

GROWING MAD: PLANT BEING AND THE MEDIEVAL HUMAN IN *SIR ORFEO*

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Abstract

In the Middle English Breton Lay *Sir Orfeo*, the eponymous hero describes his wife's madness as her becoming "wyld and wode" [wild and wooden]. An adaptation of the Orpheus myth in the popular romance genre, the poem relates the abduction of the queen by a faerie king from a Thracian orchard and her husband's subsequent abdication from and return to the throne. Existing approaches to the poem typically link Heurodis' madness and subsequent silence to nonhuman worlds, yet overlook Orfeo's immunity to the touch of madness. Other paradigms understand madness as demonic possession (Doob 1977).

Though sensitive to the link between madness and dehumanization, these readings neglect the unequal apportioning of wooden madness between Heurodis and Orfeo. The poem's codes of categorization, relying on human-botanical spaces and bodies, thereby invite ecocritical queries of the principles of division and identity (Chen 2012, p. 40) which produce Heurodis' madness as nonhuman being. Therefore, I investigate how literary imaginations of madness as a mode of plant being test the medieval concepts of humanness by elucidating the "thriving" (Chen 41) enacted by the mad plant-woman and the nonhuman beings who cohabitate at the peripheries of medieval society.

Deploying a postumanist framework grounded in critical plant studies and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, I argue that *Sir Orfeo* figures madness as a portent of the possibility of community at and beyond the margins of the human category. In making this analysis, I develop an image of plant life termed the *conspiracy of plants* through which aforesaid community is read as both welcoming (of exiles) and threatening to conventional hierarchies of medieval society.

Turning to Orfeo and Heurodis's response to her experience, I show that the "human" nevertheless remains an object of fraught attachment for these characters. Although both experience humanity as a dialogue with the nonhuman, Heurodis approaches humanness as a provisory strategy for understanding her experience in the orchard, while Orfeo insists on a belief that the human is a possible, achievable state. Ultimately, the poem's humanity is one structured primarily around ambivalence rather than firm senses of belonging or exile.

Lay Summary

The Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo* relates how Heurodis, the wife of the eponymous hero, encounters a faerie king when she sleeps beneath an orchard tree. The poem is unusual in portraying madness as plant-like, rather than bestial. In order to understand how this shapes our understanding of medieval ideas about humanness, I assess how posthumanist philosophy and critical plant studies helps clarify the way the poem constructs the human category through moments of plant-human hybridity. I argue that *Sir Orfeo* portrays humanness as unstable, and that forms of relating to the other-than-human posit alternative organizations of society outside aristocratic hierarchies. However, awareness of the possibility of other organizations does not prevent attachment to the idea of the human even by those who are dehumanised. Ultimately, this thesis claims that *Sir Orfeo* understands experience of the “human” as primarily ambivalent, rather than one of perfect expression or absolute rejection.

Preface

This thesis is original and independent work by the author, Scott Russell.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Lay Summary	v
Preface	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. The Wild Without: Plant Sociality at Orchard’s End	6
1.1 Plants, Humans, and the Limits of Agency.....	7
1.2 Dispatches from the Conspiracy of Plants	12
1.3 Conspiratorial Polyphony	19
1.5 Harping and the Haunting of the Fool	22
1.6 At the Ends of an Orchard World	25
1.7 Wod and Wyld	28
Chapter 2. The Impossible Possibility of the Human	32
2.1 Coping with the Nonhuman	33
2.2 Heurodis and the Fantasy of Trust	36
2.3 Orfeo Departs from Thrace	40
2.4 Arboreal Geometry	44
2.5 The Eerie Audience of Birds.....	46
2.6 The Hunt for “The Human”	49
2.7 The King’s Two Dozen Body Parts	53
2.8 <i>Sir Orfeo</i> II: Revenge of the Trees.....	55
Conclusion	58
Works Cited	61

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Introduction

Michel Foucault wrote that madness was “a direct relation between man and his animality, without reference to a beyond and without appeal.”¹ As he argued, for classical and medieval thinkers madness constituted such a radical break with their concepts of humanity that it was only by imagining the mad to have bestial characteristics that some understanding of madness could be achieved. Fixing madness to a point outside the human, even as it is realised in humans, is a hallmark of premodern thinking about insanity. Foucault’s understanding that premoderns could only think about madness by thinking about animality draws to my attention an often unremarked line in *Sir Orfeo*, an early 14th century Middle English romance. After Lady Heurodis has run wild in an orchard and been forcibly confined to her bedchambers by a host of knights and ladies in waiting, her husband King Orfeo proclaims she has gone “wode and wyld” [wooden and wild] (92), imagining her onset of madness as a transformation to plant matter. These lines appear only in the Ashmole 61 codex manuscript of *Sir Orfeo*; in Auchinleck, the oldest surviving copy, Orfeo observes that she has “Pat euer zete hast ben so stille / & now gredest wonder schille?” (103-104) [You have always been so calm, and now you grow wondrously unreasonable?]²

The difference in the two texts could be explained by their manuscript contexts. The Ashmole 61 codex is a mixed collection of romance and moral didactic tales focusing on sins and punishment.³ The neighbouring tales of the Ashmole *Orfeo* support this reading: “The

¹ *The History of Madness*, p. 148.

² “Wonder schille” is slightly ambiguous. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury give this phrase as “strangely shrilly” in their translation (*The Middle English Breton Lays*, p. 28).

³ See Michael Johnston, “Two Leicestershire Romance Codices,” p. 86.

Wounds and the Sins” is a methodical conjunction of the wounds of Christ with the seven deadly sins, while “Vanity” is an extended rhyme royal treatise on the eponymous sin. Given the later date of assembly and the implicit moralising in this arrangement, it is perhaps understandable that nearly all *Orfeo* scholarship has concentrated on the Auchinlek *Orfeo*. Certainly, Auchinlek seems less messy an object of study, given its earlier date and the absence of a prevailing moral framework.

Yet, I find this conclusion unsatisfying — or at least, incomplete — because of the wealth of other additions to the Ashmole *Orfeo* which are not readily accounted for by this explanation. For example, the Ashmole *Orfeo* opens with an extensive catalogue of Spring growth and beauty. Certainly, this is firmly within the generic conventions of the Breton Lay, but this catalogue is repeated again before introducing Lady Heurodis and her time in the Thracian orchard. While arguments about the intentions of the Ashmole *Orfeo* poet can remain only speculative, these additions point to a degree of autonomy from the moral didacticism to which it is often consigned. I am struck, then, by a series of questions: what claims about madness are being made through this botanical mode that couldn’t quite be addressed by the more conventional, bestial insanity of Chaucer’s Melibee or the languidness of Plowman’s drifting lollers? What’s more, how might this specific mode of dehumanizing the mad inform our understanding of medieval ideas about the human category?

In order to address these questions, I turn to the young discipline of critical plant studies. This field seeks to find “transformation in the conceptual and ethical status of plants”⁴ and so promises to offer a framework for thinking through Heurodis’s plant being. As several scholars have astutely warned, there is a risk that attempting to “think vegetatively” will in turn reiterate

⁴ “Introduction: Covert Plants,” p. 11.

human-centered ideas. Indeed, it is precisely this tension which I find most useful for my project. In one sense, I am hoping to fall into exactly that trap: attempting to think vegetatively, but in actuality thinking about the human. In another, by highlighting those elements of plant-thinking which are most suitable for this task, I am allowing, or rather requiring, this medieval romance to participate in quite contemporary efforts to make concepts of plants available to current scholarship.

This project will consider the texts of *Sir Orfeo* from the Auchinlek and Ashmole manuscripts, although I will focus primarily on the latter. I have made this decision on two bases: one, the Ashmole *Orfeo* demonstrates a greater thematic richness in figuring vegetation as well as madness; two, the differences in how these texts approach madness and the human facilitates a degree of specificity in understanding “botanical madness” that cannot be sustained by a single text. The first chapter of “Growing Mad” engages medieval in/human bodies through a posthumanist framework. This movement ‘beyond’ the human interrogates the particularities of plant matter recruited in literary dehumanizations while following Claire Colebrook’s call to avoid reiterating the human subject as an unexamined parameter of posthuman explorations of the other-than-human subject.⁵ In doing so, I consider Heurodis’ transformation from human to mad plant through what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have termed the “intensive,” schema of processes of becoming and relation that continually (re)compose what ‘is.’ Accordingly, I read Heurodis’s madness as a system of relational changes through which the poem conceptualizes madness as the threat of alternative formations of community at the edge of human society.

⁵ *Death of the Posthuman*, p. 140.

Deleuze and Guattari's enigmatic enthusiasm for weedy growth as "[filling] in the waste spaces left by cultivated areas," an existence of "[growing] between" through which "the weed always gets the upper hand,"⁶ directs this chapter towards cultivation and garden spaces. As Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga write, even the domesticated plant "[exists] on and beyond the outer reaches of our knowledge."⁷ Using the concepts of these and other authors, I will offer an image for plant thinking I call the "conspiracy of plants," emphasising secretive assemblages of different nonhumans which portend both destruction and negation. Doing so opens my analysis to questions of what Anna Tsing describes as the polyphony of worlding assemblages; that is, the formation of new ways of being incorporative of difference.⁸

In the medieval garden, horticulture disciplines plant life, creating a space characterized by what Seth Lerer calls "principles of community" which "point to the ideal of a city which promises both inner fulfillment and personal security."⁹ Tsing's call to examine the "multispecies attunements" which are made visible through attention to how all entities join their "melodies" in "unexpected moments of harmony or dissonance" with those of cohabitating species thus reframes questions of madness and conspiracy in terms of community and sociality. I read *Orfeo's* orchard, and the ympre-tre [grafted tree] below which Heurodis rests, as sites in which conceptual centres and peripheries are tested. I contend that reading through the conspiracy of plants conceptualizes exile from the human category not as purely disruptive destruction, but also as an alternative, persistent generation.

⁶ *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 17.

⁷ *Plant Horror*, pp. 7-8.

⁸ *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 158.

⁹ "Art and Artifice in *Sir Orfeo*," p. 96.

The second chapter of “Growing Mad” draws on these theorizations of non/human life to analyze their role in figuring madness in Sir Orfeo. Extending Barbara Lalla’s reading of Heurodis’ encounter with the Faerie King as an irruption in Orfeo’s narrative of his own authority, I consider the woods of Orfeo’s self-exile. Returning to Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy and the work of theorists Andrea Long Chu and Lauren Berlant, I argue that Orfeo’s journey into the woods is an extended attempt to produce and sustain a fantasy that it is possible to be perfectly human. In the woods wherein he finds “hys haule” [his hall] in a “tre that was hollow” (269-270), Orfeo eludes madness in this nonhuman world; however, his fantasy remains elusive until the trappings of an aristocratic hunt at last offer him the potential for satisfaction. Returning to Thrace, Orfeo finds his humanity promised by the throne he had so long ago abandoned. Yet his return is bittersweet, for the conspiracy of plants knows of his secret desire to become one of them.

Woodenness, as a mode of obscure being that cannot be fully excised and which posits alternative orderings, is an anxiety that all constructions of and depending on the ‘human’ are in a state of constant failure and, therefore, in ‘dialogue’ with the other than human. Orfeo’s frantic efforts to resolve the problem of Heurodis, from marshalling his armies to harping for birds, ultimately figures aristocracy less as a structure to organize humanness than a structure of a fantasy that humanness is possible within the fortifications of Thrace.

Chapter 1. The Wild Without: Plant Sociality at Orchard's End

This chapter advances the relatively simple argument that the central tension in the first half of *Sir Orfeo* is not whether or not the mad tree-woman Heurodis retains her humanity, but with whom she enters into community. To make this reading, I survey the nascent field of critical plant studies in the humanities, and outline how this field has heretofore understood plant life. The field has thrived in its early life on an interest in understanding the agency of plant life, often understood as denoting a capacity for action and intention typically overlooked by anthropocentric thought. This tendency does not, I argue, capture the full range of analysis which can be made of plant life in theory and in literature.

Working with a Deleuzian conception of the 'real,' I shift the terms of discussion away from agency into relation and sociality. In a parallel move, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of weeds as a secretive, affective register of the rhizome which highlights its capacity to negate as well as create. These concepts permit me to work without prevailing analytics of plant studies such as the recognition of agency or formation of new ideas of 'freedom.' Using Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's theorization of plant horror as sounding the foundations of human subjectivity, my reading of *Sir Orfeo* recasts the poem as a premodern horror lyric. I incorporate Andrew Culp's explication of the insurrectionary tendency of Deleuze's thought into the weed, christening the "conspiracy of plants" to refer to the secretive assemblages of different nonhumans which portend both destruction and negation. Doing so opens my analysis to questions of what Anna Tsing describes as the "polyphony" of worlding assemblages; that is, the formation of new ways of being incorporative of "different ways of

being.”¹⁰ In this light, I turn to *Sir Orfeo* and examine the relational changes through which Heurodis is remade as nonhuman. As I will show, the poem explores what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the “series of intensive elements... all of them positive, through which a subject passes.”¹¹ What is most threatening about Heurodis’s madness is not her ambivalent claim to humanity, but that she may pass into alternative forms of relation that are not exhausted by dehumanisation.

1.1 Plants, Humans, and the Limits of Agency

This study is deeply invested in the analytical capacities of plant studies. Within this young discipline there exists considerable variegation in the goals ascribed by thinkers of the vegetative. The most influential claim guiding the field is Michael Marder’s argument that thinking *about* plants without “aggravating the abuse of plants” requires thinking *like* plants.¹² Marder posits a quadripartite synthesis as the condition for this thinking:

(1) the non-cognitive, nonideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants
 (2) the human thinking about plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants.¹³

This thinking promises a new form of encounter with plant life, but one which requires the “[abandonment of] the familiar terrain of human and humanist thought.”¹⁴ Adopting Marder’s prerogative, Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira see plant studies as a framework for re-evaluating “principles of ethics, aesthetics, poetics, agency, cognition,

¹⁰ *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, pp. 24, 158.

¹¹ *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 20.

¹² *Plant-Thinking*, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

intentionality, communication, and language.”¹⁵ In a different volume, the same editors state that plant studies “seeks to redress the long-standing biases that have proscribed plants from the spheres of intelligence, agency, and ethics.”¹⁶ If this description of plant studies sounds familiar, it is doubtless due in part to a debt owed to animal studies. Similarly, and more contentiously than the above claims, plant studies has also inherited a blurring between the very human subjects of the discussion and the objects so discussed. Vieira *et al* indicate this methodological genealogy quite overtly, noting that plants are both increasingly recognised as having “attributes historically associated with animal life” as well as an “indeterminacy” that blurs boundaries between participants in “intricate exchanges between human and plant life.”¹⁷ Outwardly, these claims appear somewhat challenging to resolve. This tradition of plant studies shows that it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to regard plant life as meaningfully distinct from animal and human life, yet is also founded on redressing the historical exclusion of plants from political life. Ben Woodard has critiqued Marder and others on this basis, noting that their arguments sometimes rely on both positing an ontologically distinct relationship to life on the part of plants while simultaneously asserting the universality of life as a grounds for ethics.¹⁸ In my view, it is precisely this sort of paradoxical contention which allows plant studies to make claims on ostensibly human concerns.

In designating the limits of his analysis, Marder attends to how plant thinking refigures the human, but maintains that this thinking will shift the terms of human rather than offer alternatives. He argues that “all that we can hope for is to brush upon the edges of [plant] being,”

¹⁵ “Introduction,” pp. xvi-xvii, in *The Language of Plants*.

¹⁶ “Introduction,” p. x, in *The Green Thread*.

¹⁷ Ibid. See also the introduction to Nealon’s *Plant Theory*.

¹⁸ “Continuous Green Abstraction,” pp. 133-134.

and thereby “grow past the fictitious shells of *our* identity and *our* existential ontology.”¹⁹ For Marder, this essential incompatibility of plant being with major concepts for recognising plants as having political life (agency, intent, communication, to name a few) can be sidestepped by fusing ontology with ethics.²⁰ Plant thinking becomes an inherently ethical practice of “homecoming ... a harkening of ethical discourse back to the domain of life where it originated” made possible by respecting vegetal existence and avoiding practices that “disrespect... facets of ontophytology.”²¹ Nuancing Marder’s claims, Jeffrey Nealon speculates that plant studies could extend a quasi-Derridean project which would take human privileges scholars have tried to extend to plants and invert the terms, asking instead whether humans have “any less fettered access” to these “human privileges.”²² Where Marder requires of plant studies an ontological reconceptualizing of (for example) freedom that can work *with* plant freedoms, Nealon asks instead if plant thinking critiques the extent to which existing concepts of freedom reliably serve as universal foundations for ethics and politics for humans. In effect, Nealon’s plant studies asks what political life looks like *without* intention, freedom, agency, or others. As Mo Pareles has argued, although medieval and contemporary thinkers need not “share [critical] investment in progressive politics,” there is opportunity for coherence and clarity around shared *doubts*.²³ Thus, following Pareles, I “appropriate the structure of [the] distinction” Nealon makes between having political life (eg. having agency) and political existence in turning to the medieval human.

Plant studies’ investment in agency need not overdetermine all analysis. If its heritage in animal studies is examined more closely, I will argue, plant studies is fully capable of enacting

¹⁹ *Plant-Thinking*, p. 13. Emphasis original.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 10, but see also 181-185.

²¹ *Ibid.* 182, 185.

²² *Plant Theory*, p. 13.

²³ “Jewish heterosexuality, queer celibacy? Ælfric translates the Old Testament priesthood,” p. 3.

Nealon's prescription to query the human through the plant. For this purpose I consider Karl Steel's work on the relationship between medieval humanness and animality, although I recognise that nominating a single work to serve as exemplary risks oversimplifying the historical relationships I seek to outline. However, Steel's thinking has been highly influential on my own, and in focusing on the relationships between norms of humanness and animality, as well as the enforcement of those norms, Steel's text is uniquely suited to this purpose.

Steel notes that his methodology has been highly informed by Judith Butler's concept of performativity. As he explains, he draws on her understanding of norms as produced by a "*stylized repetition of acts*"²⁴ to examine how cruelty towards animals shores up medieval norms of the human. Thus the 'human' lays sole claim to language and reason (among other capacities) for "itself only, through acts of violence against others that, by *routinely* suffering this violence, are designated 'animal.'"²⁵ Steel's great sensitivity to how the use of animals to construct and enforce notions of the human permits him to form a number of important claims concerning how "the arbitrariness by which humans distinguished their souls and bodies" from those of animals supported claims of human distinctiveness.²⁶ More interesting to my purpose is his determination that relationships amongst human and animal that fail to exist within the aforesaid frameworks of violence "dissolve the categories of human and animal," eventually offering ways of "imagining how humans might cease to project... their selves against other animals."²⁷ At one level, this claim is appealing: not all humans were violent towards animals, and so relationships without violence recuperate "humanity" by constructing an alternative set of signifiers. However, Steel's

²⁴ *Gender Trouble*, p. 179. Emphasis original.

²⁵ *How to Make a Human*, p. 21. Emphasis original.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 27.

sense of performative antinormativity depends heavily on the assumption that failure to embody a norm leads to the resignification of that norm.

Steel's stated intellectual tradition of Butlerian philosophy does not support this claim comprehensively. As Butler notes, by virtue of being idealised structures, norms are "finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody."²⁸ Indeed, this tension is necessary: in the instability of this impossible performance, the "contingent groundlessness"²⁹ of a norm becomes apparent. By reintroducing failure as a precondition of experiencing norms, I detect in Steel's work a troublesome, but useful, difficulty: namely, that if it is conceivable that there is nonuniformity in the experience of humanness, then failure to embody humanness cannot serve as the point of differentiation for those experiences because that failure *precedes* the experience. To the extent that I consider plant studies an heir to the some concerns raised by animal studies, I contend that navigating this problem to be of some importance to botanical thinking. The implications of this problem will be addressed more completely in the second chapter. For now, I will note that failures to be human do not *necessarily* propose alternative norms of being human nor destabilize prevailing ones. However, the poem's preoccupation with those failures, and the exhaustive narrative effort on resolving them, foregrounds the dialogues between the nonhuman and the supposedly human which inhere in each instance of failing to be human. What will become central to my analysis is the relationships to this norm that are produced through those moments of conversation and exchange.

In reading humanness as inherently approximated, my project is posthumanist in the manner prescribed by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. As she explains, "calls to move... 'beyond the

²⁸ *Gender Trouble*, p. 179.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

human' too often presume the originary locus... requires no further examination."³⁰ By attending to the role of humanness as a norm, and which relations to that norm are taken through approximations thereof, I seek to enact a modest achievement of her demand that posthumanist scholarship "[redirect]... the euro(andro)(anthropo)centric terms" through which the perspective of "post" humanism has been understood.³¹ Accomplishing this task will require a conceptual vocabulary that, as I have noted above through Nealon's discussion of plant freedom, is not robustly supported by most work in plant studies. Accordingly, I will turn to the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as recent work in plant horror, to describe a mode of plant reading informed by *Sir Orfeo*.

1.2 Dispatches from the Conspiracy of Plants

I turn to the work of Deleuze and Guattari for two reasons. First, I will argue that their concept of the "intensive" usefully facilitates a reading of Heurodis' transformation as primarily a change in systems of relations rather than an essential one such as that proposed by Doob's claim of demonic possession. Second, this relational change permits an examination of the literary recruitment of nonhuman matter in making her change understandable as "madness." In other words, Deleuze allows an examination of Heurodis's madness not only as motion away from the centres of *Orfeo*'s society, but also as incorporation of herself into new socialities that exist within and across the edges of those conceptual centres. In considering the position of these changes as enclosed by Thrace's many orchard borders, I argue that *Orfeo*'s orchard is a space in which conceptual centres and peripheries are tested.

³⁰ "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human,'" p. 216.

³¹ Ibid. 217.

To contextualize my use of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the intensive, and my later discussion of its role in relations to norms, it will be necessary to briefly outline its presence in their concept of the "real." They understand the real as having three components: the actual (what "is"), the virtual (what could be), and the intensive (how something becomes actual). As Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis explain, their 'real' is at once and equally "what is already assembled [and] the cloud of potentiality that hovers around this stratification" as well as the "operations of relation that enact these manifestations."³² The intensive, as a systemization of becomings, denotes the capacity of beings to affect one another and be affected, and in so doing to move into different, even new, stratifications of the actual. Understood in this manner, the intensive highlights two key analytic concerns: the bringing into being of other bodies, and an understanding of relation as responsivity. As Chandler and Neimanis qualify, responsivity is "neither active nor passive, neither purely intentional nor mechanical."³³ By bracketing away questions of passivity and activity, the intensive facilitates an avenue of inquiry that is not constrained by the demands of agency noted earlier in this thesis. This is not to suggest that questions of agency are of little importance or value, but rather that the prevailing focus on agency and intentionality in plant studies has limited somewhat the range of analyses possible within the discipline. As I will show below, plant studies is capacious to other sets of assumptions concerning analytical strategies and priorities.

Deleuze and Guattari are famously interested in plant life's participation in the actualization of forms of thought. The most direct example of this interest is their opposed models of the tree, an image of hierarchical thinking, and the rhizome, a relational model which

³² "Water and Gestationality," p. 70.

³³ Ibid. 71.

“connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature.”³⁴ However, the rhizome must not be regarded as a static arrangement of connections, for it “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overflows,” an indeterminate structure of recombination operating through “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots... defined solely by a circulation of states.”³⁵ The rhizome’s elevation of connectivity has proven the source of much careful thinking in plant studies,³⁶ with the notion of growth forming a major thematic concern. Deleuze and Guattari are at pains to clarify that the rhizome cannot be understood as uniformly trending towards the positively affective transformation; indeed, they explain that “[the] rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed.”³⁷ As they illustrate, weeds are figures of unseen, inevitable destruction: “The weed is the Nemesis of human endeavor,” the battle against which is hopeless because “... [e]ventually the weed gets the upper hand.”³⁸ The weed wins precisely because it thrives in the margins, “fill[ing] the waste spaces left by cultivated areas,” forever “grow[ing] between.”³⁹

Although Deleuze and Guattari did not form the connection explicitly, rhizomatic weeds have much in common with their notion of the secret. The secret, as they argue, relates to a content that is “*too big* for its form,” and thereby has been isolated or disguised lest it be disclosed.⁴⁰ Like rhizomes, secrets are non-teleological, but in the coming to know *of* a secret,

³⁴ *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See: Stark, Hannah. “Deleuze and Critical Plant Studies.”

³⁷ *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 7

³⁸ *Ibid.* 17-18. Deleuze and Guattari are here citing Henry Miller, in Henry Miller and Michael Fraenkel *Hamlet* Carrefour, 1939, pp. 105-106. Citation courtesy of the authors.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 286.

“the perception of the secret must be secret itself.”⁴¹ Thus the *weed*, as a register for the negatively affective potential of the rhizome, becomes perceptible in the mode of a secret. Once one has perceived the weed, every point around or under which there is a margin — anywhere that is even slightly imperceptible — may disclose itself the home of the nemesis.

My interest in the negative dimensions of plants is not a radical innovation within plant studies. These potentials have been developed and preserved by scholars of plant horror, a genre Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga determine as formally organized around human “dread of the wildness of vegetal nature.”⁴² They theorize the basis of plant horror as the vegetable realm’s “exist[ence] on and beyond the outer reaches of knowledge.”⁴³ Furthermore, they argue that human attempts to grapple with plant nature “threaten the foundations of human subjectivity” by foreground vegetative beings as living and acting without “intent and purpose.”⁴⁴ To the extent that I am similarly interested in drawing out the negatively affective dimensions of encounters with plant life, I am therefore reading *Sir Orfeo* as a premodern horror text.

The problem for a straightforward reading of plants as monstrosity is that, as Marder explains, there is a “constitutive vegetal otherness in ourselves”⁴⁵ which is exteriorized in Keetley and Tenga’s notion of a radical, botanical alterity. Disavowal of the vegetative within human subjectivity leads, in Marder’s thinking, to the view of “vegetal beings” as “unconditionally available for unlimited use and exploitation.”⁴⁶ To account for the vegetal dimension of human consciousness and how disavowal thereof conditions relations to

⁴¹ Ibid. 287.

⁴² *Plant Horror*, p. 1.

⁴³ Ibid. 7-8.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 9.

⁴⁵ *Plant Thinking*, pp. 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 2-3.

nonhumans would, in Randy Laist's view, require that we challenge "our basic assumptions about what it means to be a living thing."⁴⁷ I am in agreement with these authors that plant life requires a rethinking of our assumptions concerning human life and subjectivity, but must nuance their claims with recourse to Nealon's conclusion these claims do not emerge from a remote critical purchase on the life of plants.⁴⁸ Rather, as he explains, "rhizomatic plant life will... offer tools for thinking our way forward" in a critique of *life*.⁴⁹ The necessity, as Nealon sees it, is that the category of life must be denaturalized, and thereby understood as a historical project which invests some humans with a greater degree of "life" than others. Thus, the great reluctance of vegetative life to submit to conventional frameworks of agency and intention proposes that such categories cannot reliably serve as guarantees of access to the status of living being.⁵⁰

Though model rhizomes, what weeds imply is far from the joy often attributed to the rhizomatic network. As Andrew Culp explains, affirmation and joy in Deleuze's thinking has long been over-estimated through elevation of connectivity and flat networks. Highlighting the role of rhizomes in forming assemblages in opposition to the state, Culp offers a term for describing the world-negating capacity of Deleuzian connectivity: the conspiracy.⁵¹ Appropriating Culp's logic, the particular form of plant thinking which I deploy in this project can thus be called a *conspiracy of plants*. This concept maintains the potential of the rhizome to undermine and destroy and emphasizes its secrecy. The weed can be any place, any time,

⁴⁷ "Introduction," *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ *Plant Theory*, p. 13. See above for a summary of one of Nealon's prescriptions.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 118-119.

⁵⁰ Philosopher Axelle Karera has similarly critiqued the presumed uniformity of life in posthumanist Anthropocene discourse ("Blackness and the Pitfalls of the Anthropocene Ethics").

⁵¹ *Dark Deleuze*, pp. 42-43. In this case, Culp does not fully distinguish between texts written by Deleuze and those written in collaboration with Guattari.

perpetually worrying at the edges of governing structures of power and human endeavor through growth *without* welcome to the garden. The conspiracy of plants also addresses Nealon's critique of Marder by insisting on the negative answer: the prevailing concepts of political life are understood as *not* guaranteeing a claim to humanity. The conspiracy of plants demands not recognition of the agency of plants, but instead analysis of what remains possible amongst conspirators without concepts such as agency.

Lastly, the conspiracy of plants does require that I nuance Culp's claims somewhat. His interest lies in returning Deleuzian thought to an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-state insurrectionary objective. He emphasizes modes of resistance such as sabotage, guerilla warfare, and breaking, to name a few.⁵² Culp's conspiracy is thus one constituted through active agents in opposition to the state. To this extent, his nomenclature justifies the concerns of Chandler and Neimanis that Deleuzian understandings of politics are still susceptible to reiterating Western Humanist dichotomies of active subject and passive object.⁵³ Although he does note avenues of resistance which do not depend on this sense of activity,⁵⁴ the conspiracy of plants requires more explicit attention to nondichotomous resistance if I am to avoid, as Clare Colebrook warns against, reiterating prevailing assumptions of the human in my analysis.⁵⁵

Vegetative reading with the conspiracy of plants is informed by, and parts from, Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of textual analysis. They write that there are "two ways of reading a book": either "as a box with something inside" that is discovered through some apparatus that illuminates this inner signification, or "as a little signifying machine" in which the question of

⁵² Ibid. 47, but see also 21.

⁵³ "Water and Gestationality," pp. 70-71.

⁵⁴ For example, his discussion of interruption on p. 50.

⁵⁵ *Death of the Posthuman*, p. 160.

“how does it work for [me]?” is primary.⁵⁶ As Daniel Haines summarises, these (and other) comments have generally been understood as a rejection of close textual analysis.⁵⁷ However, as Haines identifies, these anti-textualist arguments have overlooked Deleuze and Guattari’s uptake of Nietzsche’s concept of thinking as a *style*. He notes that Nietzsche understood ‘truth’ as located in “the simulacra” of “‘metaphors’ and ‘metonymies’” which is “‘poetically and rhetorically intensified,’” thereby elevating style of expression as central to thinking.⁵⁸ The task at hand then becomes to conduct a *minor reading* which affirms the immanence of desire⁵⁹ by “trac[ing] the ways texts... constitute major and styles, and reveal the way that the minor, when affirmed, undoes the major.”⁶⁰

The conspiracy of plants is an image of thought for this minor reading practice. It is suitable to this task, perhaps uniquely so, because of the logic of *secrecy* I attribute to it. To read with the conspiracy of plants is to insist on the affirmation of the minor within the major as intensified by the poem’s aesthetic⁶¹ features. For example, *Sir Orfeo* and Orfeo alike imagine Heurodis’s madness through the recruitment of nonhuman matter; later in the poem, Orfeo returns to Thrace shrouded grown through with moss. The conspiracy of plants rejects reading either moment metaphorically: that is, as a representation of something external. Metaphors remain important to think with, but must be understood as intensities: they exist as assemblages in which many different desires may draw the metaphor towards different affirmations. To understand the metaphor as a representation would be to suppress multiplicity, though neither is

⁵⁶ *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁷ “From Deleuze and Guattari’s Words to a Deleuzian Theory of Reading,” p. 531.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 541

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 548

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 549

⁶¹ I am taking a loose definition of “aesthetic” here as pertaining to both formal features (rhyme, diction, etc) as well as the interactions and relations thereamong in which ‘close reading’ is interested.

it desirable to decline to ascribe any particular affirmation to a metaphor on the basis of an inherent elision of other affirmations. The conspiracy of plants mutters its instructions quietly: observe how and where the poem intensifies the major reading, and look to how the the minor reading is similarly intensified. The conspiracy of plants asks us to read all moments for their secretive, horrifying virtuality. Find the cracks in the masonry, the overturned stones, the fallen logs, and grow there. Become the nemesis who waits there already.

1.3 Conspiratorial Polyphony

As I note in the introduction to this project, Heurodis's madness is understood by Orfeo through the imaginative recruitment of nonhuman matter. And, as Marder and others have highlighted, the perceived passive immobility of plants⁶² is fundamental to their position at the margin of what can be considered alive. Although the conspiracy of plants permits us to read this dehumanisation for the claims it makes about madness, a failure to attend to the conceptual structure of dehumanisation risks reifying it - that is, the conspiracy of plants endorses, to an extent, King Orfeo's contention that passivity determines inhumanity. The work of queer theorist Mel Y. Chen allows for the conspiracy of plants to understand the botanical conspiracy without smuggling in Humanist frameworks of resistance activity. In Chen's work, equations of human and non-human dehumanize the subject while paradoxically relying on the subject's human animacy. For example: the descriptor "vegetable," when applied to a human, indicates a "radical lack of subjectivity" while also preserving a position on an implied gradient of human subjectivity such that being a vegetable is notable.⁶³ It is not noteworthy for a vegetable to be a vegetable; it is noteworthy for a human to be a vegetable.

⁶² *Plant-Thinking*, p. 29.

⁶³ *Animacies*, p. 36, but see also 40-41.

Methodologically, Chen is less interested in the norms of these dominant animacy hierarchies, but rather their failings. The mapping of such “leakages,” Chen suggests, demonstrates that such a “conceptual hierarchy cannot but fail” in its continual interanimations⁶⁴ despite apparent fixities. As they explain, dehumanization operates through and within systems of “race, animality, and sexuality,” but in relying on the animacy of that which these processes objectify, there remains “possibilities for reanimation”⁶⁵ on the part of the dehumanised. Hierarchization of power and privilege across lines of human and plant therefore depends on a very particular and *fragile* construction of the human.⁶⁶ In this process of construction, the hierarchizing text must elucidate the “background assumptions or structures” that permit dehumanization to do its “imaginative work.”⁶⁷ While *Sir Orfeo* produces an imaginative (in its literal sense) dehumanization, but one that paradoxically relies on the human animacy of Heurodis, the construction of the human deployed by this poem must be far from the unitary, bordered humanness assumed by those who prosecute the dehumanisation.

Ultimately, Chen demonstrates that a kind of “thriving and sensitivity... must be preserved... to highlight the major locus of difference between what is desired” (higher positions on an animacy cline) and “what is undesired” (lower conditions on the animacy cline).⁶⁸ This slippage between negation and preservation of humanity permits the possibility for the subject to grow and thrive in spite of the nonhuman categorization enacted on them.⁶⁹ The conspiracy of plants must thus account for the conspirators in ways not determined or endorsed by the

⁶⁴ *Animacies*, p. 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 40

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 41

dominant hierarchies of power against which they conspire in the first place. In short, the conspiracy must understand growth and thriving without direct reference to, for example, the Thracian court.

Marder helpfully reminds us at this juncture that plants constitute their being through relations to inorganic others as well as fellow plants and animals.⁷⁰ This is not a pastoral, harmonious cohabitation - after all, “every gardener knows that some seedlings should never be planted next to each other” while others summon carnivorous insects to attack other, more aggravating, herbivores.⁷¹ Rather, the particular form of sociality amongst those marginal to Thracian society can be expressed through anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s concept of polypyphonic assemblages. In her explanation, polyphony refers to “both the separate melody lines and their coming together in unexpected moments of harmony or dissonance” on the part of different beings (plants, mushrooms, humans, etc) who cohabit.⁷² Like Deleuze’s rhizome, these assemblages produce no single, fixed future toward which they move uniformly;⁷³ instead, the open-ended and provisional relationships adopted by the polyphony retain a formless, unpredictable potential. By adopting the contributions of these thinkers, the conspiracy of plants retains its indiscernibility, its destructive potential, and its emphasis on the modes of being drawn up amidst complete exclusion from the centres of society, but is no longer determined by active modes of resistance. Rather, the conspiracy of plants threatens Thrace precisely because it offers another sociality without the governing principles of enforced order and harmony.

⁷⁰ *Plant-Thinking*, p. 41.

⁷¹ *Grafts*, pp. 29-30.

⁷² *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 158.

⁷³ *Ibid.* x.

1.5 Harping and the Haunting of the Fool

Inheriting Tsing's attention to melodies as the governance of unpredictability, I will first examine madness in *Orfeo* as a trace within music before proceeding to Heurodis's woodenness. I will show that *Orfeo* places sound and noise as central to the poem's understanding of the human category. However, the separation of human from nonhuman, and music from noise, is at best imperfect. Even the most perfect embodiments of 'human' are, in this sense, always in uncomfortable discourse with the nonhuman.

The Auchinlek *Sir Orfeo* introduces Heurodis's encounter with the otherworld with an effulgent if conventional depiction of Spring and its bounties:

Bifel it so in þe comiessing of May
 When miri & hot is þe day
 & o-way beþ winter-schours
 & eueri feld is ful of flours
 & blosme breme on eueri bouȝ
 Ouer-al wexeþ miri anouȝ (56-62)

[It happened at the beginning of May, when the day is merry and hot and winter showers have gone away, and every field is full of flowers and bright blossoms on every bough, everything grows aplenty]⁷⁴

Rosemund Tuve explains this trope as one expression of a literary tradition harkening back to late antiquity in which "[Spring] is... the creative ordering power which brings peace and order from chaos."⁷⁵ The peace and order that result here are not, however, the result of subjection to either a divine or aristocratic power, but rather an "insatiable fecundity [of growth] and generative power" on the part of Spring, realised through the conventionalized lists of plants and animals renewed by the season.⁷⁶ This preamble to Heurodis's arrival is not, however, alone in

⁷⁴ Line numbers for the Auchinlek and Ashmole *Orfeo* texts are those of Alan J Bliss (1966). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁷⁵ *Seasons and Months*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 23.

its foregrounding of order. The poem's opening declares its investment in traditions of lyric performance, noting that "Layes þat ben in harping / Ben y-founde of ferli þing" [Lays set to song have been based on marvelous things] (3-4). The strangeness of the contents of these songs has not been subdued by orderly arrangement in written record, as "We redeþ oft & findeþ y-write / & þis clerkes wele it wite" [We often read and find written [these lays], and this the scholars know well"] (1-2). Song is then capable of shaping the bizarre and the marvellous into a comfortable, knowable form, yet also preserves that strangeness which merited a lay in the first place.

This tension between maintaining yet constraining marvel requires some skill to handle well, for the poem describes the composition of the lays as "wrou[G]t" [wrought] (13). What's more, it seems that there is some craft required in being good listeners as well. The narrator proclaims:

Ac herkneþ, lordinges þat beþ trewe
 Ichil 3ou telle Sir Orfewe
 Orfeo mest of ani þing
 Loued þe gle of harping (23-26)

[But harken, true lords. I shall tell you of Sir Orfeo, who loved harping more than anything else]

The narrator is conscious of the variability of an audience's attention, and usefully reminds of us those moments when we must focus, lest we overlook a significant point. As a summons into rhetoricity with the narrator (alongside an imagined harper), this address asks us to *read* as lords. That is to say, the reader constructed by this poem is one invested, even implicated, in aristocratic concerns.

Music, we soon learn, is not just the king's greatest joy, but also his major quality as a king. His skill brings him respect and honour: "Siker was euri gode harpour / Of him to haue mich honour" [Certainly every harper as good as him would have much honour] (27-28). What's

more, the greatness of his harping comes not from a knowledge of the lay tradition, as “him-self he lerned for-to harp” [He taught himself how to harp] (29). Absent a teacher or a tradition, Orfeo’s beautiful harping (and the honour it brings him) comes from himself alone, made actual through the mediation of the harp on which he “leyd þer-on his wittes sharp” [laid thereon his sharp wit] (30). So sharp are these wits that there was “a better harpour in no plas” [there was nowhere a better harper] (32). In other words, Orfeo’s music is the tool by which he is afforded the honour and respect which he innately deserves by transforming an essential characteristic (wits) into a relational one (honour). I will return to this notion in the second chapter, and the role of the harp specifically. For now, three major points merit emphasis: song reorders chaotic spectacle but retains it within, skill in doing so is worthy of esteem, and that to be an audience to his harping is, to some extent, to affirm his aristocratic subjectivity. Similar praise is heaped on Orfeo in the Ashmole text, but it is placed anterior to the music of birds. In this text, the poem begins:

Mery time is in Aperelle,
That mekyll schewys of manys wyll
In feldys and medewys flowrys sprung
In grenys & wodys foules syng (1-4)

[It was a merry time in April, [when] much is shown to man’s liking: in fields and meadows flowers sprout, [and] in greens and woods the fools / fowl sing]

Song itself retains pride of place in the opening lines, but this is music crafted by the nonhuman world. Indeed, the joys of spring are here firmly anchored in the nonhuman world. The human “manys” who observes is here a watcher from afar of a work of wondrous albeit wild proliferation outside the control of humankind.

For all their chaos and danger, however, the woods still have some semblance of harmony indexed, at least partially, through the foules song. For David Abram, to acknowledge that the sounds produced by birds are song requires that we also acknowledge the corporeal

situation of the birds themselves. This acknowledgement produces “[a] new experience of [birds] as other centres of experience, as attentive, creative subjects in their own right.”⁷⁷ The poem’s opening lines, then, imagine a peripheral position of the human as audience. But, why enact this separation? Lesley Kordecki’s call that we “interrogate how[animal] voices help define or even isolate”⁷⁸ the human constitution of self helps refine our focus to the particular deployment of song - the ordering of sound - as an index of human subjectivity. The first ordering of chaos into music in *Sir Orfeo* is, pertinently, not human, but neither is its specific content intelligible. To recognise bird song as song, then, is to witness a dialogic formation of both human and non-human, but one whose particulars cannot be readily articulated into discourses neatly legible to humans. It is, in effect, the recognition of an at-best partially commensurable form of relationality outside humanity. As a consequence, a multi-sensory orientation is also produced by the foules homograph, metonymically linking fool and bird through song. The peripheral fowl/fool are made to ‘see’ the forces of exclusion which operate on them, whilst those remaining closest to the centre can choose to ignore such forces. The fool, then, is the result of conceptualizing sound as song: it is the exhaust of ordering logics, the abject that cannot but be expelled from a world rendered through song.

1.6 At the Ends of an Orchard World

Prior to her awakening as mad, Heurodis naps underneath an ympe-tre [grafted tree] in the Thracian orchard. As Seth Lerer describes, the ympe-tre (a horticultural designation) is a sign of human capacity to dominate, manipulate, and control nonhuman nature. For him, the tree

⁷⁷ “The Discourse of Birds,” p. 267.

⁷⁸ *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, p. 11.

“signals a human attempt to impose some order on the landscape”⁷⁹ through grafting, a particularly prized art. Curtis Jirsa emphasizes a very different graft: the attachment of classical arboreal lore to the medieval orchard itself. With reference to tree shadows in classical and medieval medical texts, he observes that these shaded regions carried a potent disruptive influence over their surroundings, ranging in consequence from headache, to persistent illness, to death via concealed snake.⁸⁰ The ympe-tre is, therefore, a figure of not inconsiderable anxiety; on the one hand, it signifies the superiority of humans over nature, yet on the other, it shadows human stability with the threat of its undoing.

The grafted tree, formed from the union of two different tree species, is a quite literal conspiratorial body. It is an ugly alien spectacle of surgically intertwined bodies, but the hybrid tree grows more rapidly and yields more fruit than the unhybridized cohorts. The ympe-tre, then, tests the conceptual tolerances of the orchard and human delineations, for as its yield increases, so too does the challenge it poses to the human systems of knowledge through which it was produced. When Heurodis sleeps beneath the tree, she experiences a vision of a Faerie King, who orders her to present herself at the tree at noon the follow day even though “nothing helpe [she] ne schall” [there is nothing that can help her] (172). Should she fail in this apparently unnecessary gesture, the Faerie will find her and “to-torn thy lymys all” [tear off her limbs] (171). The unimportance of her bodily integrity is insisted upon when the King departs, noting that even if she should maim or kill herself, “Yit schall [she] away with us be born” [yet shall she be born away with us] (174). Heurodis is left with a sinister warning: there are alternative forms

⁷⁹ “Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*,” p. 95.

⁸⁰ “In the Shadow of the Ympre-tre,” pp. 143-146.

of being Heurodis, but the Faerie King cares little for which she takes. Indeed, in being taken to the Otherworld, these other forms are synonymized to him.

After waking, Heurodis' madness is imagined through three descriptions: her running to-and-fro in the orchard (65), wailing and a "grete noyse" [great noise] (66), and tearing at her face until bloody (68) from which Orfeo assesses her *wod and wyld*. Given the attribution of song to birds and kings alike, Heurodis's noise would seem to indicate a positioning more distant from the human than even wildfowl. Her becoming both human and inhuman becomes a spectacle which attracts the attention of Orfeo's entire court, with dozens of knights and ladies beholding her actions (76) before the king himself arrives and is moved to weeping (87). As Chen explains, dehumanizing structures operate through this paradoxical insistence on humanity even as increasingly inhuman states are ascribed to the subject,⁸¹ for their (increasingly burdened) humanity remains the metric by which their distance from the "perfect" human subject is observed. Given the emphasis placed on Orfeo's faculty of song and Heurodis' noise, sound presents one exploration of how prevailing logics of humanity relate human and nonhuman bodies.

Theories of music and harmonic orders available to the poem's author have been investigated by Lisa Myers, who argues that the interweavings of music through the poem act as a refrain reminding *Orfeo*'s audience of the presence of divine order and foreshadowing the poem's "happy" ending.⁸² As she writes, the most eminent musical theories were those of Boethius, who categorized music into three spheres. The music created by voices and instruments was the lowest such sphere, but it retained the capacity to express through harmonies

⁸¹ *Animacies*, p. 41.

⁸² "The Intersection of Music Philosophy, Performance, and Genre," pp. 121-22.

the proximity of human bodies to divinity originally found in the garden of Eden.⁸³ Thus, when Orfeo's great skill at harping allows him to sound a "blyssedfull note of paradys" (39), he shares in the capacities of birds and Spring to order a world through artifice, but an ambiguity remains as the centre of this worlding his artifice enacts. While Orfeo's divine harmonies would ostensibly take a cosmic centre, therefore placing the material world (including Orfeo and his kingdom) at the periphery, his exile in the wilderness instead sees him centre his own aristocratic rule over human and nonhuman life.

While Boethian musical theory defines conceptual centres, noise defines conceptual liminalities. Michael Uebel's work on the acoustics of *Sir Orfeo* is illuminating, for as he explains, sound demands a sensitization of both the body producing sound as well as the body that senses it. As Uebel notes, "the audible other [is] a sonic field surrounding the self, unsettling it at the same time that it defines the distance between self and other, outlining the territory of the familiar."⁸⁴ The unsettling fact, for Uebel, is the acoustic other's intrusive piercing of the self, to show otherness by destabilizing interior and exterior. Heurodis's noisiness is, then, an interdiction in the harmonic systems of meaning through which produce relations through hierarchical orderings. This noise both proposes an alternative and demonstrates the failures of the prevailing system in causing that which cannot or was not ordered to well up, to spill out and show that such systems have not exhaustively captured all sound and, hence, formation of worlds.

1.7 Wod and Wyld

When the king of the Ashmole *Orfeo* sees his wife, he declares:

⁸³ Ibid. 124-125.

⁸⁴ "Accoustical Alterity," p. 351.

And euer þou ast be meke & myld;
 Thou are be-com wod & wyld.
 Thy flessch, þat was wo whyte befor,
 Wyth þi nayles þou hast torn
 Thy lyppes, þat were so bryzt rede
 Semys as wan as þou were dede
 And þi fyngyrs long & smale
 The be bloody & all pale (91-96)

[Though you have always been meek and mild, you have become wooden and wild. With your nails, you have torn your white skin. Your lips, which used to be so red, are now pale. And your slender fingers are bloody and pale.]

The poet offers an aesthetics of oscillation here, moving back and forth between two opposed, even contradictory, images. Orfeo reads Heurodis as nonhuman, but in this anxious vacillation he tests a series of expressions by which her nonhumanity can be expressed in a less-threatening form. In short, mildness may have given way to madness, but this rhyme refuses a neat segregation between the two categories. Moreover, this technique inverts the earlier structure by which music contained and preserved traces of madness and the nonhuman. Here, Heurodis's madness and her increasingly suspect humanity are ushered in by, and provide an echo of, her very human mildness.

Orfeo is, however, not particularly successful. Through the catalogue of injuries, Orfeo reads her not as an entire entity but an accumulation of subunits whose perceived togetherness is as uncomfortable as her nonhumanity. Thus, Orfeo is devastated by both the abundance of blood on her face and hands, and the absence of blood from her lips. The signs of life he sees are at once too visible and not visible enough. In this sense, I read this as a moment when the text is attempting to speak with itself, and in doing so, makes discernible the inherent instability of the human category as a concern of poem and king alike. Recall that the poem has earlier asserted that skillful use of rhyme and melody is the technique by which Orfeo can produce and enact order on chaos whilst preserving it to the extent that poetry facilitates a shared experience of

paradise. Here, this structure is being thrown against its purported purpose: Orfeo's rhyming, by virtue of *being rhyming*, produces the opposite effect. Human order withdraws from the wild chaos it contains.

The end of Orfeo's catalogue grants him the same sense of self-reflexivity as the poem takes on. He wails, "And þi louffsom eyn two / Loke on me as j wer þi fo!" [and your loving eyes look on me as if I were your foe] (109-110). Orfeo's anxious, almost frantic attempts to understand what has happened to Heurodis culminates in a tremulous recognition of himself. The poem has earlier drawn out a tension in song as both human and nonhuman, sane and insane; now, Orfeo confronts himself as equally subject to this lyric structure. In this moment, however, the poem is ultimately ambiguous as to what Orfeo has come to fear. Thus challenged, we can read this scene as Falk does, and see in Orfeo's recognition of himself a fear that his specific performance is failing - that Orfeo can no longer perform the role of man, person, and King, and will be ousted by his nobles. This reading offers much, particularly in a historicist analysis such as Falk's, but it does require a subordination of the poem's reflexivity to Orfeo's. I would, in essence, be allowing the language of aristocracy to overdetermine Heurodis's experience. Recalling Steel's explanation of humanness as a "doing," an obverse claim is possible: what Orfeo fears is not that he will be expelled from aristocratic power and the centres of human society, but rather that the 'human' could change around him. As above, this reading is not without advantages. Yet, the overlapping moments of reflection suggest to me that either reading, for all their strengths, relies on forming conclusions which negate the very tension that prompted them in the first place. To submit either reading would be to take on Orfeo's way of reading in which a definitive, knowable form must emerge from this upsetting ambivalence.

It is here at the moment when Heurodis's (and Orfeo's) humanities are in doubt, and where a particularly botanical form of madness proves so intractable, that vegetative reading is most useful. I have earlier argued for a conspiracy of plants, emphasizing responses to approximation that do not generously return to recuperate that norm but instead form new socialities at and across these conceptual boundaries. Removed from the need to reform these centres, such socialities retain an affective multiplicity which allows the formation of positive, affirming assemblages (Chen's growth and thriving) as well as negative, destructive ones (the conspiracy of plants). With this vegetative reading, the tension here can be recast in terms which do not require that Heurodis's humanity be regarded as completely exhausted by Orfeo's imagination. What Orfeo fears is not the precise form that Heurodis's new, mad being takes on, but rather that this being remains fully capable of sustaining relations amongst any and all others who inhabit the margins of the human. Through the terror of the rhizomatic underworld, the governing tension of the second half of the poem, read botanically, is not that Orfeo could fail to rescue Heurodis, but that Orfeo's trust in the world to affirm his humanity was, at best, misplaced.

Chapter 2. The Impossible Possibility of the Human

The previous chapter developed a vegetative reading practice termed the ‘conspiracy of plants.’ By reading Heurodis’s madness as a system of relational changes which reconceptualize her as nonhuman matter, and by deploying the conspiracy of plants as an image of plant thinking, I understood Heurodis’s madness as conceptualizing the presence of alternative worlds at the margin of the human. This chapter offers a similarly simple argument. Orfeo, having become aware of the secret conspiracy of plants, ventures into the woods of Thrace to find objects capable of sustaining his fantasy that he does not want to be amongst the conspirators. What he wants most all is, then, to persist in his belief that it is possible to be truly, fully human.

To form this claim, I will return to performativity as deployed by Karl Steel, and identify a generative limitation of the concept as theorized by Judith Butler. Specifically, performativity does not offer a satisfactory conceptual vocabulary for differentiating the experience of ‘humanness’ for those whose performances are always already imperfect. Drawing on theorist Andrea Long Chu and a Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of ‘desire,’ I argue that Orfeo and Heurodis are alike in experiencing a desire for the nonhuman, but differ markedly in their response to that experience. Heurodis trusts Orfeo to be receptive to her desire to affirm her humanity, a trust she will sadly see to be misplaced. Orfeo, in contrast, is chiefly anxious that the trust he places in the world to affirm *his* humanity is similarly foolish. Orfeo therefore responds to his desire to be nonhuman by elevating a desire to not have that desire. My final claims in this chapter concern which objects can offer Orfeo what Lauren Berlant calls fantasy, the “idealizing theories and

tableaus about how [he] and the world ‘add up to something.’”⁸⁵ The object most productive of Orfeo’s marvellous fantasies of the human turns out, in the end, to be aristocracy itself.

2.1 Coping with the Nonhuman

Given the poem’s emphasis on Heurodis’s madness, it is unsurprising that critics have sought to place Orfeo’s own mental state. For Oren Falk, Orfeo is methodically rational in his behaviour in the forest, carefully extricating himself from an untenable court position and returning only when he has measured himself fit to retake control over Thrace.⁸⁶ Dorothy Yamamoto, in comparison, reads Orfeo’s kinship with forest animals as denoting his oscillating between the madness of the inhuman wild man and his rational, human impulse.⁸⁷ My point here is not that these critics have undertaken conceptually flawed approaches, but that the very necessity to debate this point suggests that Orfeo is both far from a reliable demonstration of humanness in the woods and able to interpose some method of asserting his humanity. Thus Corinne Saunders’ twin claims that Orfeo maintains his human connection to Thrace through the harp⁸⁸ and that his bestial madness “demonstrates his own familiarity with the topos of the forest as landscape of lament and loss”⁸⁹ are not at all contradictory. Rather, in demonstrating the imperfections of Orfeo’s claims to sanity within the forest, and the according discourse with the nonhuman, Orfeo’s humanity is approximate at best.

In the first chapter, I drew on Karl Steel’s theory of the human as a doing, itself a concept theorised by Judith Butler. In that account, I critiqued Steel for failing to account for Butler’s

⁸⁵ *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ “The Son of Orfeo,” pp. 255-256.

⁸⁷ *Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature*, pp. 144-145.

⁸⁸ *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, pp. 137-138.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 137.

own insistence that all performances fail to embody the human and are, therefore, non-normative. As Andrea Long Chu identifies, “the criterion for distinguishing” performances that resignify from those that reconsolidate “cannot be that the first set is normative... on the contrary, if norms are impossible to embody, then *both sets are nonnormative*.”⁹⁰ If “exceptions” are then understood as the function of a norm, there is ambiguity in Butler’s concept as to how these states of failure can be differentiated.

Absent the space to conduct a complete survey of Butler’s philosophy, I rely here on Mikko Tuhkanen’s exploration of the links between performativity, norms, and Deleuzian concepts of the real. As he explains, “performativity does not allow us to think forms of existence that diverge from what is currently available” because “performativity has trouble conceptualizing becoming as... open and unpredictable.”⁹¹ Although Butler understands performativity as allowing “an open future of cultural possibilities”⁹² that is ultimately unpredictable, the “possible is realised as a form that, despite its insubstantiality, has been made conceptually available.”⁹³ Because the newness that performativity would create is already understood as alternatives, these pre-formed concepts must already be available and would be unable, therefore, to alter existing norms. What’s more, the future after failed embodiment is already determined along trajectories towards preformed alternative objects. There is, in this sense, very little of the present left after the failed performance.

By drawing on Tuhkanen’s account I do not mean to reject performativity as a theory, nor offer a critique of the political practices which have drawn on it. Rather, it is necessary to

⁹⁰ “After Trans Studies,” p. 114 footnote 4.

⁹¹ “Performativity and Becoming,” pp. 20, 6.

⁹² *Gender Trouble*, p. 93.

⁹³ “Performativity and Becoming,” p. 20.

understand performativity's opportunities as well as its limitations. That is to say, performativity makes visible the existence of "the human" as a real, conceptual structure, and illuminates the dependence of the human on concretizing borders with the animal and the plant. Where performativity is less effective is in describing relationships taken to these norms.

The conspiracy of plants requires attention to those untended gardens that have been heretofore overlooked. In this sense, my project here mirrors that of my engagement with plant studies: not as a critique or evaluation of performativity, but the formation of a limitotropic understanding of the concept. To extend the concept of the conspiracy of plants, I am proposing an alternative set of assumptions, not as replacements or superordinations of those deployed by preceding scholars, but rather as avenues to make inquiries of the text not accounted for by my predecessors. Equally, it is not my intent to argue that these limitations on performativity as a concept for thinking through constructions of the human mean that it is not an important, useful concept. Rather, I am interested to locate precisely those regions at which these analytics leave something behind, and assess a suite of analytic tools which are suitable to this situation. Thus, what I *am* suggesting is that, with the conspiracy of plants, a both-and approach is possible. The remainder of this chapter is therefore invested in exploring how the poem, having shown the potential for that which lies outside the human, continues to think through that which remains within it. I am guided in this project by Chu's emphasis on "how one *cope*s"⁹⁴ with the experience of an inevitably subordinate position.

⁹⁴ *Females*, p. 12. While Chu's work in this text is insightful and perceptive, I am not proposing an alignment between the concepts therein and Heurodis's (or Orfeo's) experience. Rather, I find her thinking generative in working through the challenges posed by Steel's deployment of performativity.

2.2 Heurodis and the Fantasy of Trust

In her woefully under-appreciated reading of *Sir Orfeo* and the politics of vernacular language in late medieval romance, Barbara Lalla notes that Heurodis's madness is an "interdiction in Orfeo's narrative of his own authority"⁹⁵ This reading is outwardly comparable to that of Oren Falk, who reads Heurodis's restraint by the band of knights as a devastating wound in Orfeo's political power. There is a subtlety to Lalla's reading which I find useful: it is the fact of Heurodis having gone mad which disrupts the story Orfeo tells about himself, distinct here from the story told about Orfeo by his courtly public. However, as much as Lalla's analysis usefully shows that Orfeo narratively produces himself in relation to Heurodis, it also overlooks how Heurodis produces herself. By analysing Heurodis's expert rhetoric in her chamber-prison, I will argue that she conceptualizes herself, or what she could be, through what Lauren Berlant refers to as "attachment" and "fantasy." However, these processes must also be understood as comings-together with Orfeo, and so also constitute invitations to him to reconceptualize *himself* in relation to her.

Orfeo's doubles down on existing social forms early in this episode. Distantly echoing the sonic haunting of song by the nonhuman, "When Orfeo herd þat tiding / Neuer him nas wers for noþing" [When Orfeo heard that news, he had never been worse off for anything] (97-98). The poem's ambiguity on this point unsettles Orfeo's position at the centre of Thracian society, for the exact sense in which Orfeo is "worse" are rather unclear. Is he, as Falk reads, thinking of his political position? Or is it more straightforward - he is emotionally devastated? His decision to surround himself with "wiþ kniztes tene" [with ten knights] (99) coheres with both frameworks, but in rhyming the rather unnecessary knights "tene" with the "quene" he runs to

⁹⁵ *Postcolonialisms*, pp. 211-212.

visit, the narrator imputes a third reading. Here, the danger Orfeo feels is not to himself as king, but to himself as a human. Summoning knights secures his authority publicly, as Falk argues, but it is also a securing of his securing himself against Heurodis.

The Ashmole and Auchinlek texts diverge here in two critical ways. One has already been discussed: in the Auchinlek *Orfeo*, the king does not proclaim to the crowded bedchamber that Heurodis has become “wode and wyld.” The second is more subtle. When first entering the bedchamber, Auchinlek introduces a short pause as Orfeo “bi-held & seyde wiþ grete pite” (101) [beheld her and said, with great pity]. For Ashmole, Orfeo instead “wepte, & seyde wiþ grete pyte” (86) [wept, and said with great pity]. Orfeo’s weeping truncates his recognition of his wife, a lachrymose obstacle to our own understanding of precisely *whom* he weeps for. That Ashmole’s Orfeo is more callous is born out in Heurodis’s piteous attempts to console him following his catalogue of her injuries and ailments. She first reminds him that “euer j haue louyd þe all my lyfe” (109) [I have loved you all my life] before attempting to assuage what seems to be a growing anger, proclaiming that “be-twen vs was neuer stryfe / neuer seth we wedyd were” (110-111) [there has never been strife between us / since we were married]. This Heurodis holds up the entire measure of her life to stave off his anger, simultaneously declaring that strife interdicts in this story of perfect harmony. Auchinlek’s Heurodis is less threatened, acknowledging the same life long love apposed to a much less severe recollection that “wroþ neuer were nere” [anger never came near us] (122).

Heurodis’s precision is often overlooked in readings of this scene. Even Caldwell’s highly sensitive reading treats Heurodis’s plea to Orfeo as overdetermined by its religious register. To my reading, Heurodis’s reproach contains within it an attempt to be welcoming to Orfeo, a careful request that he give her a reason to trust him. It must be recalled the Heurodis

has just been publicly restrained and confined to her bedchamber and that, having learned of these events, her husband has only wept and enumerated her many injuries to a courtly audience. As Falk observes, Heurodis has perishingly little reason to trust that Orfeo can adequately fulfill his duties as king and husband. Rather, by consistently positing herself in durable relation to Orfeo, Heurodis (re)produces herself as a partner to Orfeo, rather than as Queen. Her experience with the faerie king has decoded the relationships and arrangements of space (orchard, queen, Thrace) which previously grounded her. The cautious reaching out to Orfeo is thus a request to him that he be as generous in defining himself in relation to her as she has in defining herself in relation to him.

Heurodis, then, is attempting to understand what has happened to her, but she needs help. First, she is trying to find some formulation that makes her experience intelligible to Orfeo while knowing that any arrangement that has the feeling of stability and protection can only become so through moments of reproduction. Second, in a very literal sense she needs *help* to work through this - that as hurt and frightened as she is, she wants to believe Orfeo is a good king and husband. Lauren Berlant's understanding of desire and optimistic attachment provide an analytic vocabulary sensitive to the relationship between Heurodis's attempt to produce herself anew and her taking Orfeo as the object of these attempts. Two points from Berlant bear emphasis here. First: attachment is a kind of relation, but one that is not necessarily accompanied by an "experiential mode" that resembles desire, want, or need.⁹⁶ Attachment can, as she explains, produce affective experiences quite unlike the investment made in attachment itself. In other words, attachment may *feel* like doubt, or frustration, or disgust, or any manner of felt sense differing from the commonplace register of *wanting* something. What makes a relation to some

⁹⁶ *Cruel Optimism*, p. 13.

object an attachment is how that relation is understood to be meaningful; that is, how attachment to that object brings one out “into the world” and closer to that “satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene.”⁹⁷

Heurodis attempts to produce her being in a knowable form, then, through her attachment to Orfeo. This is not to argue that she envisions herself subordinately to him, or that her being is a derivative or reduced version of his. Rather, faced with a room bordered by seemingly nothing but doorways and knights, and having born witness to the conspiracy of plants that lies outside Thrace, Heurodis makes a difficult choice to provision herself with that *something* she cannot make on her own. She takes what is available in order to assert some sense of herself amidst the chaos of her confinement in the chamber.

Thus, the second point of emphasis: insofar as Heurodis invests in this attachment a sense of “[her] own or the world’s continuity,”⁹⁸ it constitutes what Berlant calls fantasy. She explains that fantasy “is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something.’”⁹⁹ In that sense, too, Orfeo’s attempting to reproduce his hall in a stump, his harping for animals, and his witnessing a silent audience of birds, are all attachments, although they do not outwardly provide him an experience of *being attached*. What Heurodis does here gives Orfeo a chance to reconceptualize himself as well. “Here is something you can be *for me*,” she pleads, “here is a fantasy of mine that you can live, if only you would try.” If he understood this, he makes no sense of it: he intensifies what has already been tried (martial defense) and nothing else. The conspiracy of plants reminds us, however, that there is an

⁹⁷ Ibid. 2-3.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 2.

unseen world below and around Thrace. Heurodis's offer to Orfeo, by disclosing the possibility of there being another way to be, has also disclosed the secret of the conspiracy. Her plea that he be something for her, therefore, shows Orfeo the subversive gatherings of the vegetal are already here, and perhaps more ominously, are ready to welcome him into their ranks.

2.3 Orfeo Departs from Thrace

Having failed to protect Heurodis, Orfeo declares his intent to depart from the city. He summons his barons, knights, and squires "of grete renonwnys" [of great fame] (204) to assemble before him. Repeating the poem's address to the reader but shifting its object to the known figures of his nobles, Orfeo

... seyd, 'Lordingys, be-for 3ou here
J wold orden my hyze steurd
To kepe my londys afterwerd
And in my sted be he schalle
To kepe my landys ouer-alle (206-210)

[said "lords, before you here I ordain my noble steward to protect my lands, and from henceforth he will take my place in looking over all my lands]

This scene, generally of critical interest for invoking the trope of the evil steward,¹⁰⁰ is notable to me for the many quite subtle doublings it deploys. In one sense, it echoes the publicity of Heurodis's madness. In another sense, directing his speech to the "lordynges" mirrors the poem's formation of an aristocratic readership early in the text — or, at the very least, a reader attentive to aristocracy. And in a third sense, Orfeo is, like the narrator and the aristocratic audience, directing his gaze to an absent, imagined party, in this case the steward. Orfeo's speech must thus balance on the edge of a very thin sword indeed. He insists on his personal authority as

¹⁰⁰ Falk's reading is an exception.

king, dictating the future for his lands (208, 210), held by a steward in his place (209), while in the same breath demanding his nobles transfer this relationship wholly to another.

The complex and precarious triangulation between himself, his lords, and his steward demands he flex that extraordinary lyric skill which has brought him so much fame and honor. Orfeo appeals to the privileged site of his declaration and the asymmetrical arrangement of speaker and audience — *be-for you here* — and extends this emphasis from the rhetorical present through the narrative he constructs of a future without him. The ‘afterward’ so important for the story Orfeo is, therefore, both an extension of the present arrangement of king and lords as well as one grounded quite outside that arrangement — that is, it is made present in the lyric fused by rhyme with the steward. By extending the space of his pronouncement across his entire kingdom and into an imagined future, Orfeo’s departure becomes an intensification of his authority rather than an abdication.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of desire and multiplicity usefully clarify how abdication strengthens aristocracy. As they explain, desire is not a relation of absence or lack but rather of affirmation. Indeed, desire is “a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it.”¹⁰¹ Thus, if one is said to ‘desire’ an object, one is not deprived of that object but rather engaged in a relation to *produce it*. Desire cannot act alone, however, for “there are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages”¹⁰² Eugene Holland summarises this concept thus: “desire is thus not a fantasy of what we lack: it is first and foremost the psychical and corporeal production of what we want.”¹⁰³ Because any entity exists as an assemblage of many desires (a multiplicity), desire is an

¹⁰¹ *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 154.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 229.

¹⁰³ “Desiring + Social Production,” p. 67.

index of changing *of* those assemblages through transformations they term “becoming.” They write that “multiplicities continually transform themselves into each other,” a fact they consider obvious because “becoming and multiplicity are the same thing.”¹⁰⁴ The significance of this comparison becomes clear when multiplicity is understood as “defined not by its elements” but rather by “the number of dimensions” it has through transformations of becoming.¹⁰⁵

Two important claims relevant to *Sir Orfeo* can be made on this basis. Firstly, assemblages change on the basis of desire. To desire the nonhuman, for example, is to transform one’s multiplicity in a way incorporative of the nonhuman. Desires in this sense do not necessarily *feel* like desire in the everyday sense of desiring sleep, or food, or companionship, because desire is not an interior psychic phenomenon. Desire is production: one must take steps to welcome the nonhuman. The second claim concerns the notion of becoming, and the relationship to “affective” experience. Let us take their description of becoming-animal as instructive: “becoming-animal does not consist in... imitating an animal,” and so it is clear that the human being does not ‘really’ become an animal.”¹⁰⁶ The becoming-animal is an experience of change in capacity for relation, for “you become-animal only... [by entering] the relation of movement and rest of the animal.”¹⁰⁷ As a concept of change, becoming is not a statement of bodily hybridity as some have argued,¹⁰⁸ but a statement which affirms a relation at both “poles” of that change. Becoming animal is not turning into a werewolf: by affirming a relation to an animal, becoming-animal is an affirmation of the desire to be human but in a different way. My argument is thus: Orfeo does not, at any point, desire to be nonhuman, although he is keenly

¹⁰⁴ *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 249.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 238.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 254.

¹⁰⁸ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, pp. xiii-xiv.

aware (thanks to Heurodis) that as a multiplicity, he is always constituted by a desire towards the nonhuman. Orfeo's taking on the wild man persona, his harping for animals, his dalliances with the faerie — these are all attempts to sustain his desire to be human *only*. What he wants most of all, in other words, is to *not want* to be part of the conspiracy of plants.

With this understanding, Orfeo's abdication and appointment of a steward need no longer assume the troubled relationship to his self-understanding that has long vexed critics. Discussions of the king-steward relation have generally focused on literary traditions in which stewards are figures of treasonous perfidy, but consensus remains elusive to exactly how this relationship informs Orfeo's decision. For example, Kenneth Gros Louis reads the nomination of the steward as an act of humility which ultimately confirms the esteem Orfeo placed in him; after all, "he discovers that the steward, like himself, has been faithful."¹⁰⁹ Edward D. Kennedy argues instead that the appointment of a steward is a decision governed more by emotional effluence than better judgement.¹¹⁰ Insofar as I agree with these critics that this moment is heavily laden with ambivalence, I would raise that one underlying assumption has not been examined: namely, that the anxieties governed by this moment can be addressed by extending their reflection on Orfeo across the entire text. In other words, to regard the tensions in this moment as coalescing around Orfeo seems to endorse his attempt to establish himself as a transcendental guarantee for Thrace. If we allow these ambivalences to speak not to Orfeo as a guarantee of his kingdom, but rather as tools through which Orfeo seeks to produce himself as king through abdication, Orfeo's becoming-animal is then not a refusal of humanness but an insistence on it.

¹⁰⁹ "The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile," p. 251.

¹¹⁰ "Sir Orfeo as Rex Inutilis," p. 93.

2.4 Arboreal Geometry

Orfeo enters the forest, travelling so far into the woods that he “wyst not wher he was” (242). The Thracian woods have, however, an odd geometry. Orfeo moves past trees, or temporarily within them, yet the space itself seems defined solely by its highly trafficked clearings. Moreover, once carefully observed and explored by Orfeo, each clearing gives way to yet another clearing within it, neither adjacent nor overlapping. Thus, his discovery of new groves, spaces, and circulations of bodies occurs through little more than a glance.¹¹¹ These woods are distinctively *fractal* - looking more closely at any given part produces only more of the same ratios, spiralling out ever wider and deeper. As a fractal space, the woods become dizzying and disorienting through Orfeo’s movement. Motion itself appears paradoxical, for the appearance of one’s surroundings repeats in each vignette, offering little variation on which navigation would depend. By freezing space in an unvarying pattern of iteration, Thrace’s woods are the complement to the Otherworld, where time is frozen.

Having been suitably dislocated by his entering into the environment, he proceeds to become tightly surrounded by the organic material of the woods, enveloping himself with “levys and gresse” [leaves and grass] (246) for concealment – from what is not clear – yet simultaneously “he sey not that hys herte lykyth” [he does not see what his heart desires/enjoys] (250). Orfeo, thus surrounded, is unable to take pleasure in the comforts of the green that Heurodis found so much to her enjoyment, and, in concealing himself, evinces fear of unknown other. Jacob Lewis has identified in *Sir Orfeo* a critique of nobility produced by concealment of its signs (clothing, royal beauty, cleanliness) so effective that nobility loses its utility. Yet as Hwanhee Park demonstrates, the same harping that to Lewis signals Orfeo’s class descent

¹¹¹ See lines 244-245, 254-255, 270-271.

reinscribes his royal authority on the animal world.¹¹² Unlike Heurodis, whose experience with the garden spaces is one of periphery, Orfeo constantly recenters himself and defines courtly borders around that spot. The harper king scavenges much, “dyge and wrote” that he may “have hys full of the rote” [digging and working (the soil) so that he can fill up on roots] (257-258) before finding in “a tre that was holow / there was hys haule, evyn and morow” [in a tree that was hollow there was his hall, night and morning]. By moving into this hollow tree and inhabiting it, Orfeo finds in its wooden barriers a courtly, domesticated space; that is, the tree is itself a space and a boundary in which another, privileged space can be recognised. More pointedly, this space is recognised at particular times - morning, night - which lay on either side of the “undrentyde” [midday] in which Heurodis naps and is abducted.

If Orfeo seems uncomfortable with this proximity, he has at least his harp to stave off the whispers of his woodland conspirators: “Jn-mydys þe wodde he sett hym dounne... and harpyd after hys awyne wyll” [amidst the woods he sat down... and harped as he pleased] (273-275). Suitably enchanted, the “wyld bestys” [wild beasts] (277) came to hear him play and be transformed thereby. Ultimately, “the bestys of þ at forest wyld / Com a-bout hym meke & myld” [the wild beasts of the woods go about him meekly and mildly] (279-280), performing precisely the characteristics Orfeo found so lacking in his wife (91). Having gone out into the woods to find himself, what Orfeo has continually, obsessively relocated is precisely the conspiratorial world of the nonhuman forever offering something recognisable as sociality, as a chance to live and grow and be in relation to another, but which remains definitively *not* Thrace.

¹¹² “The Importance of the Animal in Sir Orfeo,” p. 8.

2.5 The Eerie Audience of Birds

When Orfeo's playing ceases, the poem takes on an almost elegiac valence:

So mych melody was per-jne
When he hys harpyng stynt wylle
No leng per a-byde þei wylle
And all þe foullys þat þer were
They come a-boute hym by bussch & bere. (282-286).

[So much melody there was / when he no longer wished to harp / no longer did they (the animals) wish to remain there / and all the birds that were there / came around him on bush and briar]

The joy that Orfeo has taken from his animal cohabitators, as well as the pleasure he has brought them, inflects the silence of the birds such that what could be a respectful silence becomes a decidedly melancholic one. Recalling David Abram's contention that recognising bird sounds as bird song requires an acknowledgement of the human spectator as a visitor in the world of birds, the quiet conclave about the harper can be read as the return of this gesture. The birds recognise Orfeo as a fellow nonhuman, and see his harping as a sensuous openness to this world amidst the woods. The poem echoes this reading lyrically, synonymizing Orfeo's engagement with song and the animals' decision to receive it respectfully through the identical rhyme on "wylle." The overdetermined expression of shared reduction in desire calls attention to the asymmetry in movement through this space. The spot where Orfeo harps becomes a space defined by the movements of the nonhuman. Orfeo, as the static element amidst these circulations of animal life, casts himself as *among* the animals but not *of* them.

This asymmetry recasts the presumed stability of 'wylle' as a hinge or plane across which Orfeo and the animals are doubled. But this difference is, as Deleuze reminds us, not the opposite of repetition but its precondition. He explains that "only that which is alike differs; and only differences are alike," on which basis he understands resemblance "as the condition of

difference.”¹¹³ Repetition in this formulation “is constituted not from one present to another, but between the two coexistent series that these present form of the virtual object.”¹¹⁴ Repetition is the expression of difference amongst two or more instances by triangulating their respective relations to another object; however, in doing so repetition is furtive and secretive, “constituted only with and through the disguises which affect the terms and relations.”¹¹⁵ With language of visiting and listening on either side, wylle becomes the point around which Orfeo and the animals are differentiated, not unified. The animals, having listened, no longer ‘wylle’ to be around him and return to their lives. Orfeo, having retracted his gift to the animals, confronts their silent presence.

Here, Eduardo Kohn’s theorization of non-linguistic thinking *by* environments offers a useful complement to Chen’s claims about dehumanization’s incapacity to exhaust all possibility to thrive. Kohn approaches the idea of thought through semiosis, writing that “what we share with nonhuman living creatures... but the fact that we all live with and through signs.”¹¹⁶ Rather, matrices of relation amongst the human and nonhuman are, independent of their elements, capable of thought and sociality.¹¹⁷ The arrangement of the birds around Orfeo can then be understood as a kind of thinking *about* Orfeo in the most literal sense. By surrounding him with birds, positioning him in spatial and sonic relations to the nonhuman, this world in which he has set himself responds back to him.

With Kohn, the silence of the birds is not empty of thought, but *dense* with it. Arriving at the end of a long musical performance, and themselves famed musicians, the birds’ refusal to

¹¹³ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 116.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 105.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 129.

¹¹⁶ *How Forests Think*, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 7.

extend to Orfeo something resembling what he has offered them imbues this moment with a somber gravitas. The birds recognise Orfeo to the extent that he does not transcend them, but neither do they reject him either. The convocation of birds, then, is not giving a gesture of welcoming; it is only an acknowledgement that his harping carries with it an openness to them, whether or not this openness is important to him. In their eerie circumlocution, the birds hold sociality in a state of suspended animation: an incredibly long moment which cannot pass without Orfeo's involvement.

Deleuze's concept of *differentiation* clarifies the ambiguous invitation offered by the birds by foregrounding the potential it affords Orfeo to differ from himself.¹¹⁸ Where repetition and difference were earlier coproduced in relation to the virtual (real, non-actual, formless) object, differentiation expresses the movement of that virtual's multiplicities into particular intensities.¹¹⁹ Differentiation is the force within any multiplicity to differ from itself by taking on new schema of relations. With the idea of differentiation, the birds are not offering "nothing": they are offering him the chance to show that he wants to be *something* for them. In the same gesture, the birds are asking him *what he wants from them*. Although Orfeo himself may not be consciously aware that he is looking for something, it is with desire that the silence of the birds becomes meaningful.

By briefly suspending sociality, these birds make this claim: Orfeo is not Orfeo without being made as such by an assemblage of desires. The profound eeriness of this scene, therefore, arises not from a tension between sound and silence but between affirmation and rejection of the gesture offered by the birds. The birds have come to know him in a way he does not necessarily

¹¹⁸ I extend my thanks to Chandler and Neimanis (p. 73) for this expression, which I have here appropriated

¹¹⁹ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 207.

want to be known: the ambiguity here is whether Orfeo will accept that he *is* Orfeo through this dialogue with the nonhuman.

2.6 The Hunt for “The Human”

The poem departs from the Orpheus myth by removing from Orfeo the desire to find Heurodis. His exile is, as we have noted earlier, purely for his own sake. The discovery of Heurodis in the Otherworld by Orfeo should then be regarded as equally a discovery by Orfeo of something about himself and his relation to the nonhuman. The harper king at last stumbles into the otherworld after spying a host of fairy knights and nobles riding through the woods. Orfeo makes no move to follow or engage them until he sees sixty fairy ladies riding through the woods:

Gentyll and gay as bryd on ryse
Not a man a-mong þem, j-wyse;
Bot euyery lady a faukon bere,
And ryden on huntynge be a ryuere
Off game þei found well god haunte,
Suannys, herons, & cormerante,
And þe faucons forth fleyng
And þe foullys fro þe water rysing
Euery facon hys pray slowȝ (307 - 315)

[...gentle and merry as a bird on a branch. I reckon there wasn't a man among them, but each lady had a falcon and rode hunting by the river. They found good game: swans, herons, cormorants. The falcons flew out, and the [water] fowl flew up, and each falcon killed his prey.]

There is close lyrical resemblance (in rhyme, syntax, and diction) between the lines conveying the chase of the falcons and the flight of the waterfowl, a resemblance all the more striking for its breaking with the rhythms of the preceding lines. Rather than a blur, the slow escalation of tension through a repetition that defers resolution creates *intensification* and *densification*, a hoarding together of nonhumans which produces increasingly anxious energy for a purpose presently only imagined.

When the conclusions arrives with every falcon slaying his prey (315), the sense is anticlimactic: the cadence is interrupted, dulled, and disappointing. The hawks have won, but it hardly seems worth it - at the very least, it doesn't feel like a victory. In this regard, the fairy women and their falcons iterate the same machinic desire as their knightly counterparts. The fairy king and

... all hys route
com ryding hym all aboute
with dynne, cry, and wyth blowyng
And wyth hundys berkyng
Bot no dere ne best þei nom (289 - 292)

[all his host came riding all around [the king] with din and shouting, blowing horns. There were barking hounds, but the beasts took no dear.]

While the fairy men failed outright to take any game, the fairy women don't seem to have *taken* the water fowl either. Just as the failure of the dog hunt is of little concern to the fairy and harper kings, the fairy ladies are little interested in the bodies of the dead birds. In either case, the hunt must be made to happen, even if nothing is, strictly speaking, hunted. The violence will suffice for their purposes. I recall here Karl Steel's warning against reading too much sympathy in the elevation of one set of animals as privileged companions when doing so overlooks that this relation depends, precisely, on violence enacted against other animals.¹²⁰ The dogs and falcons are relations to the fairy, but their sole presence in the text is in their participation in the hunt. That is to say, these animals are made present *as participants* only in their participation in the pursuit and death of other animals; absent this necessity, they depart from the poem.

Orfeo himself observes these surroundings from a position that, mirroring his earlier attempts to "hall" the woods, is both central and peripheral. The entire host of fairy knights passes directly beside him (287), only for him to glance beside him once again to see the fairy

¹²⁰ *How to Make a Human*, pp. 224-225.

ladies (305). The Auchinlek and Ashmole *Orfeo* differ in this shift of perspective. In Auchinlek, the transition is “and on a day he seize him beside” [Then one day he saw beside him] (301), where Ashmole Orfeo glances “anon” [soon] (304). In the Ashmole text, Orfeo is thus granted an interrupted procession of court through his woodlands, with no interval of quiet reflection between. In this manuscript more than its peers, Orfeo witnesses the mobilisation of the whole spectrum of aristocracy divorced from a strict human framework. That is, Orfeo here sees the faerie as a single unified court, conducting the rituals of noble leisure, maintaining its relations to and command over animals, while also being nonhumans themselves. He has wandered into the woods without aim, and has stumbled into the rituals through which aristocracy makes itself.

Given this contention, it is perhaps surprising that, when at last driven to act, Orfeo laughs and declares the falconry “gode game / ... Sych game j was wont forto se.” [good sport ... such as he was accustomed to seeing] (317-319). The impetus behind Orfeo’s laughter is opaque: does he find the sight of fairy women hunting to be ludicrous, and thus his evaluation is sardonic? The conspiracy of plants whispers otherwise. Orfeo shares the secret knowledge of the conspiracy, and his endeavor in the woods has heretofore participated in a fraught confrontation with his twin desires to join the conspiracy and to not want to join it at all. His laughter, interposing his observation of the hunt and his movement towards it in a final, triumphant break from the fractal geometry of the woods, assigns significance to both the distance from this vignette as well as the relation to that vignette allowed by precisely that distance. When he appends his approach to this laughter, the conclusion is clear: what he sees adds up to something, allows him to tell a particular story that has not, to this point, been possible.

Orfeo laughs, then, because the sight of the hunt allows him to imagine a greater distance between himself and the nonhuman than has previously been allowed in the woods. His laughter

at the sporting is not joy at having found a way out of the woods; it is laughter both fearful and cruel. It is fearful in the sense that his deepest, paranoiac imagination is being played out before him: a whole community of the nonhuman outside Thrace, living and seemingly thriving. His laughter posits a *safe* distance. But Orfeo still approaches them, affirming a form of desire to partake in these communities.

In this other sense his laughter is eminently cruel, for some among his fellow conspirators have lost their lives in this spectacle. The hunt proposes to Orfeo that there are, in fact, ways for him to safely recognise the nonhuman *and also kill it*. The fractal woods of Thrace formerly gave him more of ‘the same’ no matter where he looked. Every motion added and confirmed what came before, reproducing the same conspiratorial landscape behind every glance and gesture. Orfeo does not laugh because the hunt shows him an exit from this labyrinth; Orfeo laughs because the violence of the aristocratic hunt affirms his fantasy that leaving it is possible in the first place.

Neither Heurodis nor Orfeo speak to the other as they linger in a moment of mutual recognition. Heurodis’s weeping at Orfeo’s tattered clothes becomes the point of asymmetry in their gazes. His poverty here, as Lewis reminds us, is the sign of his failure to maintain his standing in human society. Heurodis had once reached out to Orfeo to help her keep her own, to receive *her* fantasy through which she could imagine herself safe and secure. She had, in short, once hoped that Orfeo could help her be human; now, this hope has been clearly shown to be *misplaced*. Faced with the opportunity to admit that who he ‘was’ was a product of the desires of others, even conspiratorial others, Orfeo instead threw himself out. This is no selfless act, tragic abdication, or noble recognition of his kinship with the nonhuman: Heurodis sees that Orfeo has come seeking a way to reject the nonhumanness that he cannot but experience. That this whole

adventure has been largely an attempt to confirm himself in the world is born out by his own response to Heurodis's departure. As he has it, "Sche dare not a word with me speke" [she dared not speak a word with me] (337), and worse yet, "[he] may not speke with [his] wyffe" [he may not speak with his wife] (335). Even as he participates in it, Orfeo interprets silence primarily as an enforced absence of sound that ought otherwise be present; the possibility that silence in the wake of trauma can be, as Lucia Lorenzi argues, self-protecting or interventionary,¹²¹ is inconceivable. For Orfeo to imagine that the world will affirm his belief in the possibility of the human, he must first refuse to offer the same opportunity to any other.

2.7 The King's Two Dozen Body Parts

Like his abdication, Orfeo's return to the throne of Thrace is often read as a site of great ambiguity and uncertainty. In this framework, exemplified by Falk but also variously agreed-with by Jirsa, Lalla, Park, and others, the form of the problem is that Orfeo left and came back. The exact content varies: the threat of deposition (Falk), English anxieties concerning the history of Norman conquest (Lalla), or the precariousness of signs of nobility (Lewis). I agree with these and other critics that this scene is primarily anxious, but I must adjust the terms.

As we have seen earlier, Orfeo struggles but little to find confirmation of his fantastical self-image amongst the nonhumans. When brought before the steward and his lords, Orfeo claims to be a "herper of hethynes" [harper of pagans] (501) and plays for them "the meryest note" [the happiest note] (517). Suitably moved, "the stewerd þe harpe knew full suyth" [the steward knew the harp truly] (522) and on this basis invites Orfeo to tell the story of how he came by the instrument. Orfeo's fabulated biography is as much an exploration of his time in the

¹²¹ *This Page Intentionally Left Blank*, p. 184 - 185.

woods as it is a moment for him to posit a particular *idea* of himself as the one who overcame that tension. His account is brief:

in a mornyng-tyde
 Thorrow a wyld forest j zede
 A man wyth lyons was drawyn smale
 J fond hym lyzend in a dale
 Etyne he was wyth tethe so scherpe
 By hym j fond þis ryall herpe
 Nyzhe x wynter ago (526-532)

[Nigh ten winters ago, I was walking through a wild forest one morning when I found, in a dale, a man torn to pieces by lions. He'd been eaten by sharp teeth. I found this royal harp beside him.]

Orfeo imagines his own history as a taking-apart of his own body witnessed by himself. But, his instrument continues to signify royalty even without his body, rent by sharp teeth in an echo of the “wytte so scherpe” he once displayed while playing. He is appropriating then the structure of his recognition of “gode game” in the falconry of the Faerie ladies, casting himself as the site of violent, needless conflict in suppression of the nonhuman. The Auchinlek *Orfeo* emphasizes this point with an explicit differentiation between his killer and his eater, noting that it was “wolues him frete wiþ tep so scharp” [wolves chewed on him with sharp teeth] (539). Indeed, that the wolves gnaw on “him” rather than his body parts infuses destruction with the potential to recapitulate that which was broken down.

As Deleuze and Guattari identify, any social formation works only through its own failure.

The death of a social machine has never been heralded by a disharmony or a dysfunction; on the contrary, social machines make a habit of feeding on the contradictions they give rise to, on the crises they provoke, on the anxieties they engender, and on the infernal operations they regenerate.¹²²

¹²² *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 151.

The conspiracy of plants whispers that Orfeo's return to court is not so fraught as Falk understands. Aristocracy (and indeed, all social machines) is not threatened by the arrival of its failings; rather, it is in these moments of crisis and disorder that aristocracy as a social formation works by feeding on the pieces, thereby reproducing itself. Thus, Orfeo's reassembly into the human is not a tense, anxious moment which could, at any moment, disassemble the Thracian court. Instead, this moment is joyous in the most direct Deleuzo-Guattarian sense: the affirmation of desire, the Absolute Yes¹²³ spoken to the social formation reproduced at a site no less prominent than Orfeo's body.

2.8 *Sir Orfeo* II: Revenge of the Trees

Recognised and endorsed by the Steward, Orfeo returns to the throne. But first, he must be prepared by his lords, who "Brouzt hym to a chamber swyth / And bathyd him, and schouehys berd / And tyred hym as a kyng in wede" [brought him swiftly to a chamber, bathed him, shaved his beard, and clothed him as a king] (579-581). Curiously, "berd" and "wede" are one of the few failures of rhyme¹²⁴ in the Ashmole *Orfeo*. Orfeo's beard was earlier noted to be the subject of some marvel, for the citizens of Thrace immediately gathered around him and

... seyd, euery-chon
How þe mosse grew hym vpon
'Hys berd is growyn to þe kne!
Hys body is clong as a tre! (494-497)

[each and every one spoke of how the moss grows all over him: 'His beard is grown down to his knee! His body is as lumpy as a tree!]

¹²³ Deleuze and Guattari take this phrase from Nietzsche.

¹²⁴ See Bliss's introduction to the text, pp. xiv. It is tempting to wonder if this circumstance is a scribal error. In that scenario, the rhyme for 'berde' may well have been 'werde' [word]; the text's commentary would become much more sardonic - the lords dress him as a king with words.

Orfeo's shaving in the chamber is therefore also a removal of the most visible nonhuman elements of his body, and an attempt to firm up his appearance as a human. But, just as his story imaginatively remade his body from fragments, so too this gesture contains within an element of fantasy. As Vilém Flusser notes, shaving "remov[es] beard hair to emphasize the boundary between man and world."¹²⁵ As a result, "[t]he goal of shaving is not to make a connection with the world but to distance oneself from it and assert oneself in it."¹²⁶ The lords' shaving of their new, old King both produces a distance between his humanity and nonhumanity, while at the same time offering him confirmation that yes, after all, he *can* be rid of the latter. Much like Heurodis has done once before, the lords give Orfeo a fantasy he can fulfill - something he can be *for them* - by telling a gestural story of his humanity. Not ironically, Flusser observes that "barber's tools are gardener's tools in miniature, and so a barber's gestures can be compared with those of a gardener."¹²⁷ Like pruning an overgrown hedge, the shaving of Orfeo thus makes him *more* himself by cutting away parts. In Deleuzian terms, the king has quite literally died - he was torn apart by lions, and eaten by wolves - and here remade. He is, in this sense, a *grafted* body, a plant-human being collected of disparate parts in a public work of skill demonstrative of a human claim to mastery over nature. Orfeo's becoming King here is at once an affirmation of his desire to be King, but by the middleness of becoming, it is also an affirmation of another multiplicity: the more of a human that Orfeo becomes, the more of a plant he was.

In the end, "herpers of Bretayn herd [anon] / How þys a-ventouyr was be-gon / And made a ley of grete lykyng" [harpers of Britany eventually heard of this adventure, and made a greatly pleasing Lay] (590-592). Thus, the poem ends by naming itself precisely this composition, and

¹²⁵ *Gestures*, p. 108.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 109.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 105.

harkening back to the circulation of lays in the opening lines. The conspiracy of plants, not content to rest quietly, whispers its refrain to this closure. In his harp and his court, Orfeo has found something to sustain his fantasies, but he can sustain his fantasies only *for now*. There will be more lays, more singing, and more madness. But we remember Deleuze: repetition is difference is repetition. Like any sequel, the hypothetical descent of this text promises little more than keeping the same basic story intact amidst new scenery, actors, and a director. Given the ugliness of the poem's affective resolution, solidified by the conspiracy of plants' refusal to offer a neat wrap-up, the lingering blandness of what is otherwise a joyous moment shears off the crown of this tree. What *Orfeo* ultimately leaves us with is the suggestion offered by any sequel: next time, it *might* be different. This isn't necessarily a comfort; certainly, the thought that some imagined future will have a better time isn't going to bring any comfort to Heurodis.

Conclusion

It is customary to close an analysis with a gesture of generosity. *Having successfully completed my analysis*, so the old saw goes, *here is how what I have done adds hope to the world*. In this thesis, I have offered little more than two modest claims concerning a single late Middle English romance. First, that *Sir Orfeo* deploys a specifically botanical form of madness through which it conceptualizes the presence, ever threatening, of alternative social orders on the margins of the human category. Second, to the extent that *Sir Orfeo* is interested in what is possible outside the human, the poem is equally interested in what is possible despite it.

These two claims required something of a circuitous stroll through the gardens of critical plant studies, posthumanism, and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, to name but a few. Grafting together those concepts I found most appealing, I attempted to animate something called “the conspiracy of plants.” This concept (I have also called it an image of thought) was meant to offer an escape from prevailing frameworks for thinking through plant life by eliding questions of agency, intention, and freedom in favour of allegiance, secrecy, and insurrection.

The conspiracy of plants was also intended as a tool for elevating the negative passions of any interaction, intensifying them where already prominent and hyperbolising them where minor. There is an undeniable truth to the objection that the conspiracy of plants is a *post hoc* concept - certainly, I grafted it together because I thought it could be useful for and nuanced by *Sir Orfeo*. Similarly, I doubt that an elevation of the *unpleasantness* of plants will receive widespread endorsement. Nevertheless, I maintain that it is unsatisfying to be only positive, or at least interested in only the positive, when it comes to one’s object of study. Famously, every rose has its thorn.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ My thanks to *Poison* and Bret Michaels for clarifying this tension in floral being.

Of course, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, want is not a lack but a desire for something we don't want to want. The conspiracy of plants cannot be understood without this move. It offers up a fear of trees, a disgust for flowers, a paranoia around roots — I could go on. This is not a prescription for deep ecophobia, nor a proscription against the pleasures of gardens. Through the conspiracy of plants, these negative affects are allowed a certain purchase on what is *real* even if they are not granted the status of the *actual*. With apologies to Michael Marder, this is hardly a model for ethical being. What negativity offers is an opportunity to be guided by and perhaps learn from affective nonuniformity in all its endless mutations. Heurodis's attachment to humanity isn't, as I read it, a choice based on extensive reflection and moral contemplation; it is ambivalent (and interesting) precisely because it is provisional. I do not think Heurodis *wants* to undo the grand narrative of aristocracy and human authority over nature: she *wants* to pull herself together and handle an extraordinarily difficult situation. Orfeo, too, is largely self-centered, but his is the reactionary path — welcomed into community with the nonhuman, he tries to suppress that part of him that wants to be something other than human. Although this task is impossible, he is able to find in the trappings of violence and nobility a conceptual apparatus for imagining that it is. That, for him, will do.

To the extent that any of these critical endeavours I have outlined can be regarded as successful, this is a manifestly hopeless conclusion. I have asked much of the two texts of this single poem, not the least of which demands was to make *Sir Orfeo* a site for quite contemporary makings-plant.¹²⁹ Whether these concepts are useful or successful will depend on whether or not I have misplaced the trust I offer plant studies to take up a wider set of assumptions on which to prosecute the conspiracy of plants.

¹²⁹ I am thinking here with Madhavi Menon's idea of an *unhistorical* method.

But I wonder if it isn't the case, after all, that what I can offer by way of ending is precisely this sense of having asked *too much* of *too little* a purchase on plants, or the human, or medieval poetry. What seems necessary for this conclusion then is not optimism but fantasy. That *Sir Orfeo* demands a radical reformulation of the entire discipline of plant studies is a fantasy, but so too is it fantastical to see the category of the human as dissolved (Steel) or always-hybrid (Cohen). These accounts are not exactly incorrect either - humanness is a production of acts over time, and even then that product is at best an assemblage of parts. What remains is the probably-empty promise offered by these recognitions of hybridities, or dissolutions: that *seeing them will mean something*, perhaps for characters, but certainly for critics. If *Sir Orfeo*'s conspiracy of plants offers us anything by way of understanding the 'human,' or those 'human' notions of agency, freedom, communication — again, I could go on — it is that 'humanness' is essentially a condition of *ambivalence*.

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