but it is coherentist. Each instance of the 'Paradis' rhyme pair makes the other instance more probably part of the text, and all instances of repeated rhyme pairs make all other instances more probably part of the text. In the absence of other guidance, and accepting that *Orfeo* is the product of a mind constructing a poem both by drawing on habitual tools, and by consciously thinking through craft, coherence offers legitimate aid in assessing the romance's textual problems. Is there a different kind of circularity in questioning the paradisiacal references only to restore them? No, for the process has uncovered more knowledge about *Orfeo*. It asks us to recognize that the mentions of

Paradise repeat not only an idea, but also a rhyme. It highlights the poet's use of repeated rhyme pairings and opens up an approach to reading such features in the poem. The study of the two instances of 'Paradis' hints that more might be learned through attention to this poem as a work, despite the notable divergence of its texts. Although the three surviving copies frequently differ, many of the examples of rhyming habits or techniques adduced above—the rhyme pairings, through-rhymes, and instances of rhyme breaking—have survived in A and at least one of HB, often in both of HB. This observation suggests a programme for reading *Orfeo* as a work.

An approach to interpretation

The following argument tries, experimentally, to read likelihood: it focuses on parts of the text which seem to have been most stable in transmission, and more probably represent the poem as initially circulated. This procedure demands an explanation, rooted in some further discussion of the work's textual states. Even compared to other Middle English poems known in multiple manuscripts, the witnesses of *Orfeo* strikingly diverge. The three surviving copies also raise the vexed possibility of oral transmission or, as Rhiannon Purdie has usefully framed it in her comparison to the Scottish *King Orphius*, 'memorial' transmission. As Purdie observes, a poem might travel through someone's memory whether it was copied by the memoriser or copied down when heard from them.³⁸ Yet *Orfeo* does nevertheless exist, for AHB converge sufficiently closely, sufficiently often, to win recognition as representatives of one entity. As noted above, Bliss's edition largely ended textual-critical discussion. What is to be done?

The problem of the poem's text has drawn a number of different approaches in past criticism. One can implicitly or explicitly take one of the three witnesses—most commonly Auchinleck, because it is by some margin the oldest—as one's text. The witness studied does

not have to be Auchinleck, and all three manuscripts containing the poem hold value as packages of evidence about three different contexts of transmission and reception; a study of any one of the three is legitimate. Literary criticism purely founded, for example, on the text as found in the context of B, MS Ashmole 61, can offer valuable insights. This codex provides a view of *Orfeo* at the end of the fifteenth century, fruitfully surrounded by co-texts.³⁹ One can also sound a note of caution about the poem's text, but appeal to the effect of detail in aggregate.⁴⁰ A scholar can also simply state the use of a particular edition, without making a commitment to one of the three manuscripts.⁴¹ There is no shame in openly relying on an edition in this way. To do so avoids the risk of asserting that a manuscript contains text which it in fact lacks, and most often when scholars call upon this or that manuscript of *Orfeo* they too, really, rely on an edition: Bliss's. It is reasonable to take any one of the three witnesses as a text, or to rely honestly on an edition; the real risks lie in failing to think through the textual state of the work, and in lacking developed intentions when choosing a method of study. We might also ask, though, whether there are parts of the work in which we can place more trust, parts which might sit closer to its composition and which might have been encountered by more of its audiences.

An interpretation might focus on elements of the poem which, first, appear in A and at least one of H and B, and, second, make sense. Why do this? Compared to H and B, laying aside their intrinsic interest for other types of study, A contains fewer readings which we might call, in textual-critical terms, errors. H cannot descend from B, for H is earlier; B cannot descend from H, or at least not from H alone, for it contains material not in H.⁴² Probably neither H nor B descends from A. This last point makes agreement between A and at least one of H and B more significant, and so requires a brief digression.

Bliss found it impossible to rule conclusively on the possible descent of the common ancestor of HB from A, but suggested that the possible common ancestor of HB probably did

not descend from A. This is because, for Middle English poems in general, witnesses descended from other extant witnesses (directly or otherwise) are rare. To put it another way, if a scholar selected a copy of any multiply-witnessed Middle English poem and then selected any other, younger, copy of that poem at random, the odds that that second copy would be descended from the first copy selected would be low.⁴³ Among the numerous surviving witnesses to the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, we know of just one cognate pair of copies descended from the same (lost) exemplar, alongside one certain exemplar–copy pair and one possible exemplar–copy pair.⁴⁴ Therefore, if we postulate a manuscript of *Orfeo* which is lost—a shared ancestor for HB—in the absence of firm evidence deciding one way or another, the likelihood that that imagined manuscript descended from A is low.

Accordingly, elements of the poem which (i) survive in AHB, or in A and one of H or B, and (ii) are formally and semantically sensible, are more likely to go back to the shared origin-point of the three witnesses we have, whatever the natures of that origin point and of the poem's subsequent transmission. With the exception of the second mention of 'Paradis' which, as discussed above, is supported by coherent verse-craft evidence, I do not commit myself to saying that when HB agree against A, A is correct; the argument which follows simply does not call on such material. The phrase 'elements of the poem' does not necessarily mean only word-by-word textual detail: it includes, for instance, rhymes and figuration. Precise textual details persist less reliably, and the study of them tends to lead, naturally enough, to discussion of individual witnesses as separate texts appreciated for their own agendas and contexts, rather than of the work. Robert Allen Rouse and Ralph Hanna offer a clear, simple example of this in their brief but interesting observations on the specific mention of Winchester present in A but absent in HB.⁴⁵ For all the notorious textual divergence of the manuscripts, however, elements of *Orfeo*—such as through-rhyme, rhyme pairs, and imaginative comparison—survive surprisingly consistently. They provide a useful

purchase on the poem as a work. The goal here is not somehow to produce a critical text of *Orfeo*, but rather to identify elements which are more secure. Thus the procedure outlined above: acknowledging the value of other routes, and acknowledging the probabilistic aspects of the exercise, it seems worthwhile to study closely the literary effects which, the witnesses suggest, might be reliable, consistent features of the poem as a work. With this procedure in hand, we might ask how the invocations of Paradise in the poem relate to its broader comparative strategies. How does comparison function in *Orfeo*?

Interpreting comparison in *Orfeo*

Any comparison invites thought about difference as well as similarity. Past interpretations of the poem have tended to emphasize the element of similarity in the invocations of Paradise, reading them as invitations to see Orfeo's harping and the fairy castle as paradisiacal.⁴⁶

Researchers have had good reason to do this, for the second mention of Paradise occurs in a passage drawing on the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21.⁴⁷ The element of difference, however, seems important too, as a few critics have briefly noted.⁴⁸ The remaining pages pursue this element of difference in the poem's use of comparisons. These comparisons have elicited little past discussion. The only dedicated comment known to me comes from John J. McGavin, who usefully if impressionistically points to the connection between similes and fairy in the poem, without discussing every instance.⁴⁹ Scholarly caution about the state of the text is understandable, but commentary has also probably been limited by the fact that each comparison is, on its own, 'familiar and stereotyped'.⁵⁰ English narrative romance of this time often, however, eschews developed simile and metaphor, and 'familiar' therefore seems a questionable verdict. The content might be familiar, the figure itself perhaps less so. Though the contents of the comparisons seem rote, the figure, the textual event of imaginative comparison, might hold more interest as a textual event: precisely because

narrative of this sort is notably light on figuration, such moments of figuration as do appear would loom larger in an audience's consciousness, however trite their content might seem to us. Moreover, points of evidence which seem insubstantial or routine on their own can become revealing when considered as part of a system or habit.

Orfeo contains many mundane comparisons and comparative conditionals. Heurodys speaks of the fairy king's knights spurring back 'as þai miȝt driue' (141), for instance, and she describes the king himself coming equally quickly, 'also blue' (142, H140). When Orfeo leaves fairy land, 'Riȝt as he come þe wey he ȝede' (476, H439). Occasionally, such mundane comparisons might become slightly more imaginative or allusive, and probably the most striking example of this crops up in the poem's celebrated description of the folk spirited away and held in the fairy castle: 'wonder fele þer lay bisides, / Riȝt as þai slepe her vndertides' (401–2, B389–90). Much of this comparison's force comes, though, from its position at the end of one of the work's bravura passages. Its immediate meaning remains quite matter-of-fact: the remarkably many people who lie in the castle lie physically just as they lay when they too, like Heurodys, encountered the fairy king during a late morning's rest.

The poem also, however, contains a smaller group of comparisons which characterize their referents more imaginatively. This grouping of imaginative comparisons includes true similes, but also some other constructions, such as conditionals. This category holds together across changes in construction type. Its consistency comes through in the poem's transmission. For instance, the first example of such an imaginative comparison after the mention of 'Paradis' in the opening lines, in Orfeo's response to Heurodys's distress, uses a conditional in AB, but a true simile in H:

Allas! þi rode, þat was so red,

Is al wan, as þou were ded. (107–8)

Alas! þy rode, þat was so rede,
 Is as wanne as ony lede. (H105–6)
 Thy lyppes, þat wer so bryzt rede,
 Semys as wan as þou wer dede. (B95–6)

The next imaginative comparison, in the same passage, is a true simile in AH, but a conditional in B:

Allas! þi louesom eyzen to
 Lokeþ so man doþ on his fo! (111–12)
 Alas! þy lovely yzen two
 Loken on me as man on fo! (H109–10)
 And þi luffsom eyn two
 Loke on me as I wer þi fo! (B99–100)

The changeability between true simile and conditional in the transmission of these examples shows how the two constructions do the same job, and invite grouping together. Despite such variations the presence of imaginative comparison persists. The textual event remains. All the examples of this type of figuration in the text of A also survive in some form in at least one of HB. Neither H nor B adds any new instances which are not in A. All but one are visual, in keeping with the poem's long-recognized emphasis on the external over the internal.⁵¹ The sole exception still describes outwardly-observed behaviour: the ladies from fairy land whom Orfeo sees in the wilderness are 'Gentil and iolif as brid on ris' (305). Once again, some lineaments of the work grow clearer if attention raises itself from the level of individual textual variations to aspects of poetic craft.

Approached as a group, the imaginative comparisons in the poem reveal a pattern: only characters using direct speech engage in the comparative perception of Orfeo's own world, and only the narration engages in the comparative perception of fairy land and its

denizens. The poem first locates such acts of comparison within characters' speech. Then, as Orfeo nears and then enters fairy land, the narration itself begins to use comparison. In the poem's closing section, after Orfeo's return, imaginative comparisons begin to affect other more mundane types of statement. The comparisons in *Orfeo* thus arrive in a pattern which gradually casts doubt on comparison itself. This coordination of changes in the distribution of comparisons with changes of setting has a discernible literary effect.

The two examples quoted above come from Orfeo's direct speech to the distraught Heurodys. The next three imaginative comparisons in the poem arrive in Heurodys's direct speech describing her dream, when she tries to characterize the fairy king's company and crown. The first of Heurodys's comparisons arrives quietly, in a compound: she tells Orfeo that the fairy king's company rode

Al on snowe-white stedes. (145)

al on snow-white stedys. (H143)

This description might have been a commonplace, 'dead' image for the audience: the *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*) has a well-attested entry for *snou-whit*, a compound which goes back to Old English. The second of Heurodys's comparisons appears as a true simile in A, but has subsided into a similar compound in B:

As white as milke were her wedes. (146)

Off mylke-whyte was all þer wedys. (B145)

This alteration during transmission again suggests the persistence of a category of imaginative comparison across different types of construction. This compound too crops up in other Middle English contexts.⁵² A similar conventionality hangs around Heurodys's simile for the fairy king's crown:

As briȝt as þe sonne it schon. (152)

As bryȝt as sunne, forsoþe, it schone. (H150)

Als bryȝt as any son it schon. (B151)

It is the event of comparison, not the details, which is crucial. All five imaginative comparisons discussed so far occur in direct speech and convey a particular, subjective, perspective-limited attempt to grasp something bewildering. Before the poem nears fairy land, it links imaginative comparison to characters' bewildered attempts at understanding others, and it makes such comparison perspectival by limiting it to characters' direct speech.

The next cluster of comparisons emerges as Orfeo nears and then enters fairy land. They occur not in characters' direct speech, but in the poem's narration. The first describes the demeanour of the 'Sexti leuedis' who 'riden on haukin bi o riuere' (304, 308), who include Heurodys in their company and whom Orfeo will eventually follow into the otherworld:

Gentil and iolif as brid on ris. (305)

Gentyll and gay as bryd on ryse. (B306–7)

The text compares them to a bird on a branch, and it is probably no coincidence that the hawking passage which follows is packed with birds, variously wild and controlled, predator and prey (307–14, H293–9, B309–16). Very shortly afterwards, the narration delivers a cluster of similes all describing the landscape and buildings which Orfeo sees on arrival in fairy land. Like the five similes delivered earlier in direct speech, these work visually, but unlike them they describe not people but aspects of light in the prospect that confronts him:

He com into a fair cuntray,

As briȝt so sonne on somers day (351–2)

as bryȝt as ony day. (H338)

Als bryȝt as son in somerys dey. (B354)

Al þe vtmost wal

Was clere and schine as cristal. (357–8)

Gan schyne as doth þe crystalle. (B361)

Þe riche stones liȝt gonne

As briȝt as doþ at none þe sonne. (371–2)

Also bryȝt as ony sun. (H358)

Only a single-couplet inexpressibility topos separates this third fairy land comparison from the second ‘Paradis’ comparison (373–4, H359–60; the comparison itself is, as discussed above, only in A). Before Orfeo abandons his kingdom, narration was the sole perspective; proximity to and then entry into fairy land have reduced narration to one perspective among many. Outside of fairy land, imaginative comparisons are associated with the direct speech of baffled characters; in fairy land, the narration itself takes up comparison, implying that here the voice delivering the poem—probably often a real voice, reading aloud, to listeners—takes on some of the same bafflement. Outside of fairy land, other people can be enigmas, but the world itself is straightforward; within fairy land even the physical objects around Orfeo baffle. Perhaps by accident, and perhaps not, the poem trains readers to associate figurative comparison with limited, confused moments of description, rooted in characters’ speech, and only then begins to use the same textual event in narration.

One more imaginative comparison remains in the poem on Orfeo’s return from fairy land. It continues the association between comparison and bafflement, and returns to direct speech, this time the collective speech of Orfeo’s subjects startled by his overgrown hair and beard:

He is yclongen also a tre! (508)

Hys body is clong as a tre! (B497)

Within a survey of trees in the poem as a whole, Danielle Howarth has teased out this image's various resonances, concluding that it ties Orfeo to the wilderness whence he has returned, represents his subjects' startlement and discomfort at the sight of him, and also conveys a strength won through his long ordeal.⁵³ Howarth offers a detailed, convincing account. I would only add that this simile again emphasizes perspective and invites an audience to detect unlikeness, because this time the audience knows that Orfeo is not exactly or only the wilderness-dwelling, time-worn minstrel he seems.

The final part of the poem, after the return from fairy land, also delivers two simpler and more mundane non-comparative uses of *as*. Both, like the tree-simile above, relate to Orfeo's appearance. He takes lodgings disguised 'As a minstrel of pouer liif' (486, B475), and after his self-revelation at the court his attendants attire 'him as a king' either 'apert' ('openly', 586) or 'in wede' (B581). These phrases, more humdrum in themselves, might land differently after the strange series of imaginative comparisons, many of them introduced by *as*. Together with the narrative event of the minstrel disguise, these cast doubt on the attiring of Orfeo as a king: if he was not truly a poor minstrel, is he truly a king? Thus I gloss *apert* as 'openly' rather following the sense assigned to this line in the *MED*, 'in fact'—although both senses make for a slightly uneasy assertion here.⁵⁴ Though far more mundane, this late use of *as* might activate the same kind of fruitful searching for meaning prompted by what are probably Middle English's most famous clothing images: 'I shoop me into [a] shrou[d] as I a sheep weere; / In habite as an heremite, vnholý of werkes'.⁵⁵ The first of these two constructions deploys a conditional with irrealis copula ('as I a sheep were'), just like Orfeo's earlier 'as þou were ded' comparison, but the second quite closely resembles the attiring of Orfeo 'as a king'. Among other things, an audience grasps in Langland's opening comparisons that Will is neither a sheep nor a hermit. A simpler but similar effect operates in the closing descriptions of *Orfeo*. After the increasingly strange uses of more imaginative

comparisons earlier in the poem, and after the use of a related *as* construction to describe Orfeo's deceptive disguise as a 'minstrel of pouer liif', Orfeo's atiring 'as a king' does not seem so unremarkable.

I do not seek a full interpretation of *Orfeo* here, but this unsettling of the otherwise mundane king-comparison does fit with studies emphasizing kingship as a key concern in the poem, and with studies which sense notes of doubt or failure in the king's return and the throne's transmission to the steward afterward.⁵⁶ After Orfeo returns from fairy land, the one imaginative simile and the two more mundane uses of *as* all direct listeners' attention to Orfeo. Orfeo himself ends the poem a much less fixed and stable figure than he was at the beginning. He does, also, supply the poem's title, although we do not know whether the poem is titled *King Orfeo* or *Sir Orfeo*. As noted above, Bliss constructed the line 'Ichil 3ou telle Sir Orfewe', and he remarked that one might just as easily print the metrically-equivalent line 'Ichil 3ou telle of Sir Orfewe'.⁵⁷ No external title for the poem survives in A, the *explicit* in H names it 'Orpheo Regis', and B titles it 'kyng orfew'.⁵⁸ The fragmentary Scottish text recently re-examined by Purdie, related in some way to the Middle English poem, is also called *King Orphius*. I have chosen here to refer to the poem as *Orfeo* rather than *Sir Orfeo*. If the poem had the title *King Orfeo*—as, crudely speaking, two thirds of its surviving copies suggest, with no reply possible from A—then the king-comparison would carry an additional charge.

Despite the frequent involvement of light, comparison in *Orfeo* tends to obfuscate rather than illuminate. It erupts at moments when characters fail to understand each other, in connection with the baffling appearance of fairy land, and when Orfeo is disguised on his return. By the poem's end, even mundane description has become potentially less mundane, so that the dressing of Orfeo as what he is—a king—might be received as a comparison of Orfeo to what he ought to be, or used to be. Doubt has settled on figuration itself. In this

dubious light, the elusive comparisons to Paradise mean more. The first mention of Paradise could be received straightforwardly (in whatever form it took), but by the time the second arrives the act of comparison comes tied to uncertainty. When Orfeo thinks the fairy castle is ‘Pe proude court of Paradis’, the audience hears that, whatever it is, it is not paradisiacal; it might be great, but it is also terrible. Like the poem’s rhymes, the poem’s comparisons might be partly the rote products of habit, but nevertheless deserve thought as persistent features of craft.

The argument above pursues another type of comparison, too: the comparison of different witnesses. Readers need not accept this argument about imaginative comparisons, though it seems at least strongly suggestive to me. The very fact, however, that the argument can be made about *Orfeo* as a work underlines the larger point that, with care and thought, research can, in some respects, treat *Orfeo* as both a poem and a work, not just as three texts. Bliss perhaps took the project of a full scholarly edition of *Orfeo* more or less as far as it can go, but criticism should not lapse into treating his edition as a stable text. It demands care throughout, and nowhere more than in its opening lines. This fact, however, does not have to drive the field to abandon readings of the poem as a work. Judgements can be made about the likelihood that individual points either were or were not encountered by most readers, and knowledge of verse-craft might sometimes show which parts are either more or less secure. Perhaps we can reprise Edwards’s conclusion that ‘there is little middle ground between textual and literary criticism in respect to the romances’, but with a more hopeful tone.⁵⁹ The study of *Orfeo*, at least, can advance by allowing literary and textual criticism to inform each other.

The very qualities which might seem so discouraging to detailed criticism in fact offer another useful route into understanding *Orfeo*: what can be recovered of the poem as a work can be recovered in its formulae, its habits of rhyme, and its conventional figurative

language. These elements display coherence, pulling the work together across its witnesses. The passage of time has perhaps armed readers in the 2020s to appreciate the aggregate interest of these individually inert features. The years have distanced research from Modernist or New Critical desires for the single extraordinary pointed phrase. Critical theory has produced a lineage of studies attending to the mundane or the everyday which might help us think about style in romances. To give just one example, two of the three elements of ‘everyday life’ which have interested Rita Felski, repetition and habit, might relate to the experience of hearing *Orfeo*, while the third element, home, seems relevant to the likely reception-context for many romances.⁶⁰ Research could not, of course, apply such work to romances without thinking about anachronism, but the link nevertheless seems potentially fruitful, and romances might in turn reveal things about the theory of the everyday. Finally, childhoods spent with the generatively repetitive internet might also produce students more primed for romance’s returning oddities and glittering surfaces.

Both Eggert’s revived concept of the work and a commitment to let knowledge of verse-craft, literary criticism, and textual criticism mutually assist each other might have their uses beyond *Orfeo*, and beyond romances. The new findings offered above do not register any failure of textual-critical imagination on the part of romance specialists, who have developed a well worked-out set of theories and methods for editing and studying works in widely divergent manuscripts. The findings suggest rather that, without making claims about ‘genius’ or about conscious intention, Middle English studies might usefully take as starting points the ideas that poets had habits of craft, and that an understanding of those habits will hone our collective ability to understand their poetry and, sometimes, to trace their poems as works. To say this is not, in any way, to reject studies of works such as *Orfeo* which look to potential historical contexts or pressing present-day problems. Rather, it is to lay out more precise tools for such studies. More remains to be said about this poem, and some of it will be

said best by examining the poem's language, verse-craft, and witnesses, alongside its words.

Orfeo remains a live textual problem, lively verse, and a living work.

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¹ *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1966), 33–8. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Orfeo* are referenced as line numbers in this edition's presentation of the Auchinleck text; quotations from the other two witnesses, London, British Library, MS Harley 3810 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61, are referenced using line numbers preceded by 'H' or 'B' respectively; references to other editions specify the editions concerned. I suppress Bliss's italicization of expanded abbreviations, silently expand the ampersands with which Bliss represents Tironian *et*, and remove Bliss's hyphens in words such as *yhad*. Bliss's imposition of editorial capitalization on the texts transcribed from MS Harley 3810 and MS Ashmole 61 was very limited, and in a few places I silently capitalize words, such as the first person pronoun, to aid readers' comprehension.

² For example: Robert M. Longworth, 'Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel's Art', *Studies in Philology*, 79 (1982), 1–11; Seth Lerer, 'Artifice and Artistry in Sir Orfeo', *Speculum*, 60 (1985), 92–109 (102); *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995), 55; and Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 2016), 26–7.

³ Ben Weber, "'Smothe and plain and al grene': *Sir Orfeo*'s Flat Fairyland', *Notes and Queries*, 58 (2011), 24–28 (27).

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- ⁴ A. S. G. Edwards, 'Middle English Romance: The Limits of Editing, the Limits of Criticism', in Tim William Machan (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretation* (Binghamton, NY, 1991), 91–104 (104).
- ⁵ *King Horn: An Edition Based on Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4.27 (2)*, ed. Rosamund Allen (New York, NY, 1984), discussion at 17–120. Edwards also discusses this edition: 'Middle English Romance', 102–3.
- ⁶ Jennifer Fellows, 'Author, Author, Author . . . : An Apology for Parallel Texts', in Vincent P. McCarren and Douglas Moffat (eds), *A Guide to Editing Middle English* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998), 15–24 (24).
- ⁷ *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, ed. Jennifer Fellows, 2 vols, EETS, O. S. 349–50 (Oxford, 2017), lxxvii–lxxviii.
- ⁸ Alison Wiggins, 'Editing Middle English Romance: Problems and Prospects', *Poetica*, 71 (2009), 15–27. As Wiggins notes, the key set of digitized editions for Middle English romances is that gathered in the TEAMS Middle English Texts series, available at <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams>> [accessed 1 June 2021]. Unlike digitized editions, fully digital editions begin to take advantage, in one way or another, of the affordances of their medium; one example relevant to this article is *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. David Burnley and Alison Wiggins (2003), <<https://auchinleck.nls.uk>> [accessed 1 June 2021]. For a print facsimile, see *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS. 19.2.1*, ed. Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London, 1977).
- ⁹ Tim William Machan groups the two together in just this way: *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville, VA, 1994), 164–5.

¹⁰ For work on sources, see: J. Burke Severs, 'The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*', in MacEdward Leach (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh* (Philadelphia, PA, 1961), 187–207; Lerer, 'Artifice and Artistry', 99–101, 103; Paul Beekman Taylor, 'Sir Orfeo and the Minstrel King', *ANQ*, 13 (2000), 12–16; Dominique Battles, 'Sir Orfeo and English Identity', *Studies in Philology*, 107 (2010), 179–211. Seth Lerer has, however, made a thoughtful local proposal about the text in 'Sir Orfeo, Line 285: An Emendation', *Notes and Queries*, 59 (2012), 320–22.

¹¹ Nicola McDonald (ed.), *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (Manchester, 2004); Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević and Judith Weiss (eds), *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2010); Raluca Radulescu, *Romance and its Contexts in Fifteenth-Century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (Cambridge, 2013); Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2014); and Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (eds), *Thinking Medieval Romance* (Oxford, 2018). Some more stridently formalist notes are sounded in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson (eds), *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹² Paul Eggert, 'Brought to Book: Bibliography, Book History and the Study of Literature', *The Library*, 7th series, 13 (2012), 3–32; Paul Eggert, *Securing the Past: Conservation in Art, Architecture and Literature* (Cambridge, 2009), 214–37.

¹³ Eggert, *Securing the Past*, 235, 237.

¹⁴ Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of 'Piers Plowman': The Earliest Transmission of Langland's Work* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), xiii–xv, 65–6.

¹⁵ Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts*, throughout, but esp. 136–76.

¹⁶ Eggert, ‘Brought to Book’, 32.

¹⁷ H has no equivalents to *Sir Orfeo*, 375–6; B has no equivalents to 367–78.

¹⁸ The text as we have it starts at A, f. 300^{ra}, l. 1, l. 39 of Bliss’s text (‘Orfeo was a kinge’).

The text probably began at A, f. 299^{vb}, l. 1; f. 299 has been cut out, leaving a stub: Margaret Connolly and A. S. G. Edwards, ‘Evidence for the History of the Auchinleck Manuscript’, *The Library*, 7th series, 18 (2017), 292–304 (294–5).

¹⁹ A, f. 261^{ra}.

²⁰ A, f. 261^{ra}, l. 22.

²¹ A. J. Bliss, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1–46’, *English and Germanic Studies*, 5 (1952–3), 7–14 (12); *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss, xv, xlv–xlviii, 52; *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, 42.

²² Bliss, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1–46’, 13–14.

²³ Bliss, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1–46’, 12.

²⁴ Bliss, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1–46’, 7–11.

²⁵ Lerer, ‘Artifice and Artistry’, 94; *melody* argument at 102, implicitly restated at 106.

²⁶ For example, Sarah Elliott Novacich, ‘Inaudible Music’, in Robert J. Meyer-Lee and Catherine Sanok (eds), *The Medieval Literary: Beyond Form* (Cambridge, 2018), 141–58 (143–4); Piotr Spyra, ‘The Terror of the Threshold: Liminality and the Fairies of *Sir Orfeo*’,

Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 46 (2017 for 2015), 57–72 (63, 68–9); Catherine Batt, ‘*Sir Orfeo* and Middle English Romance as Creative Re-Reading’, *Kunapipi*, 25 (2003), 102–10 (103, 109); E. C. Ronquist, ‘The Powers of Poetry in *Sir Orfeo*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 64 (1985), 99–117 (99–100). Frederick Porcheddu did briefly lay out Bliss’s procedures, assessing the edition as an edition, in ‘Editing the Auchinleck: Textual Criticism and the Reconstruction of a Medieval Manuscript’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1994), 123–9, 275–6.

²⁷ A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge, 1987), 69.

²⁸ *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury

<<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-orfeo>> [accessed 1 June 2021]. Similarly, Elaine Treharne follows Bliss’s approach in her edition of the poem in a widely-available anthology for students: *Old and Middle English c.890–c.1450: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Treharne, 3rd edn (Chichester, 2010), 550–2.

²⁹ *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, 22–3, 42.

³⁰ *Early Fiction in England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Chaucer*, ed. Laura Ashe (London, 2015), 317.

³¹ *Sir Orfeo*, 325–8, H311–14, B327–30; 453–6, H415–18, B440–3.

³² *Sir Orfeo*, 327–8, B329–30, where it coordinates with through-rhyme; 471–2, H434–5, B460–1; 529–30, H478–9.

³³ Ruth Evans, 'Chaucerian Rhyme-Breaking', in Helen M. Hickey, Anne McKendry, and Melissa Raine (eds), *Contemporary Chaucer across the Centuries* (Manchester, 2018), 56–73. See also Daniel Sawyer, *Reading English Verse in Manuscript c.1350–c.1500* (Oxford, 2020), 113–17; and Eric Weiskott, *Meter and Modernity in English Verse, 1350–1650* (Philadelphia, PA, 2021), 164.

³⁴ *Sir Orfeo*, 205–6, B207–8; 595–6, H502–3, B588–9.

³⁵ *Sir Orfeo*, 51–2, H49–50, B43–4; 63–4, H61–2, B53–4.

³⁶ *Sir Orfeo*, 177–8, H173–4; 335–6, H321–2, B335–6; 405–6, H375–6, B392–3; 485–6, H444–5, B474–5.

³⁷ Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, 66–70.

³⁸ *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss, xvi and 57, n. to l. 44; Rhiannon Purdie, 'King Orphius and *Sir Orfeo*, Scotland and England, Memory and Manuscript', in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson (eds), *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, 2018), 15–32. See also Allen's remarks on memorial transmission in her edition of *King Horn*, 25, 30–2.

³⁹ For explorations of the particular interests of B with reference to its romances, see P. R. Robinson, 'A Study of Some Aspects of the Transmission of English Verse Texts in Late Mediaeval Manuscripts' (unpublished MLitt thesis, University of Oxford, 1972); Rory G. Critten, 'Bourgeois Ethics Again: The Conduct Texts and the Romances in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61', *Chaucer Review*, 50 (2015), 108–33; and Masaji Tajiri, 'Romances in MS Ashmole 61, with Particular Reference to *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Cleges*', in

Yoshiyuki Nakao and others (eds), *Text, Language, and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Keiko Ikegami* (Tokyo, 2007), 224–35. A has similarly attracted study for its own sake: see for example Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge, 2005), 104–47, and, for studies capturing and advancing the state of the topic up to 2016, Susanna Fein (ed.), *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives* (Woodbridge, 2016). Michelle De Groot has sketched out this interpretative route with reference to all three witnesses taken individually: ‘Compiling Sacred and Secular: *Sir Orfeo* and the Otherworlds of Medieval Miscellanies’, in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson (eds), *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, 2018), 191–208. Scholarship has long recognized the legitimacy of this approach, which requires no specific or new theoretical underpinning: it is noted and taken, for instance, in Longworth, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel’s Art’, 3.

⁴⁰ Elliot Kendall, ‘Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny in *Sir Orfeo*’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 35 (2013), 289–327 (289–90).

⁴¹ For example, Felicity Riddy, ‘The Uses of the Past in *Sir Orfeo*’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 6 (1976), 5–15 (5); Neil Cartlidge, ‘*Sir Orfeo* in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 26 (2004), 195–226 (195); Danielle Howarth, ‘Making It through the Wilderness: Trees as Markers of Gendered Identities in *Sir Orfeo*’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 56 (2020), 84–106 (84).

⁴² Some parts of the extended metaphor of ancestry used to discuss manuscript transmission can invoke a history of prejudice: Tom White, ‘National Philology, Imperial Hierarchies, and the “Defective” *Book of Sir John Mandeville*’, *RES*, 71.302 (2020), 828–49; see also the extended treatment of this topic in Yii-Jan Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts* (Oxford,

2016). I can, however, find no other form of words nearly so understandable as the descent metaphor. I certainly do not argue here that there is any benefit in speaking of the ‘advanced corruption’ of H and B, as Bliss repeatedly does (*Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss, xv, xvi).

⁴³ See discussion in Angus McIntosh, ‘Two Unnoticed Interpolations in Four Manuscripts of the *Prick of Conscience*’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 77 (1976), 63–78.

⁴⁴ The copies in Chicago, University Library, MS 564 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson poet. 141 are cognate. Parts of Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 197 were copied directly from Cambridge, University Library, MS Mm.ii.5. The copy in New Haven, Beinecke Library, MS Takamiya 24 might descend directly from London, British Library, MS Egerton 2726. For discussion see Richard Beadle, ‘Geoffrey Spirleng (c.1426–c.1494): A Scribe of the *Canterbury Tales* in His Time’, in P. R. Robinson and Rivkah Zim (eds), *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays Presented to M. B. Parkes* (Aldershot, 1997), 116–46; and Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510* (Cambridge, 2014), 45–63.

⁴⁵ *Sir Orfeo*, 47–50; Robert Allen Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, 2005), 59–60; Hanna, *London Literature*, 130.

⁴⁶ Weber, “‘Smothe and plain and al grene’”; Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 93–5; Spyra, ‘The Terror of the Threshold’, 65.

⁴⁷ Ad Putter, ‘The Influence of Visions of the Otherworld on Some Medieval Romances’, in Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (eds), *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages* (London, 2007), 237–51 (237–9, 249–50); Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 87–96.

⁴⁸ Lerer, 'Artifice and Artistry', 102; Cartlidge, 'Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld', 209.

⁴⁹ John J. McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity: Literary Comparisons in Chaucer and Other Late-Medieval Writing* (Madison, WI, 2000), 116–18.

⁵⁰ Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, 60; see also 24–5.

⁵¹ Riddy, 'The Uses of the Past in *Sir Orfeo*', 10–11.

⁵² *Milk-white* appears elsewhere in A, in the only known copy of *New Index of Middle English Verse* 2602.3 / *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* 4123 (A, f. 259^{ra}, l. 1) and in *King Horn* (A, f. 323^{rb}, l. 40); in the alliterative *Wars of Alexander*, written at some point between c. 1350 and c. 1450, an angel recommends that Jerusalem's inhabitants receive Alexander the Great in 'mylk-quyte clathis': *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, EETS, S. S. 10 (Oxford, 1989), 1621. *MED* lacks an entry for the compound, but *OED*'s entry, s.v. 'milk-white' has other Old and Middle English examples.

⁵³ Howarth, 'Making It through the Wilderness', 104–5.

⁵⁴ *MED*, s.v. 'apert', sense 1b.

⁵⁵ William Langland, *Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best: An Edition in the Form of Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975), Prologue, 2–3.

⁵⁶ Edward D. Kennedy, 'Sir Orfeo as *rex inutilis*', *Annuaire mediaevale*, 17 (1976), 88–110; A. S. G. Edwards, 'Marriage, Harping and Kingship: The Unity of *Sir Orfeo*', *American*

Benedictine Review, 32 (1980–1), 282–91; Oren Falk, ‘The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30 (2000), 247–74; Taylor, ‘Sir Orfeo and the Minstrel King’; Kendall, ‘Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny’.

⁵⁷ *Sir Orfeo*, 24; Bliss, ‘*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1–46’, 14. The -e of ‘telle’ could elide into the vowel of ‘of’.

⁵⁸ H, f. 10^r; B, f. 151^r.

⁵⁹ Edwards, ‘Middle English Romance’, 104.

⁶⁰ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York, 2000), 77–98.