

THERE AND BACK AGAIN: FORTUNE AND POSSIBILITY IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCE
AND *DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS*

by

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There and Back Again: Fortune and Possibility in Medieval Romance and *Dungeons & Dragons*

Submitted by **Jonna Stewart** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree of **Master of Arts**

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Abstract

This thesis explores alternative readings of fortune in medieval romance through examining the role of chance in the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). Using game studies, medieval, and medievalism scholars, I highlight these mediums' key similarities, including: relational creation and transmission, nearly limitless possibilities, and the hopeful message that individuals can achieve a happy ending. As *D&D* and romance have a similar format, content, and function, examining the living tradition of TTRPGs can provide new insight into the medieval medium.

I argue that chance, limitations, and the possibility of failure underlies and structures *D&D*'s hopeful nature, allowing the stories it generates to reassure its audiences that they can also seize their own happy ending both despite and because of the reality that they cannot completely determine their fate. When applied to romance, this reading of fortune allows for an optimistic interpretation that differs from Boethius' fickle Fortune in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the primary medieval authority on fortune.

Studying actual plays, TTRPG web shows broadcast for an audience, alongside romance manuscripts provides concrete examples of how these parallel storytelling traditions work. I examine the participants' strategic rule modification while respecting chance in *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity* to argue for a secularization of Tolkien's eucatastrophe, a joyous turn that depends on the possibility of failure, that emphasizes the limitations underlying *D&D*'s optimism. I then turn to Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* to examine how the dual narrators draw attention to the limitations of philosophical consolation and how both Boethius's imprisonment and the Knight's conservatism affect their views of Fortune. The text's failure to endorse faith in God or nobility points to romance itself as fulfilling this emotionally consoling role. Finally, I

highlight the optimistic workings of chance in *Sir Orfeo*, arguing that Orfeo's limitations are central to his successful rescue of Heurodis in another secular eucatastrophe. *Orfeo's* incorporation of disorder and limitations signals the waning relevance of religion and the monarchy in the late medieval period, which, along with the audience's embodied response to the narrative, assures the audience that they too can seize an ultimately happy ending.

Lay Summary

This thesis explores alternative readings of fortune in medieval romance through examining the role of chance in the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). I argue that *D&D* and romance share a similar relational format, fantastical content, and hopeful function. Examining the living tradition of TTRPGs can thus provide new insight into the medieval medium. I examine *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity*, a *D&D* web show, and the medieval romances the *Knight's Tale* and *Sir Orfeo* to argue that chance, limitations, and the possibility of failure underlies and structures both *D&D* and romance's hopeful nature. The stories each medium generates thus reassure their audiences that they can also seize their own happy ending both despite and because of the reality that they cannot completely determine their fate. This reading of fortune allows for an optimistic interpretation that differs from predominant medieval and religious understandings of Fortune.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jonna Stewart. No Generative Artificial Intelligence tools were used in the research process, development, or writing of the thesis.

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Dedication

To Sunny, the best D&Dog

So long, sweet girl

Introduction: Medieval Romance, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the Continuity of Chance

“Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?”

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

John Stevens argues for the permanence of medieval romance in his seminal monograph on the subject. He reasons that romance, rather than being a genre limited to the Middle Ages, details an enduring “set of experiences” which explore “idealisms of . . . fundamental human concern” (16, 21). As J.R.R. Tolkien’s involvement with both medieval and fantasy literature suggests, many scholars have since identified speculative fiction as the spiritual continuation of medieval romance. Flo Keyes asserts that medieval romance’s idealistic spirit of individuals reaching for and realizing their goals lives on in science fiction and fantasy, as “the same human needs are fulfilled, and the same ultimate goal is achieved . . . of providing their respective time periods with hope” (6). Just as medieval romance’s conclusions are often fundamentally optimistic, Tolkien contends that all “fairy-stories must have . . . the joy of the happy ending” (153). The balm of these stories, in whatever form they happen to take, evidently remain deeply relevant to our psyche. I hope to turn our gaze to a similarly imaginative and idealistic medium in my study of the continuity between romance and tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs).

The Minstrel and the Gamemaster: Collaborative and Relational Storytelling

Before discussing this continuity in theme, however, similarities in what may at first appear to be differing formats must be established. While TTRPGs have traditionally been viewed as more game than narrative, contemporary game scholars generally agree that games and narratives are not mutually exclusive categories.¹ David Jara and Evan Torner succinctly summarize this trajectory in stating that “current approaches are less concerned with whether

¹ See Jon Peterson’s “Precursors” and David Jara and Evan Torner’s “Literary Studies and Role-Playing Games” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* for detailed examinations of how immersive role-playing games grew out of the wargaming tradition and the history of critical narrative study of TTRPGs, respectively.

specific games are narratives as with *how* they are so” (274). TTRPG scholars have increasingly emphasized the medium as a narrative generator; Daniel Mackay defines role-playing games “as an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters*’ spontaneous interactions are resolved” (4-5). In fact, the medium has always had narrative roots; a source of inspiration for 1974’s *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, the undisputed original TTRPG, includes a pastiche of fantasy literature and J.R.R. Tolkien’s work in particular (Bowman 16). While there remains a plethora of different play styles that do not always primarily approach TTRPGs as a form of storytelling,² narratives remain an inherent product of playing a TTRPG.

Our contemporary divisions between these forms become even more artificial when examining medieval texts. As Serina Patterson notes, “categories we now define as ‘game’ or ‘literature’ become blurry, since medieval literature was often considered a performance, with prompts for discussion and debate, and some games manifest *as* literature” (6).³ The seemingly disparate mediums of romance and *D&D*, far from accentuating their differences, highlight that their similarities extend well beyond the surface of their shared medieval and fantastical setting.

Their relational delivery is perhaps one of the strongest correlations between *D&D* and medieval romance. The sociological study of TTRPGs is a common thread; Sarah Lynne Bowman notes that the repeated and relational nature of TTRPGs serve as a performative “modern-day ritual” through providing “a co-created social activity for the enactment of meaningful narratives” (15). Medieval romance was similarly a fundamentally social medium. In fact, Stevens almost foreshadows the advent of *D&D*, as he further argues that “[t]o disentangle

² See Greg Gillespie and Darren Crouse’s “There and Back Again: Nostalgia, Art, and Ideology in Old-School Dungeons and Dragons” for a discussion of the Old School Renaissance movement that largely deemphasizes role-play and the pursuit of immersion to focus on other aspects of the game, such as strategy, combat, or humor.

³ See also her chapter “Sexy, Naughty, and Lucky in Love: Playing *Ragemon le Bon* in English Gentry Households” in *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature* for an examination of a medieval proto-role-playing game.

the so-called ‘literature’ of the Middle Ages from its roots in social life, ceremony, and entertainment is a difficult and delicate business,” leading him to conclude that “the study of romance, in its medieval shapes, need not, and indeed cannot properly, remain a purely literary study” (228, 236). Both narrative forms are enmeshed in the social fabric of their performers and audience through the very act of their creation and reception.

Both TTRPG and romance narratives emerge through the reciprocity of the performers and audience. *D&D* is most evidently co-creative, as TTRPGs are a communally created form of storytelling in which each participant contributes to the unfolding narrative. The gamemaster (GM) acts as a referee who organizes and narrates the larger world and overarching story of the game, and the player characters (PCs) make decisions that affect the narrative and role-play as characters that they create. This may appear to exclude the role of the receiving audience, and any resemblance to medieval romance, but Mackay makes a crucial distinction in his study of TTRPGs: “[R]ole-players and gamemasters are both the readers and the authors of the oral performance. However, the gamemaster is more often in the role of the author, and the role-player more frequently assumes the role of the reader” (134). The participants not only function as both creator and audience, but the GM, like the minstrel, typically directs the narrative, as the GM both sets the scene for players and describes the results of their actions. This somewhat hierarchical structure mirrors the performance of medieval romance, the latter of which is similarly more variable as an oral performance than our modern literature.

Though the influence that medieval audiences and minstrels had over romance is obviously of a lesser degree, it does not erase the reality of that influence on romance narratives. While the textual authority of the performers remains contentious and inconclusive, Karl Reichl closes his study of medieval romance transmission with the assertion that “[i]t does not seem too

far fetched to see in some of the manuscript variants of the Middle English popular romances traces of differing performances by public entertainers” (148). Roy Michael Liuzza similarly contends that primarily spoken medieval works, such is the case with most English romances, are dynamic and variable, as they “are made and received not as texts but as performances, situated interactions between a teller and an audience” (269). Undoubtedly, there are many reasons behind these variations, though romance’s similarity with TTRPGs highlights the possibility of the teller choosing to subtly tailor that particular performance to the responses and desires of each audience. After all, Rosalind Field argues that the optimism of romance is “grounded in the anxieties, aspirations, and difficulties of its readers and audience” (28). Speaking to and with the audience is a natural extension of romance and *D&D*’s uplifting ethos, to which I will now turn.

There is Always Hope: Fantasy’s Content and Function

TTRPG and medieval romance scholars frequently echo each other in their analysis of the optimistic freedom that both mediums explore. James and Peggy Knapp note that speculative fiction and medieval romance invite their “readers to step out of the actual world and experience the intriguing pleasure of possibility” through showcasing fantastical other worlds “where choices unavailable in the actual world can be made” (4, 23). Similarly, René Reinhold Schallegger argues that RPGs allow for “maximum player freedom . . . [in] provid[ing] safe spaces to experiment with behavior that would be unthinkable or difficult in real life for fear of repercussions” (67). In an extension of this realm of possibilities, both mediums typically tell stories that highlight the agency of their respective protagonists. Typically built around a prolonged quest as the players “level up,” *D&D* “allows a group of adventurers to collectively experience the hero’s journey” (Bowman 16) in much the same way that medieval romance is a communally received “narrative of knightly prowess and adventure” through which the

protagonist becomes recognized as a hero in “a process of maturation” (Radulescu 39).

Additionally, just as medieval romance typically enacts what Robert M. Longworth calls “the most obsessive of medieval themes, the assertion of order in an apparently disordered universe” (8), *D&D*’s characteristic mixture of endless possibilities and players’ impact on the unfolding story combine to create an optimistic medium where “choices matter, sense and purpose prevail, and apparently unconnected events can be assessed, reinterpreted, and meaningfully integrated” (Hollander 323). The shared hope of medieval romance and *D&D* derives in part from both their optimistic expansion beyond the limited possibilities individuals can enact in reality and their ability to incorporate every choice and encounter into an overarching and cohesive narrative.

The greatest source of both mediums’ optimism, however, derives from their promise that the heroes possess the capacity to seize a happy ending. This hopeful impulse of *D&D* has been noted since the inception of TTRPGs scholarship; in the first major anthropological study of TTRPGs, Gary Allan Fine highlights the common practice of rule negotiation in gaming groups, stating that “a fantasy game whose only constraints are those placed on it by the players provides a ‘possible utopia’—a utopia in which evil is continually overcome” (234).⁴ The degree of agency, plethora of options, and unique adaptability of the face-to-face tabletop playing experience empowers the players to face and defeat any challenge that they encounter.

The two mediums do appear to differ, however, in the source of that happy ending. The religious dimension of medieval romance’s optimistic nature has been well documented in scholarship. While David Jeffrey argues that the positivity of romance derives from the period’s intertwining belief in the progress of the secular state and the kingdom of God, he states that the

⁴ Player communities often adapt the rules and game system to their own desires; see Antero Garcia’s “Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games” for *D&D*’s history of replicating problematic representations of race and gender in the structure of the game and how subsections of the community remodeled the game to address these issues. Additionally, *D&D*’s current *Dungeon Master’s Guide* acknowledges modification as a feature of the game, as it tells GMs to only use the system and the rules it provides as guidelines that can be adapted or ignored according to the desires of the players (4).

form's biblical "prophetic impulse," which assures the reader that the story will reach a satisfying conclusion, ultimately derives from a "hope for order that can only depend on eternal or divine authority" (427, 430). This divine hope for order often bleeds into the secular, as romances also typically conclude in a marriage that ushers in the conservative restoration of the supposedly natural and divinely mandated social hierarchy (Crane 99), which I tackle in more detail in Chapter Two and Three. Just as medieval romance "promises that the bad king will always be defeated in the end, that God will correct injustices, and that the knight who lives virtuously will win the lady of his dreams" (Keyes 37), Tolkien's happy endings are similarly religious, as they provide a glimpse of "*evangelium* in the real world" (155). While romance's trials of the questing knight emphasize the protagonist's individual prowess, the divinely ordained order of things is seemingly central to the medium's happy endings.

This divine hope appears at first glance to disallow any correlation between romance and *D&D*, as no outcome is assured in TTRPG's emergent stories. However, medieval romance is notoriously difficult to delimit; though K. S. Whetter maintains that there are some consistent characteristics, he notes that malleability is so intrinsic to the form that "romance scholars commonly complain, or gleefully exclaim, that romance cannot be defined" (19). While many romances reinforce the status quo, Field notes that many others provide a different world for its audience: "It is a world in which, by contrast with the contemporary experience, the young, the female, the loyal, triumph over the powerful and corrupt. This is not mere escapism, but powerful imagination" (29). This hope often bleeds into real life; Feliz Rose Kawitzky similarly argues that the customizable collaboration of TTRPGs creates a spirit of "critical utopianism" in which the group can modify rule structures to both fit the story they want to tell and create queer worlds they want to live in, allowing the participants to exercise "their capacity for imaginative,

potentially revolutionary, hoping” (135). Both mediums can provide hope for their respective audiences through happy endings where the questing hero is able to imagine new possibilities and realize their goals, oftentimes regardless of societal structures that may normally impede them. Romance’s amorphous nature allows for multiple underlying causes of its essential optimism, and the living tradition of the medium in *D&D* can help illuminate alternate readings of its medieval cousin. In particular, examining the role that chance plays in romance alongside its hopeful workings in both *D&D* and medieval games reveals another possible interpretation of medieval romance’s optimistic consolation—one that has nothing to do with a godly guarantee.

Rolling the Dice: The Narrative Role of Chance and Failure

Chance is actually essential to the meaning and structure of romance, though critics have typically viewed it through a religious lens. Morton W. Bloomfield argues that the “aventure”, which can mean both chance, a wondrous event, or a knight’s quest (“Aventūre n.”), is not only central to the romance plot and its encounters with the marvelous unknown, but it also tends to structure romance through mysterious happenings that link distinct episodes together. Bloomfield contends that chance and mystery point to the divine, as “[i]n the eyes of God . . . all these episodes are no doubt explicable, but to human eyes, in the human dimension, something puzzling is going on” (106-7). Bloomfield here invokes the philosophy of Boethius, whose conception of fortune and providence is central to the medieval understanding of chance.⁵

Famously written in 524 CE while imprisoned and awaiting execution on unfounded accusations of treason,⁶ Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* manages to incorporate both the seemingly undeserved turns of fortune and human free will into God’s plan with his atemporal

⁵ See the first chapter in particular of Mikko Posti’s *Medieval Theories of Divine Providence 1250-1350* for a detailed examination of the importance of Boethian doctrine in the medieval period.

⁶ While most contemporary scholars agree that Boethius did write the *Consolation* during his imprisonment, some critics have questioned the veracity of Boethius’ story. For one of the most recent and comprehensive accounts of this theory, see Henry Chadwick’s first chapter in *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, especially pp. 66-8.

understanding of providence. Through the character of Lady Philosophy and her discussion with a fictionalized Boethius, he reasons that God exists outside time as an omniscient being that can not only see all, but can also see all that will happen and the choices individuals will make in the future with the same certainty as if these events and decisions have already happened in the past. This divine plan is providence, which can only be perceived by God, while fate or destiny is the working out of providence in the present that humans can perceive. As God is both omnipotent and good, ensuring that he orders all things to the good, what appears to be random or ill-deserved workings of Fortune are thus only the result of humanity's limited perception:

There is an ultimate order that governs all things, and when a thing has departed from this order it only falls into another category where a different order applies, but is nonetheless order . . . if you could see the way providence disposes of all things that are spread over the earth you would be able to judge that there is no evil in any of them. (139)

Conversely, when Lady Philosophy speaks as Fortune, she evokes her ever turning wheel in stating that her pleasures are fickle: "You want to try farming and sow your seeds in the earth, then you must expect barren years as well as years of abundance" (30). Lady Philosophy thus instructs Boethius to turn away from Earth's partial goods and to instead look to God's supreme good, as he is "inherently and in his substance the highest good" (88). Bloomfield similarly states that romance heroes have to rely on God: "Man is more naked and exposed in the romances than in the epics; he is in a liminal situation where the unknown hovers threateningly over him. He is in need of Christianity" (112). I outline an alternate reading of Boethian doctrine in Chapter Two, but, following the traditional interpretation of chance, romance appears to be a religious vehicle that tempers the vicarious experience of wondrous worlds with fantastical choices and possibilities in redirecting the audience's hope and wonder back to God.

The bounded agency of TTRPG players, however, suggests that the romance hero's inability to fully master the narrative does not necessitate the intervention of a divine power to preserve its optimistic character. Even the GM is not the sole director of the game; while Schalleger notes that the almost managerial GM holds more discursive power than the players, she argues that "the players are just as much storytellers as the GM, or even more so," as it is the GM's role to "respond" to the PCs' actions, "attribut[ing] the players with the primary momentum in the narrative flow" (55). The GM uses their authority not to further their own goals, but to support those of the players. Similarly, though PCs possess a more literal degree of control than romance protagonists or audiences, they are also not completely in charge of the unfolding story. Due to *D&D*'s collaborative and improvisational creation, the shape of the story is often not evident until it is completed. As Mackay highlights, it is common for participants to discover "resonant themes and meanings in role-played situations that were not intentionally developed but seem to exhibit, instead, the narrative's own identity independent of the intentions of the players and gamemaster" (130). Even the medium that touts the greatest degree of player freedom and possibility does not allow its participants unbridled control over the narrative.

Chance contributes to the narrative not only through its effect on the emerging storyline, but also because character limitations and the very real chance of failure is fundamental to the meaning-making process of *D&D*. Unlike other mediums, there is no safety net of previous save files or respawn points, and the GM generally does not fulfill the role of an omnipotent author or god ensuring that the narrative arrives at a satisfying conclusion.⁷ This dose of reality, rather than corrupting TTRPGs' bracketed world of optimistic possibilities, is the underlying hopeful

⁷ To reiterate, there are as many different approaches to GMing as there are GMs. Consequently, some tables and GMs may prioritize doing the necessary dice "fudging" and gymnastics required to ensure a happy ending. However, that is only one of many possible approaches, and the ever present possibility of a GM killing the entire party, colloquially referred to as Total Party Kill, underscores the reality of failure inherent to TTRPGs.

connection between player agency and the narrative. Just as whether the protagonists succeed or fail depends on the choices of the players, chance plays a critical role because, if the players' ideas are guaranteed to succeed, their choices have no real meaning. When the outcome or path of action is predetermined, PCs do not truly have any agency, and it is not exactly a hopeful medium if there is no chance of failure. In the narratives that *D&D* generates, failure is always one of the many possibilities at play.

This lack of control only becomes more apparent in the narrative role of dice. Fortune, a method of fair conflict resolution where probability determines the outcome of actions and effects, is a central component of many TTRPGs. In *D&D*, this takes the form of dice rolls, and though players can take steps to maximize their chances of success, Bowman notes that “ultimately, the dice decide the outcome,” and her gathered testimonials from TTRPG players highlights that “the dice themselves can tell a story” (107).⁸ Die rolls are a crucial part of how *D&D* creates and tells stories; they can poetically reinforce pre-existing emergent storylines, or they can change the direction of the narrative as the participants interpret those die rolls into their role-play and the advancing plot. This degree of fortune, external, unpredictable, and almost entirely beyond the capacity of the participants to control, rather than detracting from the optimism of TTRPGs, is central to their hopeful orientation. Players creating the opportunity to roll the dice and hoping for the number required, knowing that success is possible but not certain, is part of what makes *D&D* optimistic and impactful. *D&D*'s hopeful stance stems from the fact that, no matter the seemingly insurmountable odds and the forces assembled against the PCs, it also remains possible for them to succeed—they just need a feasible plan and to roll well.

⁸ Schalleger rightly stresses that there is a balance to be struck between player agency and random chance, as all their choices should not “be rendered meaningless by an unlucky roll of the dice” (59).

And yet, even if the players do fail, that can also contribute to *D&D*'s optimism. Jennifer Grouling Cover notes that failure is a key aspect of TTRPG's narrative agency, as the format allows GMs and PCs the flexibility to work failure into the arc of the narrative (41). Since GMs typically call for a roll to determine the outcome of the PCs' nearly every chosen course of action, you roll quite frequently in *D&D*. Failure is inevitable and it is not infrequent, but this does not halt the narrative—it actually creates it. Whether the result of “you attempt to sneak past the guards” is success or failure, the next question the GM asks remains “what do you do?” Just as the chance happenings of real life can result in failure where a character in a traditional narrative likely would have succeeded, so too can life go on after a bad roll of the dice in a TTRPG. When players fail in scenarios with potentially catastrophic consequences, they can try to steer the narrative to rectify that wrong if it does not feel like the right end to the story. This is neither inexhaustible nor a guarantee, as every narrative needs stakes, but the ability for the GM to present their players with one more chance is also a crucial part of *D&D*'s optimism. The ability to narrativize or somewhat mitigate the random chance of reality makes achieving a happy ending in a TTRPG all the more meaningful for the players. They get to both vicariously experience and help create a happy ending that can incorporate the realities of failure, making it almost feel like it could happen in real life, too. While fortune is not so literalized in romance, its centrality in *D&D* suggests that chance can play a similar role in medieval romance's optimism.

Of Dice and Men: Chance and Romance in the Middle Ages

In fact, the persistent popularity of medieval dice and chance games suggests that God was not always the consolation that many sought in the Middle Ages. The church largely banned clergymen from participating in games of chance, as dice games were viewed as earthly pleasures that resulted in the dereliction of their religious duties (Bubczyk 34-38). Rhiannon

Purdie examines the immense popularity of dice games despite the church labeling them as blasphemy; while she argues that the controversy largely resulted from games of chance misusing biblical lot and invoking God's will over trivial matters, she also highlights that dice games in particular were seen as a step removed from God due to their association with pagan divination (179). She highlights that various medieval texts represent dicing as either inverted or misdirected prayer, as even when players do call upon authorized sources in their pleas "it is neither God nor the saints to whom [dicers'] prayers are really addressed . . . they are vying instead for the attentions of Fortune" (Purdie 179-80). The popularity of dice games can be attributed to hoping for divine favour, but the optimistic role of chance in TTRPGs, combined with what Purdie calls "the desire to put one's future and fortune at the mercy of Chance" (184), sheds light on another possible interpretation.

These appeals to Fortune coincide with its rising importance in the turbulent medieval period. Discussing the rapid increase of depictions of Fortune with her Wheel in the Middle Ages, Charles M. Radding argues that the eleventh and twelfth centuries initiated "a growing awareness that much that happens in human existence is governed not by God's justice, but by chance" (128). David M. Robinson similarly characterizes depictions of the Wheel of Fortune with the summation that "[i]n spite of the anathemas of the church, Fortune is believed by many to be omnipotent, and she takes her place with God" (214). This sentiment only became more exacerbated with time. While Jeffrey ultimately asserts that romance's promise of religious guidance countered the instability that came with events like the Papal Schism, he notes that "the late Middle Ages is also a time of grave, even radical contradictions—contradictions between aspirations to an ethically responsible rule of reason, to an ordered society in the here and now, and the hard facts of a disordered and disintegrating political and spiritual world" (428). His

insight into the age's contradictions is particularly relevant, as it leaves room for the average gamester to pray to God in the morning and pray for Fortune to be merciful in the evening. After all, if God's plan can include unjust executions, Fortune may offer much more appealing odds.⁹

Read in a slightly refracted light, this is also the promise of romance: A world in which even the vicissitudes of fortune can fall in favor of the hero, and can ultimately be overcome when they do not. I again return to Fields' reading of popular romance: "While the world of romance may be a heightened reality, it is one recognizably familiar to the original audience, but in the 'wobble room' of constructive escapism, we can see a culture testing its boundaries and probing new possibilities" (29). While Boethius' depiction of Lady Fortune is overwhelmingly negative, calling her "a monster" who "toys with those for whom she intends catastrophe, showing her friendly face and lifting them up before dashing them down" (27), the optimism of medieval romance creates a storyworld where even the remote workings of chance lead towards and are central to their characteristic happy ending. When the hero encounters their limits or their fortune takes a turn in one episode, that is not the end of the story, nor does it necessitate the intervention of divine powers or preclude their ability to eventually reach that optimistic closure. For popular romances' non-courtly audience (Radulescu 31), who possessed limited power and resources to mitigate ill-turns of fortune, stories where the hero can still achieve a happy ending both despite and because of their inability to completely control the narrative would likely provide a deeply affirming experience. *D&D* and romances' ability to acknowledge the reality of chance, limitations, and failure works to intensify and render more real the uplifting hope that each form is able to engender in their participants.

⁹ I develop this idea in greater detail in the Chapter Two section titled "'[O]nly grieving Muses would prompt me to compose': *The Consolation of Philosophy* as Literature."

The Adventure Begins: Methodology and Chapter Overview

Examining instances of how each medium crystalizes into distinct narratives affords a more complete picture of how these parallel storytelling traditions work. In the case of medieval romance, particular narratives are easily found in manuscripts. Establishing records of a *D&D* game, however, offers a more complex problem.¹⁰ Mackay argues that the TTRPG narratives can never exist independent of the players who performed it, as no method of recording can fully capture the “social now” in which the players’ interactions influence their decisions (84). However, actual plays, web shows and podcasts where entire sessions and campaigns are broadcast for an audience, provide a way to study particular narratives created in playing TTRPGs. While this is not a perfect solution, many actual plays record the participants’ out-of-character reactions and interactions about both the unfolding story and the game mechanics. These conversations exist outside of the narrative, but nevertheless inform their decisions and are part of the experience of playing *D&D*. Actual plays provide the closest thing to Mackay’s “social now” that it is possible to capture. They can even grant a glimpse into what it might have been like to participate in the particular performance of a medieval romance.

As such, I begin in Chapter One with *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity*. A prequel to the actual play *Critical Role*, *Calamity* follows a historical event in which evil gods were released to wreak destruction on Exandria. The character-driven and optimistic narrative that the players create amidst the determination of a past apocalypse illustrates the hopeful stories that *D&D* creates. In examining the group’s rule modification while respecting chance, I apply Tolkien’s eucatastrophe, a joyous turn that depends on the possibility of failure (153), to argue for a secular eucatastrophe that highlights the limitations and failures that underlie *D&D*’s optimism.

¹⁰ Fine, Bowman, and Cover have tried to mitigate this through bringing in their experience of watching or playing TTRPGs themselves and surveying other players, but that still does not provide a complete independent narrative.

Having established the crucial interaction of limitations and agency in *D&D* narratives, in Chapter Two I turn these principles to romance and the vicissitudes of Fortune in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Firstly, I apply scholarship that highlights the ambiguity of Boethius' conclusions in the *Consolation* to the role of chance in romance to argue for a secular reading of Fortune. I then argue that the dual narrators within the *Knight's Tale* draw attention to the limitations of religious and philosophical consolation and how both Boethius's imprisonment and the Knight's conservatism affect their views of Fortune. I contend that the text's ultimate failure to endorse faith in God or nobility points to the ritual of romance itself as fulfilling this consoling role.

This leads to a final chapter on *Sir Orfeo*, which adapts the tragic tale of Orpheus and Eurydice into a story where love and artistry can conquer even death, as Orfeo actually rescues his wife. I highlight the optimistic workings of chance in the narrative and argue that Orfeo's limitations are central to the hopeful turn where he is just barely able to save Heurodis in another secular eucatastrophe. Building on ambiguous readings of the couple's return, I contend that the romance's incorporation of disorder and limitations happily signals the waning relevance of religion and the monarchy in the late medieval period, contributing to the romance's optimistic message of individuals managing to seize an ultimately happy ending.

These texts exhibit both romance and TTRPGs' assurance to their audience that, even given their own limits, failures, and misfortune, they too can seize a happy ending. Through the embodied emotions of the empathizing audience, the protagonist's successes feel like theirs as well, providing emotional consolation and uplifting and empowering their listeners and viewers to achieve their own goals. In establishing the similarities between medieval romance and TTRPGs, I hope to demonstrate that modern forms of media which more closely resemble the format of medieval literature can open new avenues of analysis for the ancient medium.

Chapter 1: “It’s important to dream”: Chance and Hope in *D&D* Narratives

While there are many diverse approaches to actual play content, it is worth noting that *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity* is not a typical *D&D* actual play. As a four episode prequel series that takes place nearly a thousand years before the events of *Critical Role*’s main campaigns,¹¹ *Calamity* is both much shorter and more restricted in its premise than most actual plays. *Calamity* expands upon the scant surviving historical record of its titular apocalyptic event: In mage Vespyn Chloras’ unsuccessful attempt to ascend to godhood, he released the sealed Betrayer Gods, who wrought destruction on Exandria. This brought a violent end to the Age of Arcanum, a never again repeated period of magical innovation. In a seeming contradiction of TTRPGs’ privileging of “agency and emergent collaboration over a predetermined product or outcome” (Kawitzky 129), *Calamity*’s limited runtime and the indelible facts of this historical event appear to run counter to the freedom and agency that *D&D* promises its participants.

However, this shortened and directed premise forces the participants to focus on telling and completing a coherent narrative, which also serves to highlight the essential interplay of agency and limitations for *D&D*’s impactful storytelling. Though the reality that the PCs cannot stop the Calamity remains a foregone conclusion, *Calamity*’s spotlight on the day of the Betrayer Gods’ release gives the players the freedom to determine the exact events that lead to the Calamity while foregrounding the crucial role of PC and GM limitations in the formation of *Calamity*’s hopeful narrative. Rather than following the contemporary understanding of the Calamity as a cautionary tale depicting the Age of Arcanum’s rampant hubris, the GM and PCs craft a narrative of redemption and love in which those complicit in the event confront their flaws and rally to avert an even worse outcome. The PCs manage to seize a largely happy ending

¹¹ *Critical Role* is both one of the first and arguably most popular *D&D* actual play series. At the time of writing, *Critical Role* has three distinct campaigns, each with over a hundred episodes spanning hundreds of hours.

even in the midst of a crushing apocalypse both through and despite the random chance happenings of *D&D*, as the group strategically modifies *D&D*'s rules while respecting the crucial role of chance and failure in the narrative. *Calamity* thus illustrates that the optimism of *D&D* both derives from and depends upon the role of chance and limitations to meaningfully assert the medium's hopeful ethos that individuals can exert some control over their lives and the narrative.

“It was always about reaching”: Agency and a Lesson in Limitations

GM Brennan Lee Mulligan juxtaposes the power of the floating city of Avalir and the Ring of Brass, the self-chosen moniker for the PCs' lower rung subsection of Avalir's ruling elite, against the looming doom of the Calamity from the first moments of the series. Mulligan starts the first episode detailing First Knight Zerxus Ilerez's (Luis Carazo) prophetic dream of Avalir being consumed in slow motion fiery destruction that Zerxus, despite his might and magic as a warrior, is powerless to stop (00:05:20). By the beginning of the fourth episode, it becomes clear that this is the first moments of Calamity, evidently fated to occur, as Mulligan repeats the same opening line of “Fire” (00:05:20, 00:06:01). Just as both the audience and the players know that the Calamity is a historical fact, Mulligan begins by foregrounding its inevitability and, seemingly, the players who are doomed to be caught in its explosive wake.

This stands in stark contrast to the spectacular arcane innovation of Avalir, a city that flies along leylines and gathers magic from across Exandria, which Mulligan quickly shifts to describing from Zerxus' viewpoint atop his tall tower's balcony (00:29:51). The flying city is a bustling metropolis teeming with arcanotech, including public transportation in the form of hulking quadruped constructs and a crystal screen projected on the sourceless Por'co Waterfall. This screen flares to life as Loquacious Seelie (Sam Riegel), the state-sanctioned head reporter, delivers the news. Avalir is more akin to a modern city or something out of science fiction than

the medieval fantasy setting of present day Exandria, demonstrating the marvels that were possible during the Age of Arcanum. Mulligan summarizes Avalir's success, calling it "a testament to the power and might of mortal beings to make their own future and destiny with arcane strands" ("Excelsior" 00:31:30). The reality that neither Avalir's technology nor its mages can stop the Calamity ensures that the city represents both the age's prosperity and its arrogance.

While juxtaposing a city that celebrates arcane potentiality and self-determination with a prophetic scene of imminent desolation illustrates the rampant hubris of Avalir, it can also be read as "railroading," a much-maligned "GMing style in which, no matter what the PCs do, they will experience certain events according to the GM's plan" ("Railroading"). However, the PCs are just as emblematic of the sins of the age as the city itself. Rather than undermining the narrative agency that is fundamental to TTRPGs' adaptable nature, Mulligan and the players make use of a semi-determined narrative to create a story that leads to that climax not despite the characters' actions, but because of them. Mulligan states that he designs short campaigns around the PCs, as "the rails are going to be who you tell me [your characters] are" ("Game Masters of Exandria Roundtable" 0:07:15). Consequently, the PCs quickly establish that they are symptomatic of the larger age. Patia Por'co (Marisha Ray), the Keeper of Scrolls and steward of Avalir's vast knowledge, demonstrates her lack of wisdom in questioning the usefulness of ascending to godhood, stating "[i]t just feels like such a hollow title, especially compared to the wonders and the powers that we possess as mere mortals" ("Excelsior" 2:08:39). Patia highlights the unbridled belief that nothing, including divinity, is superior to the intelligence and will of Avalir's mages, planting the seeds for the Calamity to be a direct result of the PCs' own hubris.

This mentality is further reflected in the secret plans of Laerryn Coramar-Seelie (Aabria Iyengar), the Architect Arcane who keeps the city afloat. With the support of Nydas Okiro (Lou

Wilson), who helped hide and fund Laerryn’s extracurricular experiments as the head of the treasury, Laerryn bypassed Avalir’s bureaucracy and siphoned the city’s collected magic into the leywright, a device that would allow the entire city to travel to the divine plane. While Laerryn partially constructs the leywright for her personal ambitions, she also does so as a servant of the city of Avalir, as being able to traverse and gather material from the divine plane would allow Avalir to almost irrevocably pull ahead of the other rival floating cities (“Blood and Shadow” 2:59:15). As Laerryn concisely summarizes, the ethos of the city “was always about reaching” (“Blood and Shadow” 03:09:31), and she eagerly agrees with Nydas’ impassioned cry of “but why should we be *limited* to this plane?!” (“Bitterness and Dread” 01:30:25). Just as Vespian aspired to godhood, the PCs strive to ascend beyond the boundaries of mortals, believing that there are no limitations that they cannot surpass. The PCs, far from being restricted by the fact of the Calamity approaching, prove to be instrumental to the event coming to pass.

In fact, it is ultimately Laerryn, not Vespian, who fully releases the Betrayer Gods onto the face of Exandria, demonstrating that the players are still the main driving force of the narrative. The choices of the players thus flesh out the prophetic dream; the fiery explosion is the result of Laerryn destroying the magical Tree of Names that, unbeknownst to her, scribed runes across the city’s path along Exandria and cataloged the many names of the Betrayer Gods as a ward against their return (“Blood and Shadow” 05:05:35). While one of the many possibilities of *D&D* does not include stopping the Calamity, Mulligan presents his players with scenarios in which they can make an in-character decision that brings it closer; Mulligan tells Laerryn¹² that she does not hear Nydas revealing a prophecy that ties the tree to an apocalyptic event, as she is preoccupied in her discovery that the tree is the reason why previous tests of her leywright failed, causing the

¹² To distinguish between out-of-character commentary and in-character interactions, I will refer to the parties involved by their player names in the case of the former and their character names in the case of the latter.

death of their friend, Evandrin (“Blood and Shadow” 04:37:27). Far from taking agency away from the player, Iyengar describes the moment as Mulligan “understand[ing] exactly what Laerryn’s motivations are, so you can help me see them” (“Game Masters” 00:08:05). Laerryn knows that the tree has some sort of important function; per an ancient pact between the sky-bound arcane mages and the nature-based magic of the terrestrial Druids, the latter planted the tree in Avalir and refused to tell the former of its warding purpose. Laerryn had found a letter from the Druids’ leader explaining this decision, as he feared that the mages, who “do not see limitation . . . [would] see all that they could do with [the tree] and not what they could do for it” (“Bitterness and Dread” 3:29:20). She does not know the ramifications of her actions, but, hubristic and ambitious to a fault, she selfishly chooses to kill the Tree of Names anyways. In one fell swoop, Laerryn ushers in the Calamity and proves that the Druid’s suspicions were largely justified. Laerryn causes the Calamity because of who she is, not because it is set in history or prophecy. This turns the hard fact of the Calamity into a springboard that preserves Iyengar’s agency and creates a space for “safe experimentation with moral, political, and metaphysical decision-making” (Hollander 318). The PCs are enacting new possibilities and directing the narrative even as they learn that they are not entirely able to decide their own fate.

“[G]ive me one fucking prophecy”: The Roll of Chance

Calamity also demonstrates that the PCs’ inability to entirely control the narrative is central to the hopeful story that they do still manage to craft in the immediate aftermath of the Calamity. As previously stated in the introduction, the workings of chance are integral for both player agency and the optimistic orientation of *D&D*. The possibility of creating the opportunity to roll, and only needing to roll high enough to turn even the darkest of tides, combined with the ability for both players and the GM to adapt the unfolding narrative into one in which an

unsatisfying shortfall can be rectified, renders both chance and failure fundamental to the hopeful narratives that *D&D* generates. While GMs can decide when to call for a roll and players typically need to undertake an action that triggers one, allowing the participants' agency to somewhat guide random chance, there are also occasions where circumstances force a roll that the participants have no ability to control or mitigate. These virtually true random instances of chance can poetically reinforce existing storylines or allow for latent or unexplored aspects of the narrative to be pulled to the forefront. In a storyworld where, much like in real life, there is no fully omnipotent guiding artist's hand guaranteeing a satisfying story arc, experiencing that fortuitousness when things could have so easily gone differently is part of the deeply affirming experience of *D&D*'s narratives. This is the optimism of *D&D*—that random chance, both mitigated and not, can still help or not ultimately derail the PCs' work towards a happy ending. In *Calamity*, both random chance and mitigated chance contribute to its happy conclusion.

In an example of the former, *Calamity*'s lesson in limitation and the chance unfolding of the narrative, far from undermining the possibilities and optimism of *D&D*, allows the players to turn a time of utter ruin into a story of redemption as these flawed characters confront how they brought the Calamity to bear. Nydas' journey in particular emphasizes the optimistic impact that chance can have on the narrative, as serendipity initiates his arc. Largely by happenstance, Nydas is the only party member to uncover the prophecy regarding the Tree of Names, and this knowledge drastically alters him, resulting in Nydas becoming the moral core of the narrative and the sole party member attempting to stop Laerryn from destroying the tree. This trajectory was by no means planned: Wilson even remarks to Iyengar "I fully thought I would be you in this campaign, but give me one fucking prophecy" ("Blood and Shadow" 04:50:40). In the wake of the blast, the man who funded Laerryn's lewright and took great pride in amassing Avalir's

vast coffers experiences a poetic roll to save his magical items. He fails only for his bag of holding, resulting in “magma-hot golden coins exploding out into [his] body” (“Fire and Ruin” 00:22:39). Nydas’ own wealth physically hurting him effectively becomes a narrative judgment of his materialistic motivations that contributed to the destruction of the tree.

The meaning implied by this roll informs Nydas’ decisions for the remainder of *Calamity*. After a Betrayer God is released into the city, bringing demons and devils to prey on the inhabitants of Avalir, the party scatters to best save its denizens. Nydas returns to his treasury to muster all available skyships and save the people, leaving his gold, and delivers a speech in which a laugh breaks through, as even he cannot quite believe his change of heart: “The material goods mean nothing anymore, only life. That is what we will save. That is how this beacon, this city, will survive.” (“Fire and Ruin” 03:10:58). Rather than crafting a redemption arc despite random chance, fortune is the catalyst that affords Nydas, so full of hubris that he strove to reach the divine plane, a chance to reexamine the foundation of his values as he realizes that Avalir’s gold and accomplishments are meaningless if the people die. As a representative of the Septarian and Ring of Gold, the highest ruling elite of Avalir, appears to tell Nydas that he must direct his skyships to save them, he bombastically shouts “[d]amn the Ring of Gold, the people of Avalir must survive!” (3:10:12). Saving Avalir the city, which the Ring of Brass have devoted their lives to serving, becomes saving Avalir the people, as they realize their error in making the city as great as possible with no regard to the mortal cost. This positive shift, possible but unlikely, could not have occurred organically without chance informing the PC’s actions.

“You choose ruin and the world”: Redemption in the Time of Apocalypse

After the Calamity arrives with its prophesied fire, the PCs further exercise their agency and incorporate their own failure and limitations as they create a hopeful narrative. Loquacious

prepares a broadcast to tell the people of Avalir to get to Nydas' skyships for evacuation. Just before he begins, the queen of the Seelie Court appears, telling all fey creatures that she is able to open a portal for them to flee to the fey realm. The changeling Loquacious decides to stay and save as many people as he can, a character-defining choice that Mulligan reinforces by stating “[y]ou choose ruin and the world” (“Fire and Ruin” 3:33:17). As Loquacious starts his broadcast, he echoes the beginning of both the first and last episode of Calamity with his opening line: “Fire. Mayhem. Chaos. But, also, hope” (3:41:35). Loquacious makes use of the prophetic declaration of their demise in the party's fight to save the people of Avalir, demonstrating the optimistic and agential capacity of the PCs to determine what kind of narrative will come to pass. No longer covering up the truth, as he has previously done to protect Laerryn, he finally lays bare the sins of the ruling wizards and their “hubris run amok”, concluding with his final lie that the head of the Septarion has decreed that the people should flee to the skyships and, to ensure that the citizens evacuate, he has instructed the ruling administrators “to go down with the ship” (3:42:24). Loquacious takes the failures of the Ring of Brass and Gold, their complicity in the Calamity, and turns those flaws to a narrative of redemption. Loquacious' speech demonstrates that the ability for the PCs to narrativize failure and turn it into the first step towards a happy ending is crucial to creating *D&D*'s optimistic stories.

As previously discussed in the introduction, another key element of *D&D*'s hopeful orientation is the flexibility that allows for both the GM and the players to modify the rules.¹³ While the GM may have more discursive authority as the primary narrator of events, Mulligan compares the experience of GMing to being a “one person Greek chorus . . . [y]ou're the

¹³ See Felix Rose Kawitzky's “Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method” for a related discussion on what he calls “critical utopianism.” While my use of this potential in TTRPGs is more related to generally hopeful narratives in this chapter, Kawitzky discusses how groups can modify existing rule structures to both fit the story they want to tell and create queer worlds they want to live in, allowing the participants to exercise “their capacity for imaginative, potentially revolutionary, hoping” (135).

supporting cast” (“Game Masters of Exandria” 0:15:37).¹⁴ As such, Mulligan not only role plays in support of player action, but he chooses to modify the rules to support their choices.

Mulligan further reinforces Loquacious actions through his response to his speech. While it is difficult to convey the emotional impact of Loquacious’ speech in an academic essay, especially as I cannot reproduce it in full or the nearly twenty hours of context that informs it, the impact it has on the audience at the table is evident. We see them both cheer and punch the air as he tells the culpable leaders to remain aboard, and their tears as Loquacious finishes his broadcast declaring his love for his friends (3:44:18). Rather than calling for a roll at the conclusion of Loquacious speech to determine if his deception succeeds, Mulligan decides that a dice roll is unnecessary: “In general, rolls tend to be asked for in moments where chance is required. But occasionally, people, without needing to roll a die at all, just give you a nat[ural] twenty” (3:45:45).¹⁵ In deciding not to call for a roll after Loquacious’ (and, truly, Reigel’s) hastily yet no less beautifully constructed speech, Mulligan both supports the entire party’s decision to sacrifice their lives to save all that they can and rewards his PC for a exceedingly clever and heartfelt performance. Reasoning that there is virtually no chance of disbelieving Loquacious’ incredible delivery, Mulligan adapts the rules and balances the role of chance and player agency to help his players tell the hopeful narrative that they are creating together, demonstrating the similarly hopeful role of rule modification in *D&D*.

“[H]ope will return as many times as it needs to”: The Eucatastrophe of *D&D*

However, while players can modify chance to some degree, it must still remain a deciding factor in *D&D*’s hopeful narratives. After all, if all the players’ ideas are guaranteed to

¹⁴ While Anthony David Franklin argues that the GM’s role of interpreting dice results allows them to “retain a position of authority by being the arbiter of success and failure” (76), Antero Garcia highlights a shift in GMing, as the early conception of the GM as a “referee” or arbiter of rules that “reinforce[d] subservience to the [GM]” has largely been eliminated due to the “collaborative nature of how D&D is described and understood today” (242).

¹⁵ Rolling a twenty on a twenty-sided die, often referred to as an unmodified or “natural” twenty, is a critical success that generally results in the best possible outcome of the undertaken action.

succeed, their choices have no real meaning, and *D&D* cannot be a truly hopeful medium if there is no chance of failure. Consequently, while Mulligan does selectively modify the rules, he frequently rolls not behind his GM screen, but in front of the table, ensuring that he cannot hide or override whatever chance dictates the result of the roll will be. Though he retains some power over chance, as exactly how the GM interprets that roll and incorporates it into the narrative remains his decision, the GM's interpretive power is often bound by the number on the die. When detective Cerrit Argrupnin (Travis Willingham) rolls a critical success to recall information regarding the Tree of Names, Mulligan is forced to divulge more information than he intended, stating "I gotta honour a nat[ural] twenty" ("Bitterness and Dread" 2:53:00). As dice rolls allow for the best possible outcome to always theoretically be possible, chance in *D&D* is similarly always tinged with the optimistic hope for a great result.

Mulligan thus carefully bends the rules while still leaving the ultimate outcome up to chance in the last combat of *Calamity*. As the players attempt to avert another prophecy that the Calamity will never end if Primordial Titans join the Betrayer Gods, the party makes their final stand at the leywright. Low on resources and health, Laerryn begins modifying her invention to target and banish the Primordials while the others keep Vespyn Chloras at bay. As Vespyn prepares to strike Laerryn with a fatal spell, the party throws everything they have into attempting to prevent this blow from landing ("Fire and Ruin" 05:10:56). Loquacious imposes disadvantage on Cerrit's attack on Vespyn, forcing him to roll twice and take the lower roll, in order to give Patia's counterspell advantage, allowing her to roll twice and take the higher roll. This ploy causes Cerrit's attack to miss, and, even with advantage, Ray does not roll high enough to counter Vespyn's attack. Left standing, infringing on Willingham's agency and causing Cerrit to miss only because of another PCs' desperate gamble would make for an unsatisfying outcome.

Consequently, Mulligan makes some adjustments to the rules. Mechanically, Cerrit attacks Vespin with his reaction, which he can only use once per turn. Reasoning that Vespin would have to cast a shielding spell to avoid Cerrit's initial attack, which would also trigger the PCs' reaction due to Cerrit's character abilities, Mulligan allows Cerrit one more chance to hit Vespin. Mulligan's judgment call for another roll returns agency to Willingham, which may at first seem to override the crucial role of chance in *D&D*'s optimistic narratives.

And yet, Mulligan's ruling only modifies chance while still leaving the ultimate outcome to fortune, which he foregrounds in stating "I'm going to leave this to one last roll of the dice" (05:16:41). I largely agree with Schalleger's observation that preserving the PCs' agency is crucial to the fair implementation of rules in TTRPGs, as the players need to know that their actions will "not be rendered meaningless by a single unlucky roll of the dice" (59). However, Mulligan here highlights that, even when modifying chance to give players another roll, following the outcome of that final roll is another integral aspect not only of the fairness of *D&D*, but also of its hopeful orientation. Rather than reserving the authority of the GM to interpret the result, Mulligan tells Willingham the number that he needs to roll to hit and writes Vespin's hit points on a piece of paper, ensuring that there remains a very real chance of failure that he cannot mitigate. The slim chance of success makes the moment where Willingham rolls a natural twenty that is strong enough to outright kill Vespin, saving Laerryn and allowing her to use her leywright to destroy the Primordials, all the more euphoric as the players erupt with their celebration of barely averting ultimate defeat (05:17:03). This interaction demonstrates that rule modification to preserve the PCs' agency, allowing them to somewhat mitigate fortune, and external and largely uncontrollably chance are both central to *D&D*'s hopeful message that it is always possible for the players to affect positive change and seize a happy ending.

The crucial mixture of player agency and chance in *Calamity*'s conclusion is the eucatastrophe that constitutes *D&D*'s optimism. Tolkien stresses the essential role of failure in the happy endings of fairy stories, which he terms eucatastrophe: “[A] sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance” (153). While Tolkien’s conception of eucatastrophe is deeply rooted in his religious beliefs, the chance of TTRPGs, evident in the emergent storytelling and dice rolls, secularizes the same function of creating happy endings that just as profoundly rely upon the possibility of failure.¹⁶ Though *Calamity*'s ending is not perfectly happy, as nearly the entire party falls in the fight to give Laerryn the time she needs to use the leywright, there is another final moment of eucatastrophe as the party uses their dying breaths to help Cerrit, the only non-magic user and the person least responsible for bringing about the Calamity, escape the leywright’s massive release of energy. Laerryn shows Cerrit the path out of her labyrinthine lab, granting him advantage, and Loquacious and Nydas respectively give him a talisman and a bardic inspiration that add to his roll. Arguably, it is this moment, not just killing Vespian, that is *Calamity*'s eucatastrophe, as Mulligan moves to close the session and states the nearly impossible difficulty class (DC) that Cerrit needs to reach: “This will be the final roll of this campaign . . . This is the Calamity. The DC we are setting is thirty” (5:56:45). Through the help of his friends, Cerrit manages a thirty one, just barely escaping and allowing him to give Laerryn a parting message: “The Brass Ring endures. I want you to know, you gave us a chance” (5:59:40). Through their bonds and their combined effort, the Ring of Brass not only manage to avert the complete destruction of Exandria, but they also save their dear friend. This combination of chance and player agency

¹⁶ Sarah Lynn Bowman similarly argues that TTRPGs can follow Tolkien’s fairy-story pattern of Escape, Recovery, and Consolation, citing the example of two brother’s healing their broken relationship by playing RPGs together (61), though she does not address the role of failure or the religious nature of Tolkien’s concepts.

narratively reinforces the importance of their friendship; in discussing the communal effort to save Cerrit, Riegel describes it as “one little spark of hope,” to which Iyengar adds “[i]t mattered that we were friends” (“Exandria Unlimited: Calamity Wrap Up” 1:38:43). Balancing both mitigated and unmitigated chance, the modification and upholding of rules, the PCs and GM collectively turn a time of utter desolation and ruin into a narrative of love and redemption.

The workings of chance and the PCs actions allow them to craft the uplifting story they desire to tell. The notion of desire is central to both fantasy and TTRPGs; just as Tolkien argues that fantasy is “plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” (134), Gary Alan Fine notes that all “rules are secondary to the desires of the players” (234). Consequently, while Mulligan maintains the rules when chance is necessary to that hopeful narrative, he breaks a number of RPG rules in the conclusion of Calamity to help the PCs fully achieve and experience the story they desire. Counter to the often unspoken rule of limiting events to the PCs’ point of view to further their immersion into the story and emphasize their vulnerability (Jara and Torner 277), Mulligan’s closing monologue expands beyond the PCs’ vision. He states “there are many things that you do not see, but it would be right for you to know,” switching to an unmoored view of the city as he describes the children and innocents of Avalir escaping destruction on the skyships that they rallied (“Fire and Ruin” 05:38:42). This underscores the PCs’ agency and the impact they had on the unfolding narrative.

Mulligan further breaks immersion in blurring the temporarily of their final moments, as he briefly transitions to a flashback between a younger Nydas and his brother, Eadalus (Mulligan), as they look up at the sky and dream of eventually making it to Avalir:

Eadalus: You think we’ll ever get there one day?

Nydas: Of course we will. We’re the Okiros. Nothing’s going to stop us.

Eadelus: Some things might. I don't know why I say you should get there, your head's already in the clouds.

Nydas: (laughs) Brother! It's important to dream!

Mulligan: It's important to dream . . . When you think of the future and what people will say of this time, do you think anyone will talk about how beautiful your dream was?

Nydas: No. But that's all right, because it was real for us. For those who survived, they will remember, and it will inspire them to dream of things far greater. (5:45:55)

While the Age of Arcanum will primarily be known for the arrogance and hubris of the mages who, at the height of their power, brought about the Calamity, Mulligan gives the PCs a moment to reflect on the fact that they have also told the story of how the Ring of Brass, so skilled as to be counted among the ruling elite of a magocracy, used the height of their power to avert an even worse outcome. The duality of this time period, the incredible wonders of the Age of Arcanum and all the possibilities that it nevertheless still represents, is best exemplified in Laerryn's invention of the leywright, which is instrumental to both instigating the Calamity and ensuring that it will not continue forever. While the PCs and the mages of the Age of Arcanum's dreams were misguided and corrupted by their arrogance, Mulligan helps the PCs ensure that the beauty of this age of wonders is not completely lost in its destruction. As Mulligan recites the known history of the Calamity, the centuries of brutal war to come before the Calamity finally ends, he builds off the PCs' highlighting the beautiful possibilities within this time of horror: "But, at the end of it all, hope will return as many times as it needs to" ("Fire and Ruin" 6:02:49). Both through and despite the mechanics of rules and fortune, Mulligan and the players illustrate the fundamentally optimistic nature of chance and failure in *D&D* through building a narrative of love, redemption, and hope from a time previously defined by destruction and sorrow.

Chapter 2: “[A]s olde stories tellen us”: Romance and the Fate of Fortune in Chaucer’s

Knight’s Tale

Few romances tackle the vicissitudes of Fortune¹⁷ as explicitly as the first of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Arcite and Palamon, the principal characters who begin as close friends but quickly become enemies as the tale unfolds, frequently complain about their ill-fortune both as prisoners of Theseus and rivals for the love of Emelye. They often do so through making direct reference to Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, the primarily medieval authority on fortune. While the romance is based on the *Teseida*, an epic poem that already heavily traffics in Boethian rhetoric, Jill Mann notes that “Chaucer takes pains in the *Knight’s Tale* to alter his Boccaccian source in order to emphasize the role of chance in the events of the narrative” (106).¹⁸ Chaucer brings both his philosophical source material and the workings of chance in romance to the forefront of his adaptation, which leaves the *Knight’s Tale* as a crucial stepping stone for establishing an alternate reading of fortune in medieval romance.

Chaucer’s romance is also a fitting text to explore different interpretations of the role of chance in romance because of its own multivalence. While many scholars argue that the text ultimately follows and endorses Boethian philosophy,¹⁹ Robert Stretter sees a “dual imagination” in Chaucer’s adaptation and critique of Boethian doctrine (71). Similarly, Elizabeth Salter highlights a duality in the *Knight’s Tale*’s depiction of both the darkness and optimism of romance, which she attributes to the “‘double voice’ of the poet-narrator” in the Knight and the

¹⁷ Capitalized Fortune refers to her personification, whereas lowercase fortune refers to the general concept.

¹⁸ She further highlights that nearly every key plot point is attributed to “aventure,” “cas,” or “hap”, particularly when Chaucer differs from his source material: though Arcite sees Emilia before Palemone in the *Teseida*, Palamon happens to see Emelye first “by aventure or cas” (line 1074); Palemone’s escape from prison, meticulously recounted in the original, is condensed into a miraculous escape “by aventure or destyne” (line 1465); and Palemone’s calculated plan to lie in wait for Arcite in one of his favorite haunts is replaced by Arcite not only wandering through that specific grove, but across Palamon’s exact hiding place, “by aventure” (line 1506, 1516).

¹⁹ See Jill Man’s “Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Knight’s Tale*,” Bernard D. Harder’s “Fortune’s Chain of Love: Chaucer’s Irony in Theseus’ Marriage Counselling,” and Julian N. Wasserman’s “Both Fixed and Free: Language and Destiny in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.”

diegetic Chaucer (34). I seek to unite these threads of scholarship regarding both Chaucer's dual imagination of Boethian doctrine and his double voice of romance in my analysis of the *Knight's Tale*. In addition to emphasizing uncontrollable chance, Chaucer's rendition of the *Knight's Tale* highlights that the agency of the storyteller affects the types of stories they attempt to tell.

Chaucer draws attention to the imprisoned Boethius's own investment in his philosophical conclusions through demonstrating that the Knight's investment in preserving a passing chivalric order influences his rendition of the tale. This double emphasis of not only the leanings of the Knight, but also of Boethius himself, illustrates the multiplicity of romance; while the *Knight's Tale* remains critical of conservative romances that offer simplistic answers in the power of gods and kings to order the chaotic realities of fortune, the tale upholds the essential optimism of both romance and *D&D* in demonstrating that individuals—be that the teller, characters, or audience—can still possess the agential capacity to affect the narrative. Rather than looking to God, both Boethius and the Knight ultimately turn to storytelling to achieve consolation in a world of largely uncontrollable chance. In so doing, they demonstrate that the generic conventions of romance do not necessarily rely on Boethian providence or existing social structures to achieve their optimistic happy endings.

Building the Chain: Links Between the *Consolation* and the *Knight's Tale*

Before I can address the *Knight's Tale's* deconstruction of Boethian rhetoric and romance, I must first establish its construction. Just as Morton W. Bloomfield follows Boethian doctrine in arguing that the seemingly random chance of romance would make sense if mortals could see from God's atemporal perspective (106-7),²⁰ many critics read Chaucer's incorporation of chance as following a Boethian ethos. This reading often hinges on Theseus' "First Mover" speech; after

²⁰ See the section titled "Rolling the Dice: The Narrative Role of Chance and Failure" in the introduction for a more detailed look at how Boethius' account of divine providence incorporates fortune and its intersection with medieval romance.

organizing a tournament for Palamon and Arcite to compete for Emelye, which results in Arcite winning and shortly after falling from his horse and dying, Theseus urges Palamon and Emelye to marry and make “vertu of necessitee,” as all things are part of the First Mover Jupiter’s “faire cheyne of love” (line 3042, 2991). This is a direct reference to Lady Philosophy’s description of God’s divine providence as a chain of love that holds and orders all aspects of the universe towards the supreme good (141).²¹ Mann further reads Theseus as a Boethian figure that recognizes the occasionally harsh realities of chance and the necessity to adapt, as his orchestration of Palamon and Emelye’s marriage makes it possible “to transform necessity *into* ‘vertu’, to respond to the pattern as it forms with a recognition of its passing chances for good, as well as the faith that its final shape will be revealed as concordant with the ‘cheyne of love’” (109). Charles Muscatine’s influential analysis of the *Knight’s Tale* draws a similar conclusion, calling Theseus “a representative of the highest chivalric conceptions of nobility . . . [as] he presides over the events and interprets them” (921-22). Muscatine further notes that Theseus’s speech equates cosmic order with the social and political order of his own rule, concluding that the aristocracy and their rule of law are bulwarks against the threat of chaos: “When the earthly designs suddenly crumble, true nobility is faith in the ultimate order of things” (929). Championing faith both in God and Kings, the *Knight’s Tale* appears to follow Boethian doctrine and the “innate conservatism” (Field 27) of romance optimism.

More recent scholarship has noted the cracks in this interpretation of Chaucer’s romance. Salter in particular represents the oft-cited bedrock upon which scholars explore the darker aspects of the *Knight’s Tale*. For Salter, the narrator’s abrupt transitions from splendid tableaux of nobility to the harsh realism of the knights’ violence reflects “one of the most basic themes of the

²¹ While Chaucer translated the *Consolation* into Middle English with his *Boece*, I will primarily be working with David R. Slavitt’s translation. Slavitt’s version, unlike Chaucer’s, preserves the distinction between the prose and verse passages in the *Consolation*, which is particularly relevant for my purposes in this chapter.

poem—the darkness and suffering which exist at the very center of this radiant chivalric world” (13). Ronald S. Librach goes even further, arguing that the *Knight's Tale* unveils its own “romantic veneer” (10); he asserts that Chaucer’s vivid description of the tournament’s trappings contrasts with Arcite’s equally descriptive and prolonged death just outside the bounds of Theseus’ tournament (lines 2742-2808), demonstrating that “death cannot be romanticized or ameliorated by the trappings of chivalric ritual” (4). Indeed, Chaucer’s critique of romance’s unrealistic promises in the power of knights, kings, and even the rituals many scholars cite as the happy-medium happy ending, does seem to critique romance as a whole. Alternatively, it can also be read as critique of the type of romance that the Knight prefers to tell. The duality of the romance derives in part from the reality that the diegetic Chaucer and the titular Knight, despite both relaying the narrative, are not quite telling the same story.

Upon closer examination, the *Knight's Tale's* position regarding Boethian doctrine further troubles a straightforward reading of the romance. Stretter views Arcite and Palamon as speaking for the painful experience of human suffering regardless of the ultimate source or purpose. He cites Arcite’s complaint about the overwhelming misfortune of being removed from Emelye in what should be his fortuitous release from prison (lines 1260-67), in which Arcite reprises Lady Philosophy’s metaphor of the wandering drunk man’s misguided attempts to find happiness down the wrong paths (63), as actually contradicting a straightforward Boethian reading: “Instead of a lesson about the folly of the desires that characterize the human condition, Chaucer focuses on what it feels like to be in that condition, on the experience of frustration and disorientation” (73). Faced with the painful reality of Fortune’s whims, in which the meddling gods and the malevolent Saturn cause the death of Arcite, Stretter asserts that Theseus represents a balance between Boethian theory and actionable coping methods in his suggestion of marriage

to regulate the potentially destructive emotional experience of Arcite's passing (77). Stretter argues that these irreconcilable ideas find some resolution, if not in Theseus' philosophical speech, at least in his concrete actions, which is a point to which I shall return. The tension he identifies in the *Knight's Tale*, in which Boethian philosophy provides the language of complaint about Fortune rather than the consoling solutions of Lady Philosophy, bears further examination.

“[O]nly grieving Muses”: *The Consolation of Philosophy* as Literature

To understand how Chaucer critiques the ideological leanings of the Knight, we must first unpack the preoccupations of one of the *Knight's Tale's* crucial sources. While much of scholarship treats the *Consolation* as a primarily straightforward philosophical text, some critics argue that approaching it as an interpretable literary work better encapsulates its complexities.²² As the *Consolation* alternates between verse and prose, a number of scholars have argued that it should be read as a Menippean satire that explores philosophy's limitations as opposed to extolling its virtues.²³ After all, the text's interplay between poems and prose in the text does acknowledge the inadequacy of purely logical arguments; while Lady Philosophy predictably touts philosophical prose as the ultimate cure to Boethius' suffering, believing that the emotional Muses will only worsen his condition with “the useless thorns of intemperate passion” (4), she does use verse throughout the *Consolation*. Even she concedes that they must first begin with more mild remedies “so that the sore and angry place may be softened and soothed” (22).

²² See Antonia Donato's “Self-Examination and Consolation in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*,” John R. Fortin's “The Nature of Consolation in *The Consolation of Philosophy*,” Thomas F. Curley's “*The Consolation of Philosophy* as a Work of Literature,” and Amy Blumenthal's “New Muses: Poetry in Boethius's *Consolatio*.”

²³ Peter Dronke, Joel Relihan, and John Marenbon all discuss *The Consolation* as Menippean satire, though the last two most directly engage with the satire aspect. In Joel Relihan's *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, he argues that the *Consolation* is a Menippean satire that highlights the utter failures of philosophy in favour of Christian faith. John Marenbon's *Boethius* offers, I would argue more persuasively, a middle ground approach that instead finds Lady Philosophy's arguments incomplete, as they do not fully answer Boethius' questions. His main point of contention is that Lady Philosophy never provides a concrete path or way for Boethius to actually grasp or achieve the supreme good (162-3), but see also Chapters Six and Seven for a more in-depth discussion of how Lady Philosophy's distinct arguments do not combine into a coherent philosophy.

Antonia Donato notes that this dual approach mirrors ancient consolation literature, which combines theoretical discussions with rhetorical and psychological devices, arguing that Lady Philosophy's style is designed "to help Boethius to internalize her theories by presenting them with a medium (ie. poetry) which appeals to his emotions" (421). Prose is thus associated with the rational mind and verse with the emotional body, both of which need to be addressed to help Boethius and to ensure that he fully grasps Lady Philosophy's arguments.

While the majority of verse passages in the *Consolation* align with Lady Philosophy's strategy in primarily summarizing the conclusions she arrives at in prose, the diegetic Boethius' poems suggest that her cure might not be as effective as she thinks. Boethius similarly responds in both prose and poems, though apart from his opening lament and short retrospection in Book I Verse III, only Verse V in Book 1 and Verse III in Book V are explicitly written by his character. In the same vein of his opening verse, in which Boethius states that his poems "are those / that only grieving Muses would prompt me to compose" (1), these last two verses are almost entirely comprised of his complaints: in Book 1 Verse V, he laments the injustices of the world in which God does not correct "slippery Fortune play[ing] her random games" (19); and in Book V Verse III, he struggles with the "incompatible truths" of divine foreknowledge and human freewill that a "human mind, enmeshed in flesh, / cannot discern" (157). While Lady Philosophy's arguments have answers to his complaints, like Palamon and Arcite, Boethius' poems express his questions and distress that philosophy does not completely resolve. Contrary to Lady Philosophy's use of poetry to address Boethius' bodily emotions, her doctrine preaches turning away from lowly earthly pleasures and looking upwards to the supreme good of God, which she reinforces through Orpheus' tragic loss of Eurydice in Book III Verse XII: "[if] you look back on the darkness, / the excellence you have achieved / you will lose, looking back, looking down" (105). Amy

Blumenthal notes that this circumvents the fundamental truth that humans experience the world through their physical bodies and have emotional as well as rational lives, leading her to read the many questions that make up Book V Verse III as a “cry of despair about the possibility of unity in duality [that] carries forward the subtle critique of a Philosophy that ignores the essential duality of human nature” (28). Far from being a Chaucerian addition, Boethius’ final poem suggests that the *Consolation* does not address the full experience of human suffering.

In a similar vein, Boethius’ dwindling input in Book V and its lack of a concluding poem despite the preceding books all ending with a verse passage are the main points of contention for scholars who are critical of Lady Philosophy’s conclusions. John R. Fortin succinctly captures the implication of this omission regarding Lady Philosophy’s consolation: “[T]he lack of a poem here leaves the entire text, which begins with a poem, lacking a proper literary closure and thus seemingly incomplete” (304). Blumenthal further argues that the absence of a poem suggests that the diegetic Boethius is not persuaded by Lady Philosophy’s arguments, stating that this silence “makes conspicuous the silence of Boethius” (28). After all, Lady Philosophy’s assertion that a terribly unfortunate life can be part of God’s divine plan is hardly a comforting prospect, even for Boethius himself. As the verse passages are associated with either Boethius psychologically grappling with Lady Philosophy’s arguments or her attempts to make her logic resonate emotionally, both Boethius poems and the disappearing verse draw attention to the implicit inability of philosophy to provide emotional consolation to someone in Boethius’ position.

In fact, I would argue that Boethius’ real circumstances are crucial to understanding the project of the *Consolation*, as this reality greatly influences Lady Philosophy’s logic and conclusions. In Donato’s reading of the text as consolation literature, he argues that contemporary scholarship on whether the *Consolation* succeeds or fails in his titular goal

overlooks two crucial possibilities: that the text is a direct product of Boethius' emotional turmoil and suffering, and that he turned to writing it in an attempt to come to terms with his own personal tragedy (401).²⁴ Indeed, the diegetic Boethius' implicit critique of Lady Philosophy ignoring the emotional reality of human existence could equally apply to those assuming that Boethius was or should have approached the *Consolation* as a purely intellectual exercise. Wendy Raudenbush Olmsted similarly reads the *Consolation* as an example of how human nature and the limits of the inquirer affects religious writings and conclusions, noting that Lady Philosophy's reasonings uniquely apply to a man trapped in prison: "Boethius's religion supports the person who may be cut off from community, from friendship, from positive action. It provides a way for the solitary individual to overcome his isolation and understand himself to be in relation to all else that is" (35). The philosophy of the *Consolation* does appear fairly targeted; the idea that all is ultimately ordered to God's plan even if flawed mortal perception cannot see it, that the partial goods of earthly love are fleeting and one must turn to the supreme good and love of God that connects all things, are comforting concepts to a man unjustly held in isolation and awaiting execution. This would also explain why Boethius' critique of Lady Philosophy remains implicit and never directly challenges her conclusions. For both the real author and diegetic character, the realization that even his tailor-made philosophy does not fully console him would likely be a painful truth, allowing Boethius' silence to quietly reflect what he cannot quite bring himself to conclude. Taken as a deeply personal work of literature as opposed to a philosophical treatise, the *Consolation* reveals how profoundly the interests and motivations of the storyteller can impact the stories they tell. As scholarship on fortune in medieval romance largely takes Boethius' work at face value, this reading of the *Consolation* opens up new avenues

²⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, some early critics have questioned whether Boethius wrote the *Consolation* during his wrongful imprisonment. For one of the most recent and comprehensive accounts, see Henry Chadwick's first chapter in *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, especially pp. 66-8.

for understanding the role of individual agency, chance, and the power of gods and kings in romance, which Chaucer readily explores in *The Knight's Tale*.

“But it is good a man been at his large”: The Knight in the *Knight's Tale*

Just as Boethius' needs greatly influence the *Consolation*, Chaucer renders the titular Knight's own personal leanings visible in the conservative message of the *Knight's Tale*. This starts even before the Knight begins; Nora Corrigan notes that the game-loving Knight drawing the lot to go first in the *General Prologue* ostensibly “by aventure, or sort, or cas” (line 844) is not necessarily an accident, as it allows Chaucer to hint to both the fictional and real audience that games, much like the culminating tournament, are open to manipulation and may mask hidden agendas (149). The Knight even directly states that he chooses to emphasize certain details in his telling while leaving out others. In describing Emelye's visit to Diana's temple before the tournament, the Knight admits that he saw “many other wonder storie” depicted in the art adorning the temple walls, but instead chooses to only relay images of disorder and celebrates his freedom to decide what to include, saying “it is good a man been at large” (line 2073, 2288). Brooke Bergan reads this acknowledgement of the narrator as final arbiter of his rendition as another aspect of the Knight's obsession with order in response to social change. Like the largely middle-class pilgrims listening to his tale imply, the economic shift away from feudalism in the fourteenth century renders the crusading Knight a relic of a largely bygone chivalric era: “[T]he Knight is menaced not by far-off infidels, but by the very world he comes from, a world in which he will soon no longer have a place” (Bergan 12). The Knight's fascination with the rituals of chivalry and nobility takes on a different tone when keeping his precarious position in mind.

Indeed, Chaucer emphasizing the Knight's threadbare attire and rusty mail coat in the *Prologue*, even with the qualifier that the Knight has freshly returned from an expedition (lines

75-77), provides some context for the Knight's repeated emphasis not just of the pomp and circumstance of chivalric life, but also the accompanied deference to social standing (line 2192, 2573, 2735) and the associated cost (lines 1882-3, 1900, 1908). Read in this light, the otherwise minor detail that Theseus gave an unrecognizable Arcite the "gold to mayntene his degree" (line 1441) reflects the yearnings of a knight who no longer enjoys that same support. Down on his luck and all too aware of the chaos one's life can fall into without a stipend, the Knight is deeply invested in preserving the chivalric social order in which he would enjoy wealth and status.

The Knight's conservative inclinations similarly influence his portrayal of individual desires as socially destabilizing forces. Retha Knoetze also positions the *Knight's Tale* within the rise of individualistic and commercial attitudes in the fourteenth century, arguing that Palamon and Arcite's destructive quest for Emelye's hand demonstrates both love's ability to create chaos that can upend the social order and the necessity of the aristocracy to mediate individual desires and channel them towards the common good, particularly during times of social change (95). Indeed, the narrator's apparent disinterest in the people that make up his tale is well documented; many critics have noted that the characters, especially the indistinguishable Palamon and Arcite, are more types than distinct individuals, with Knoetze specifically noting that Emelye's desire to not marry is ignored in service of the greater good (94). This fact, along with the flat characters, aligns with Lee Patterson's analysis of chivalric knighthood in the *Knight's Tale* as a conservative enterprise that subordinates the needs and will of the individual to the social collective: "Chivalry entailed a form of selfhood insistently, even exclusively, public. It stressed a collective or corporate self-definition and so ignored the merely personal and individual" (168). While romances also tend to focus on questing knights optimistically reaching for and achieving their goals,²⁵ even these individual achievements often serve and reinforce the larger status quo.

²⁵ See "There is Always Hope: Fantasy's Content and Function" in the introduction.

And yet, just as the Knight's investment in the conservative social order reflects his own interests, his portrayal of love's destructive power also serves his own goals. In her discussion of Arcite's death and Palamon's betrothal to Emelye, Corrigan highlights how the Knight's life and motivations provide some context for his lack of care regarding the injustice of their fates: "It is worth remembering that the teller of the tale is a veteran of many battles, who has seen how swift and arbitrary death can be; he is also a father of of the young Squire, a 'lovyere' and 'lusty bachelor' [line 8], and thus has personal reasons to contemplate the transience of youth and life" (157). While the Knight extols the necessity of putting aside your own wants and needs for the sake of social order and community harmony, his tale conveniently supports his own desires. Much like Boethius' *Consolation*, the *Knight's Tale* can be read as the personal undertaking of a man grappling with circumstances beyond his control. It is no surprise that a knight of a fading age, evidently a little too vulnerable to the whims of Fortune, tells a story in which the characters cannot control their fate, where they feel that Fortune is a fickle god that brings only destitution and death, and thus requires the firm hand of a king to step in and ensure a happy ending.

"Wel hath Fortune yturned thee the dys": The Agency of Individuals

Despite Arcite and Palamon's complaints, they are not quite the victims at the mercy of Fortune that they proclaim. Alan T. Gaylord is one of the few critics that highlights the agency that Arcite does have, arguing that it is not Saturn's meddling, but Arcite's decision to let his passions override his reason, that seals his fate. He notes that while Arcite first attributes his imprisonment to Saturn and the constellations under which he was born (lines 1087-90), and then later blames Saturn and Juno (lines 1328-31), Theseus and the history of Thebes has much more to do with Arcite and Palamon's imprisonment than any divine force (178-9). Gaylord follows a traditional Boethian reading, but his analysis of how Arcite and Palamon continue to shift blame

demonstrates how their perception of their plight greatly reduces their chances of improving their situation: “Although they blame the gods, the stars, the tyranny of Theseus, and their general bad luck, we see them shaping their own fortune by the way they reduce their chance to make reasonable choices” (179). In fact, their own complaints demonstrate how profoundly their determination to wallow in despair, and, much like Boethius, staunchly maintain a negative view of Fortune,²⁶ closes off avenues of action. While Palamon bemoans that Fortune could allow Arcite, now released from prison, to gather allies and resources to make war on Thebes and marry Emelye “by some aventure or some treetee” (line 1288), Arcite laments that the imprisoned Palamon remains closer and thus has a better chance of Fortune providing an opportunity to attain her hand, crying ““Wel hath Fortune yturned thee the dys” (line 1238). Neither Arcite or Palamon see the potential in their own situation that the other discerns. They do not seem to even recognize that they could attempt to create these opportunities themselves without waiting on Fortune’s whims—Fortune turning the dice *for* Palamon, removing any reference to the man ostensibly rolling them, suggests that neither view themselves as active players in the game.

Beyond the spurious connection to TTRPGs, this reference to dice further reflects their refusal to take responsibility for their situation and their actions. As touched on in the introduction, dice games in the medieval period were associated with pagan divination and the belief that some external force, be it Fortune or God, controls what seems to be chance. It would appear that Saturn, who sends the Fury that causes Arcite to fall from his horse and die, is the final arbiter of the characters’ unlucky fortunes. This seemingly uncontrollable fate aligns with the medieval conception of dice gaming, as Rhiannon Purdie highlights that “in dice-games the *sole* operative factor (barring cheating) is chance” (168). And yet, Purdie’s wording reveals that

²⁶ See “Rolling the Dice: The Narrative Role of Chance and Failure” and “Of Dice and Men: Chance and Romance in the Middle Ages” in the introduction for Boethius’ characterization of Fortune as fundamentally fickle and cruel.

even in games that are supposedly dictated by chance, there remains the possibility of, legitimately or illegitimately, tipping the scales. Much like the drawing of lots that begins the storytelling game, dice rolls are still open to the influence of individuals. As TTRPGs demonstrate in allowing GMs some control over chance in determining the difficulty of and when to call for a roll, individuals do have some agency in choosing to play and roll the dice.

Similarly, it is ultimately Arcite and Palamon who determine the tale's ending. The gods only enter as players after Palamon and Arcite pray to Venus and Mars respectively, actively inviting their influence. While they did not explicitly invite Saturn to act as adjudicator for their conflicting pleas, his solution actually stays within the bounds of their requests. Palamon does "ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie" in the tournament and instead prays for Venus to give him "fully possession / of Emelye" (lines 2239, 2242-3), while Arcite asks for Mars to "do that I tomorwe have victorie" (line 2405). And, as is so often tradition with rash requests, they get exactly what they ask for: Arcite wins the tournament, but dies shortly after, allowing Palamon to marry Emelye.²⁷ While Corrigan is right to point out that their fate being determined by their exact wording is not particularly just (156), it nevertheless implies that a different outcome was possible had they just been more precise in their prayers. They may be ignorant of all the gods' influence, but, as the dice metaphor implies, their wills are but one of the many factors at play.

Indeed, some late medieval authors deemphasize the role of God or Fortune in romance. In Marilyn Corrie's analysis of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, she argues that Arthur's destiny arises from his own choices, exemplifying a shift in Fortune's portrayal:

In conformity with Lady Philosophy's more implicit conceptualizations of Fortune in [the *Consolation*] as the agent of the fate that God has justly ordained for somebody, several

²⁷ Emelye also prays to Diana to remain chaste like the virgin goddess (lines 2297-2313), but, as befits the teller of the tale, her desires are ignored. Although, one could argue that even her prayers are somewhat respected, as she does acquiesce to marrying whoever desires her more "if my destynee be shapen so" (line 2323).

authors of vernacular literature in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries likewise reconceived what Fortune was: rather than determine what happened to people, Fortune, they claimed, dispensed the fate that people had determined for themselves. (695)

While this can ultimately follow a Boethian ethos, as their role in God's divine plan would be determined by the actions they will choose to take,²⁸ there is no Christian God adjudicating the happenings of the *Knight's Tale*. Even the pagan equivalent in Jupiter, to whom Theseus attributes a Boethian godhood in calling him the "prince and cause of alle thyng" (line 3036), cannot mediate the strife between Venus and Mars, leaving Saturn to step in and ensure that all the gods agree to his plan (lines 2442-2446). Stretter notes that Theseus's attempts at creating both practical closure and Boethian consolation are threatened by the reality of Saturn, as he highlights that Chaucer's addition of the strife between Venus and Mars and the troubled power dynamics of Jupiter and Saturn seems "only to demonstrate [Jupiter's] inability to govern the heavens—a detail with serious ramifications for [Theseus'] divine hierarchy" (70). While the Knight extols the power of both God and kings in Theseus' speech, a closer examination reveals the cracks in his representation of a divine being or aristocrat ordering the events of the tale.

Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is a mess of wills—the gods, the characters, and even the titular Knight all vie for dominance, but none are quite able to fully control the narrative. Like *D&D*, there is no one being whose will can completely override the actions of others to determine the outcome; even Saturn's plan, which "ful soone hath pleased every part" (line 2446), implies that he had to convince the arguing Olympian council to agree before implementing his plan.²⁹

Revealing how the Knight's own interests and predilections lead him to tell what he believes to

²⁸ See "Rolling the Dice: The Narrative Role of Chance and Failure" for a description of how Boethius' atemporal depiction of God allows for individuals to still have agency even within God's providence.

²⁹ See Marc S. Guidry's "The Parliaments of Gods and Men in the *Knight's Tale*" for a related and in-depth analysis on how Theseus' court and that of the Olympians are very similar institutions that operate on systemic violence and cynical conditions.

be a conservative romance in which the divine might of the aristocracy manages to turn the chaotic whims of Fortune into a happy ending, Chaucer allows the audience to see the seams barely holding the Knight's version of the tale together. After all, this is also Chaucer's telling of the Knight's tale; his *Prologue* proclamation that "Whoso shal telle a tale after a man, / He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan / Everich a word, if it be in his charge, / Al speke he never so rudeliche and large, / Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewre" (lines 731-735) leaves the author plenty of room to accurately relay the Knight's account while allowing the truth that he sees underlying his narrative to remain clear. Romance's happy endings can rely on having faith in God's plan, the social hierarchy, a practical marriage, or something else entirely—it depends on the leanings of the one telling the tale. While Stretter reads the crowning marriage as "a practical, communal, ritualistic response to fortune," as it allows them "to make virtue of necessity and thereby to claim a measure of human agency in a world mostly beyond the reach of human control" (77), that communal ritual can also be the collective participation in the performance and reception of medieval romance. As befits the writer and orator, the optimism of Chaucer's romance can derive from faith in the power of individuals and the story itself to emotionally console its listeners, as romance, much like TTRPGs, can incorporate the ill-turns of fortune that no being can fully control into an ultimately happy narrative.

"[A]s olde stories tellen us": Storytellers, Audiences, and the Narrative Game

The Knight's deviations from the *Teseida* also draw attention to what the narrator chooses not to change. The Knight heavily foreshadows Arcite's death; he evokes Arcite's funeral long before he is ever burned on his wooden pyre, describing him in exile as "lene he wex and drye as is a shaft; / His eyen holwe and grisly to biholde, / His hewe fallow and pale as asshen colde" (lines 1362-64). Heartsick for Emelye, Arcite even proclaims "I am bud deed; ther nys no

remedye,” and “That shapen was my deeth erst whan my sherte” (line 1274, 1566). While the Knight’s proclamation that “Arcita moot dye” (line 2761) refers to the fact that all medical interventions have failed (lines 2743-2760), it also implies that, as the Knight’s tale is an adaptation of Boccaccio’s, its ending must be a foregone conclusion. And yet, Mann points out that Chaucer emphasizing the role of chance in the narrative also shows the other ways the story could have unfolded. Regarding Palamon and Arcite’s extended laments about the other’s better luck, she notes that “[w]e are made conscious also of the alternative stories that chance could dictate, as Palamon and Arcite each speculate on various ways in which Fortune might produce events to favour the other’s suit” (106). As previously discussed, the Knight (or Chaucer) changes his source material. He even plants the seed that Palamon, not Arcite, might be the one to die; right after Arcite finishes his speech in which he bemoans that his death was ordained (lines 1542-71), Palamon, freshly released from prison and realizing who he has stumbled upon, “thoughte that through his herte / He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde,” prompting him to angrily leap from the bushes “as he were wood, with face deed and pale” (lines 1574-78).

Just as the Knight changes who sees Emelye first (lines 1070-77), could this foreshadow that the currently unarmed Palamon is about to be speared on Arcite’s sword, or that this will happen at the tournament? Could the delay in the sign signifying that Palamon’s prayer is answered (lines 2268-9), that pause which allows a breadth of indetermination and uncertainty to creep in, hint that the Knight may also change the ending? Mann’s analysis of Chaucer’s similarly Boethian *Troilus and Criseyde* readily applies to this moment of suspense:

The ‘openness’ of the story, our present sensation of suspense as we live through each event as it happens, gives us a sense of its fluidity, its vulnerability to chance . . . Through narrative suspense, Chaucer makes us alert to the possibility of a different story. (100)

Though Mann ultimately advocates for a Boethian reading of chance, her insight also points to the possibility for the first time reader or listener to believe, given the Knight's other changes, that the ending just might be different, too. After all, the Knight transforms the source material in his retelling; Julian N. Wasserman states in his discussion of fate in the romance that "although Chaucer's narrator may not change the ending of his source, he has not exactly told that tale either" (214). In the same manner that the Knight's own personal leanings affect his conservative take on romance, his own personal interests may also have influenced his decision to imply that individuals cannot change their fate, that they instead must both rely on a divinely ordained king for salvation and subordinate their desires to his will. The dual and nearly dueling storytellers allow Chaucer to leave multiple interpretations and possibilities latent within the tale.

In a similar vein, multiple critics have touched on the lack of closure in the *Knight's Tale's* conclusion. For Salter, this ambiguity can be traced to the Knight's disinterest in the darker aspects of his tale, most notably the horrific and undeserved death of Arcite:

The narrator, who, over the course of the work, has not shown himself sensitive to finer distinctions, gives no sign now that he is disturbed by Theseus's explanation of divine order and benevolence and the negative proof of it in the lives of mortal subjects. For him, the *Tale* is done; the unions of Palamon and Emelye cancels out all memory of what has led to it. (31).

While the battle-hardened Knight does not flinch at Arcite's death, for the audience, the unanswered injustices both in Theseus' Prime Mover speech and the Knight's unquestioning acceptance of his explanation leave a conclusion that may not be so convincing. Palamon might enjoy the typical romance marriage that papers over the pain it took to get that happy ending, but his is not the only story in the *Knight's Tale*. The Knight evidently does not see the disconnect in

his juxtaposition between a conquering Theseus being crowned with laurel, closing the chapter on Thebes with “And ther he lyveth in joye and in honour / Terme of his lyf; what nedeth wordes mo” before hard cutting to the living royals of Thebes imprisoned “in a tour, in angwissh and in wo” (lines 1028-30), but the audience remains free to pick up on and follow the threads of the multiple narratives contained within his tale. Much like Boethius slowly quieting as Lady Philosophy continues to espouse her rhetoric, no one responds to Theseus’ speech, leaving the audience room to debate the validity of the Knight’s conclusions.

In fact, the parallel between Boethius’ final poem bemoaning his limited perception and the window into the Olympian council further points both to the inadequacy of Lady Philosophy’s logic and the many possible interpretations of the *Knight’s Tale*. The diegetic Boethius’ last extended contribution to the *Consolation* emphasizes the weight of suffering and the incomplete consolation that Lady Philosophy’s teachings bring to earthly humanity, as we can only see enough to recognize the depth of our lack:

The body’s dense
flesh obscures our recollection
of the separate truths and the one truth
and yet allows us at least to suspect
that we all live in an awkward state
with inklings of our ignorance
that turn out to be our greatest wisdom
as if we had long ago ascended
and beheld from on high the exalted vision
of which we now retain nothing

but the sense of loss of that exaltation. (157-8)

In the *Knight's Tale*, we actually get a glimpse into the realm of gods on high, and it is not a pretty sight: The gods bicker, the supposedly reigning Jupiter is impotent, and the malignant Saturn "Hath moore power than woot any man" (lines 2439-55). Does this simply reveal through dramatic irony the truth that there is no benevolent god, pagan or otherwise, ordering all things? Does this suggest, as Mann contends, that there must be an even higher plane of which we cannot conceive or perceive from which the real Prime Mover sees and orders all (108)? Following Barbara Nolan's secular reading, do we reject the anachronistic addition of a Christian god and the supreme good he represents and instead turn to the earthly goods of marriage and storytelling for their power to orchestrate moments of joy (280-1)? Do we follow Stretter's assertion that the source of suffering is irrelevant, as theories do little to lessen the visceral experience of great pain (72)? While Theseus and the Knight attempt to assert their reading, Chaucer leaves that interpretive power with the audience. As Corrigan highlights, the Knight even seems to acknowledge this overriding authority, noting that the Knight's address to the pilgrims to "Demeth as yow liste, ye that can" (line 1353) also "reminds the audience of their own power as well, implying that the right answer is not predefined but is determined by the listeners' will and pleasure" (159-60). They do not have to prop up or extol the same divine mandates and power structures that the Knight is so desperate to believe in. Contrary to the story the Knight is trying to tell, and much like modern TTRPGs, each individual retains the agency to follow the narrative in which they are most interested.

A narrative that is most interesting to me is the tale of Orpheus that, quite conspicuously, is only obliquely mentioned in the *Knight's Tale*. While Arcite misinterprets Lady Philosophy's statement of "who can give rules to lovers" (105), a reference to the doomed Orpheus being

distracted by the partial good of his earthly love for Eurydice, as giving him license to do anything necessary to pursue Emelye (lines 1163-1171), the tale never directly invokes the story of the two lovers. Curiously, the Knight does reference the successful katabasis of Theseus and Perotheus, though his rendition is rather unique; rather than both descending to kidnap Persephone and Perotheus ultimately being left behind, the Knight claims that “as olde books sayn,” after one of the pair died, the other traveled to Hell to save their friend (lines 1198-1200).³⁰ Why is the tragedy of Orpheus, a readily applicable story of being unable to rectify the death of a loved one that is already directly referenced in the *Consolation*, referenced so indirectly in the Knight’s version? Why does the Knight rewrite Perotheus’ narrative to more closely mirror the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice while claiming he made no such changes?

It almost seems like the Knight is avoiding explicitly mentioning Orpheus, which could very well be his intent. In Wasserman’s analysis of how language determines the fates of the characters, he highlights that “words are the means by which destinies are determined . . . but no one may with certainty know all of the separate and possibly contradictory meanings, or fates, which those words may signify” (196). Just as Palamon and Arcite are not fully in control of how their prayers are interpreted, so too is the Knight not fully in control of others’ interpretations of his tale. In a similar vein to the alternate stories that Mann sees lurking within the *Knight’s Tale*, the Knight may have been avoiding directly invoking a contemporary Orpheus retelling in which the predictions of the teller does not either require a disempowered individual and their desires to be subordinated to the collective, or rely on divine or secular authority to regulate the inherently negative and destructive turns of fortune. After all, as the Knight himself demonstrates, we do not always have to faithfully follow what “olde stories tellen us” (line 859).

³⁰ Phillipa Hardman reads this successful version of the rescue-descent narrative as contrasting the ideal love of friendship with Arctie’s selfish and destructive romantic love that destroys his relationship with Palamon and ultimately leads to his death (546), though this does not explain the strangely distant reference.

Chapter 3: “It is no bot of mannes deth”: The Power of Chance and Romance in *Sir Orfeo*

Much like the *Knight's Tale*, the popular romance *Sir Orfeo* has a long tradition of diverging readings. As Jeff Rider succinctly summarizes, there is an “almost utter lack of accord among critics as to its interpretation” (361), which can be attributed in large part to the poem’s often clashing frames of reference. While many critics read Orfeo’s journey into Fairy to save his wife through the lens of the tale’s Celtic, Christian, or political roots,³¹ much less attention has been paid to the Orpheus retelling’s connection to Boethian doctrine. This is likely due in part to Orfeo’s successful rescue of Heurodis in a seemingly obvious disjunction with Boethius’ representation of Orpheus losing Eurydice in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Lady Philosophy’s reference to Orpheus looking back at Eurydice in Book III Verse XII represents the lover tragically looking down to earthly and bodily partial goods after ascending to both the supreme good of God and the mind’s philosophical heights (105). While some scholars have argued that *Sir Orfeo* does follow the Christian tradition of vertical moralization, Patricia Vicari notes in particular that Heurodis does not make sense as a Boethian allegorized Eurydice, as she “is neither bad nor particularly sensual: she is simply unfortunate” (76).³² After all, Orfeo being able to change his fortune and rescue his wife in what James and Peggy Knapp call a parable about “the reconciliation of earthly love” (69) seems to hardly fit with the *Consolation*’s message of turning away from joy and fulfillment in one’s mortal life.

And yet, as I established in the previous chapter, there is some unresolved tension in the *Consolation* that suggests Boethius is not fully convinced by Lady Philosophy’s arguments. This

³¹ For a summation of the Christian readings and a discussion of the romance’s oft-cited Celtic and kingship-oriented interpretations, see Patrizia Grimaldi’s “*Sir Orfeo* as Celtic Folk-Hero, Christian Pilgrim, and Medieval King”

³² In his seminal *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, John Block Friedman staunchly maintains that the anonymous author of Orfeo was influenced by this Christian tradition, reasoning that the corruptible Eve of Heurodis would be easily spirited away from her garden by a fairy-esque Satan (125). Vicari takes issue with Friedman’s reading, conversely noting that Orfeo “has elements quite foreign to the medieval Latin traditions about Orpheus, elements which give Friedman difficulty to reconcile with that tradition” (75).

undercurrent of ambivalence also extends to his incorporation of the Orpheus myth. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler highlight in their introduction to Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation* that "[a]mong the partial goods that men and women seek, Boethius does not list human love" (396). Lady Philosophy may cast earthly love as a partial good, but Boethius' silence does not necessarily imply that he agrees with this interpretation. There are even some contradictions in Lady Philosophy's moralization of Orpheus' loss of Eurydice; John Marenbon notes that in Book IV Verse I, the first verse following the Orpheus poem, Lady Philosophy "promises Boethius a successful assent to his true fatherland and invites him to look back down at what he has left [108]—precisely what [Book III Verse XII] ended by forbidding" (148). Building on my discussion in Chapter Two, Lady Philosophy's mixed signals and divergent arguments do not quite cohere into a unified message, and they fail to emotionally console the author's diegetic character despite the fact that their message of forgoing earthly happiness for the supreme good of God is tailor made for the isolated and falsely imprisoned Boethius.

Orfeo, much like Chaucer's rendition of the *Knight's Tale*, can be read as following an alternate Boethian tradition in acting on its implicit tensions and contradictions, particularly as it pertains to the experience of grief. Medical ethics professor Dominic J.C. Wilkinson briefly cites the *Consolation* as he challenges whether it is even possible for philosophy to fully comfort those who are grieving. Much like I discussed in my examination of scholarship on the *Consolation* in the previous chapter, Wilkinson highlights that there is a crucial difference between rational and psychological consolation; while philosophical treatises may provide the former, leading people to actually care less about death is a much more difficult prospect (276). Primarily using the Boethian-adjacent atemporal and impersonal identity philosophy of Derek Parfit, Wilkinson argues that his philosophy fails to provide true consolation because the pain of

grief “typically arises from the loss of a relationship... [and is thus] ineluctably temporally rooted” (Wilkinson 292). Much like the *Knight’s Tale* (though not the titular Knight), *Orfeo* honours the suffering of its characters, as whether pain can ultimately be located in God’s atemporal divine plan³³ or the whims of Fortune is immaterial to the present experience of suffering that comes from losing a loved one. As Felicity Riddy notes in her analysis of Heurodis’ and the court’s farewell to Orfeo, “in both instances there is less emphasis on the actual moment of parting than on the grief of those left behind. The fact that one departure is willed and another is not does not affect the desolation of the bereft” (7). In allowing Orfeo to rescue Heurodis, the romance acknowledges that there is no source to which grief can be ascribed that comforts the grieving. The reason behind the loss does not change the fact that a loved one is gone and that you will never see them again, that you can never make any new memories with them as the old ones begin to fade. Allowing Orfeo to actually save his wife thus consoles the tale’s audience in a way that philosophy never can.

The romance provides emotional consolation not through the limited comforts of philosophy, but through the Tolkienian “consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending” (153). Thomas Honegger argues that *Orfeo*’s dual ending in both the return of Heurodis and the successful testing of the steward’s loyalty was likely to have shaped Tolkien’s theories of Consolation and Eucatastrophe in “On Fairy-stories” (124),³⁴ but I contend that the rescue of Heurodis is the true climactic eucatastrophe that crowns the tale. Not only does this particular happy event speak to “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death”

³³ See “Rolling the Dice: The Narrative Role of Chance and Failure” in the introduction for an explanation of God’s sweeping atemporal vision, divine providence, and Boethius’ negative views of Fortune in the *Consolation*, as these points will be relevant throughout the chapter. “Of Dice and Men: Chance and Romance in the Middle Ages” in the introduction also briefly mentions Boethius’ depiction of a fickle and cruel Fortune.

³⁴ Jeffrey in “Literature in an Apocalyptic Age” and Honegger in “Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, and Consolation in *Sir Orfeo*” view Orfeo’s rescue of Heurodis as eucatastrophe. Jeffrey emphasizes the chance of failure and follows Tolkien’s religious conception in positioning Orfeo as a “biblical prophet” (442), while Honegger does not mention the vital element of dyscatastrophe, and instead focuses more on the consolation of Orfeo’s happy ending (123-24).

(Tolkien 153), but, much like I established in the context of TTRPGs and *Calamity*, it illustrates that the possibility of failure and the limitations of the protagonist are crucial to the secular eucatastrophe.

Just as Roy Michael Liuzza contends that *Orfeo*'s "manipulations of sources and contexts may be read as a commentary on . . . medieval popular romance in general" (274), I argue that the poem foregrounds the necessity of fortune for the impact of both this branch of romance as a genre and its own ultimately happy conclusion. In stark contrast to the Knight of the *Knights Tale*, who is comfortable both condemning Arcite to a painful death and subordinating other's wishes to social harmony, both Orfeo and the tale's poet proudly proclaim that individuals' desires can supersede the supposed sanctity of religious and secular power structures. Like TTRPGs, *Orfeo* celebrates the agency of individuals to seize their own happy ending and attributes this possibility in part to Orfeo's incomplete control of his fortunes through Heurodis' kidnapping, Orfeo's exile and rescue effort, and their return. *Orfeo* demonstrates that the optimism of the medium can both derive from and depend upon the role of chance and limitations to meaningfully assert romance's hopeful ethos that individuals can still exert some control over their lives and the narrative. The metatextual blurring of *Orfeo*'s storytellers stands as testament to the power of romance to emotionally uplift and liberate the audiences who participate in the creation of oral storytelling, allowing them to both feel and imagine that they can incorporate their own good and bad fortune into an ultimately hopeful narrative.

"Of aventours that fel bi dayes": The Waning Power of Gods and Kings

Orfeo's difference from the Christianized and moralized interpretation of Orpheus and Eurydice further distances the tale from traditional Boethian interpretations. Rosalind Field argues that the romance's self-expressed status as a symbolic Breton lay signals that the text

“may carry meaning at odds with the fourteenth-century world view,” as its elision of Thrace and Winchester focuses the poem more on the qualities of secular kingship in a “move away from the potential for Christian allegory available in medieval readings of the Orpheus myth” (16, 17). Much like the Knight responding to Palamon’s Boethian lament about why God’s providence includes such injustice with “The answeere of this lete I to dyvynys” (line 1323), A.W. Strouse remarks that “Orfeo does not presume to be a philosopher king . . . for a while he is simply a musician” (481). *Orfeo* similarly emphasizes the experience of loss and grief over the source behind the suffering, and in so doing it highlights that the hopeful promise of romance is not always religious. Seth Lerer’s discussion of *Orfeo*’s metatextual commentary on the power of art is particularly insightful; he acknowledges the religious tones to the tale, but unequivocally states that “this melody is also a minstrelsy, and the Auchinleck narrator returns us not to Heaven but to Brittany” (106). As Orfeo’s doubly divine line from both “King Pluto” and “King Juno” (line 43, 44) ending with him implies, the centrality of religion in later medieval romances can be read as a slowly fading relic of “Old aventours that fel while” (line 8).³⁵ Additionally, Orfeo’s God King status points to another shift in medieval romance.

Much has been said about where *Orfeo* falls in its commentary on the importance of kings and good rule. Many scholars interpret Orfeo naming his faithful steward as heir and the king’s journey to rescue his queen in particular as a necessary reaffirmation of his ability to rule his kingdom;³⁶ as Raluca L. Radulescu succinctly summarizes, “[f]amily relationships occupy center stage in Middle English popular romances, and the pervasiveness of threats to unity . . . refocuses attention on the interaction between the private and public spheres” (45). Following

³⁵ See “Of Dice and Men: Chance and Romance in the Middle Ages” in introduction for a brief discussion of the waning importance of religion in the late middle ages.

³⁶ See Rosalind Field’s “Popular Romance: The Material and the Problems,” Andea Pisani Babich’s “Power of the Kingdom and the Ties that Bind in *Sir Orfeo*,” and Seth Lere’s “Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*.”

this interpretation, Orfeo leaving his throne to rescue his queen is hardly a shirking of his duties. However, a number of critics have also highlighted Orfeo's lingering failures that complicate this reading. Eleanor Griggs notes that Heurodis' silence after being rescued and her apparent inability to provide an heir suggests that the Fairy King changed her in some unknown and unrectifiable manner, which leaves the kingdom's stability "in question as Orfeo's genetic line will end, and possibly the hereditary system of kingship will fall into question" (110). Oren Falk similarly argues that Orfeo's inability to produce progeny would override all his other accomplishments for fourteenth century audiences, leaving "the steward's succession [as] a personal catastrophe for Orfeo and an atrocity for the institution of feudal monarchy" (261). As the king represents both an individual man and the society he rules, Orfeo's personal failings are writ large onto the political stage of his entire kingdom.

Although, for the often non-courtly audience of popular romance (Radulescu 31), this failure of the monarchy may not have been perceived as quite the disaster that these critics imply. Even Falk admits in his speculation on dating the romance that the poet's evident comfortability with its non-conventional ending is consistent with the political experiments of the 1320s, including the composition of the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* and the deposition of Edward II (286), which all contribute to what Maude Violet Clarke calls "[t]he narrow circle of authority round king and magnates . . . being slowly forced open" (173). Building on Geraldine Barnes' contrast of Winchester morphing from a somewhat fantastical paradise earlier in the poem to a more grounded and urban "fourteenth century town . . . [with] suburbs, humble dwellings, and a city street" (122), Falk further argues that Orfeo's close association with the beggar on the outskirts of town demonstrates his "new mindfulness of the lower strata of society . . . and [that he] is now attuned to the *vox populi*" (262). While Falk reads this as either an atonement for his

pride or a savvy political move to gain popular support, this also coincides with the shifting social system and the rise of individualism in the fourteenth century that I discussed with the *Knight's Tale*. Nobles falling below their station due to the vicissitudes of Fortune's Wheel may be a sore spot for the aging Knight, but the poet of *Orfeo* appears fairly comfortable to let once starkly stratified societal distinctions become much less clearly defined.

Rather than signaling Orfeo's abject failure, these shifting societal structures and norms could have been quite reassuring to a fourteenth century audience. Field argues that Orfeo's lack of an heir does not have to be a stain on his character or the kingdom:

The childlessness of the central couple . . . is necessary to allow the steward to succeed to the throne through merit, not birth. So the ancient themes of loss, love and restoration are given a positive outcome in *Sir Orfeo*, while the medieval pressure towards allegory and religious exempla is resisted in favour of extending the personal into the political . . .

spreading out from the central couple to become a pattern for a post-feudal society. (18)

After all, Orfeo succeeds not as a king, but as a minstrel. Orfeo represents the burgeoning belief in the power of individuals, not just gods or kings, to seize a happy ending in the late medieval ages. In a similar vein to the agency that TTRPGs affords their participants, *Orfeo* tells a reassuring story that one does not have to be born as a mighty knight or a powerful king to achieve their goals. As the titular character is both a ruling figurehead and a simple minstrel, *Orfeo* is a testament to a changing society that is moving away from power being controlled by any preordained central figure, and his abdication ushers in a new era in which more people are beginning to have access to better opportunities. Although, crucially, Orfeo is not fully in control as either a king or a storyteller, which actually serves to heighten romance's hopeful message.

“Y nam bot a pover minstrel”: A Lesson and Hope in Limitations

As the romance’s medieval audience was likely well versed in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (Pisani Babich 477), Orfeo begins much like *Calamity* in foregrounding the limitations of its protagonist while presenting a peaceful and prosperous kingdom, hinting at the uncontrollable forces creeping inexorably closer. Griggs argues that the orchard and ympe tree from under which Heurodis is taken makes her abduction “not simply a mysterious event, but . . . a direct challenge to Orfeo’s kingship,” as the cultivated orchard and the grafted tree represents “a utopian image of man’s successful control over nature” (100, 102). Enrico Giaccherini similarly notes that the apparently completely domesticated natural setting makes “the intrusion of the mysterious beings that introduce chaos into Orfeo’s well-ordered world . . . [a]ll the more disturbing” (35). Just as the party in *Calamity* quickly discovers, coincidentally also through a tree, that they cannot completely write their own destiny, Orfeo’s love is stolen from within the very walls of his guarded castle in a manner that spectacularly undermines his ability to control both his own circumstances and that of his kingdom.

The Fairy King’s mysterious warning before fully kidnapping Heurodis similarly underscores Orfeo’s limitations. Andrea G. Pisani Babich asserts that the delay in actually kidnapping Heurodis after her dream exposes Orfeo’s “impotence to fairy magic,” but she asserts that the delay serves as a test that Orfeo “has the ability to pass,” if only he had not “neglected his own forms of enchantment, which will eventually work so effectively in rescuing her” (479, 481). However, the queen’s abduction from “amiddes hem ful right,” so completely without a trace that “Men wist never wher sche was bicom (line 191, 194), complicates this reading—how is Orfeo supposed to stop the abduction? There is no Fairy King present to whom Orfeo can perform or persuade, and the Fairy King’s apparent lack of motivation for the abduction further

undermines Orfeo's power. While critics can and have argued for various reasons behind the Fairy King's actions, none is provided in the text, which underscores Orfeo's utter inability to defend against the magical Fairy King. In the *Knight's Tale*, the titular Knight attempts to reinforce his own authority in granting the audience a peek behind the curtain at the powers affecting events, but here we remain grounded in Orfeo's limited perspective and are made to experience his same feelings of helplessness as supernatural forces change his fortune for reasons he will never know or understand, if there were any to begin with at all. The delay only further emphasizes the inevitability of Heurodis' abduction, as it appears that she is already taken after she awakes from her dream. Orfeo remarks that she "Is al wan, as thou were ded" (line 108), and Heurodis appears in the tableau of mortals, taken at the point of their death, just as she did before she awoke from her dream under the tree and scratched her face (line 80, 407), suggesting that there truly was nothing Orfeo could do.

And yet, much like narratives in TTRPGs, Orfeo's limitations and inability to completely control his fortune is also central to the hopeful turn of his own narrative. When Orfeo chooses to go into exile, he does so out of abject grief and with no plan to save his wife. Kenneth Gros Louis highlights this pivotal change to the original myth in his self-imposed exile, as "there is no search [for Heurodis] in the entire poem, nor does Orfeo ever plan to make one," which is crucial to "understand[ing] the intention of it's author" (245-6). While he interprets the poem in a Christian framework,³⁷ that crucial outside force can also be serendipity.³⁸ Just as *Orfeo's* disguises and merit-based succession plays with Susan Crane's assertion that "[t]here is a belief in medieval romances that hierarchy is natural, indeed that it derives from divine order" (99), so

³⁷ Louis argues that "the hero of the romance is able to recover his wife only after the intervention of an outside force" (251-2), namely, God.

³⁸ Rider notes that, depending on the critic's orientation, there are many ways to read Orfeo happening upon Heurodis in the forest, including "by chance" (358).

too can Orfeo's happy chance of spotting Heurodis not be the result of Boethian divine providence ordering all things to the good, but simple good fortune. In fact, Orfeo's happy life being thrown into chaos because of a supernaturally powerful man's inscrutable agenda arguably demonstrates the horrific reality of living under a Boethian deity's divine plan. The narrator emphasizing all the luxuries of kingship that Orfeo has lost (lines 241-56), which Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury specifically highlight in their notes on the passage as echoing texts like the *Consolation* in bemoaning the vicissitudes of Fortune, can similarly be read as a reference to Boethius' determined pessimism regarding Fortune rather than a straightforward allusion to his philosophy. While Boethius' and the Knight's personal circumstances lead them to negatively characterize Fortune in their desire to believe in an ordering divine figure, the *Orfeo*-poet, as befits a story that lauds the power of music and storytelling, allows the optimism of romance to seep into the workings of chance.

Although, just because fortune can fall in the hero's favour in romance, much like in TTRPGs, they still must make the decision to pursue the opportunities that chance affords. As Mary Hynes-Berry notes in her analysis of the forest scene, Orfeo declares his desire to get a better view of the hawking ladies (lines 339-42), and it is only because he decides to move closer to them that he sees Heurodis. Combined with Orfeo's decision to give up his kingdom and his plan to test the steward, Hynes-Berry concludes that "in *Sir Orfeo* conscious decision links the plots and climaxes" (665). While these choices are a factor, I would contend that the same dice analogy I employed in my discussion of the *Knight's Tale* better encapsulated the interaction of chance and agency in *Orfeo*. Players or characters need to create the opportunity to roll the dice, but once they do, they can only hope that the die rolls high enough. While I agree with Patrizia Grimaldi's assertion that the poem is ultimately about human limitations in a "parable about

power,” it is not quite a lesson on the sin of pride, as she argues (161). The lesson to learn in *Orfeo* is that even though individuals are not fully in control, the reality of our limitations can still be a hopeful one. After all, either due to the fog of grief or the limits of his own understanding, Orfeo had no idea that rescuing Heurodis was even possible when he left his kingdom, and thus did not set out to do so. The positivity of human limitations only becomes more evident in examining the realm of Fairy.

Many critics have highlighted that the Fairy King’s realm is frozen in stasis. This is most directly evident in the famous tableau of mortals suspended at the time of their death (lines 387-408), which the Knapps read as signifying Fairy as a timeless plane that exists in “a state without change” (62). The stasis of Fairy extends well beyond the Fairy King’s castle, as even the flat “Smothe and plain and al grene” (line 353) lands of Fairy itself are uniform and unchanging. This static and ordered realm is a testament to the Fairy King’s control; while Orfeo is unable to control his borders and stop the Fairy King’s intrusion into his walled garden, Griggs highlights that the Fairy King’s superior mastery over his own domain is reflected in the “perfectly cultivated landscape designed by the craft of fairies” (113). Rather than infiltrating the castle as the Fairy King did Orfeo’s, the disguised king has to be allowed in under the guise of a minstrel. In every respect, the Fairy King exhibits greater power and control than King Orfeo.

And yet, the poet makes it clear that this enforced stasis is far from enviable. Noting that the Fairy King has no reaction to losing Heurodis or being tricked by Orfeo, Rosalind Clark argues that the poem emphasises the fairies’ heartless arbitrariness in contrast with humanity’s strong emotions, stating that “the fairies are enchanted by Orfeo’s music, but have no empathy with the emotion which evokes the music” (74). Volatile emotions like the love and grief that drove Orfeo to leave his kingdom and become nearly unrecognizable in exile have little place in

the perfectly controlled and static land of Fairy. Indeed, the undead tableau implies that the similarly immortal and unchanging denizens of Fairy are not entirely alive themselves.

Conversely, Liuzza highlights that Orfeo and his song “causes change, brings pleasure, and gives life” (279). Field reads the romance as an exploration of humanity and mortality, as despite Orfeo’s rescue (and, arguably, resurrection) of Heurodis, they both still die at the end (18). That essential limitation, our aging and changing nature, is not an entirely horrific revelation; in fact, it is only in becoming so drastically altered that Orfeo is able to save his wife. Orfeo’s journey illustrates that while change and our own inability to completely control our circumstances can lead to railing against the vicissitudes of Fortune, that same force can also bring positive change that could never occur in the cold, controlled, and changeless realm of Fairy.³⁹

In addition to demonstrating that our limitations are not always a detriment, the joy of Heurodis’ rescue relies on the possibility of Orfeo’s failure in another secular eucatastrophe. After Orfeo performs for the Fairy King and asks for Heurodis as his boon, he attempts to renege on his promise to grant Orfeo whatever he wishes. Much like his delay in kidnapping Heurodis, the fairy king’s hesitation highlights the lack of complete control that even Orfeo’s unparalleled skills as a harpist afford him. As the minstrel has crafted a verbal precision that Arcite and Palamon would surely envy, Orfeo adeptly switches to persuasion and states that it would be a terrible thing for the king to be made a liar, invoking a courtly convention which Lerer argues is successful due to the profoundly ordering and “civilizing power” of Orfeo’s music and his oration (105). However, Orfeo’s prowess with his words and harp also harkens back to Orpheus, who possesses the exact same skills, and still fails to rescue his wife. Rather than asserting

³⁹ Riddy makes a similar point in her analysis of the past in the romance. While she argues that *Orfeo* primarily takes a nostalgic view of the past where mutability can bring only loss, the tale’s happy conclusion offers a different viewpoint: “Now it seems that there is another way of looking at the relationship between present and past, of seeing the one as being led up to by, and consummating, the other. Moreover, the changes that time entails may also be gains” (14)

Orfeo's ability to change the narrative and conquer any obstacle before him, the Fairy King's hesitation acknowledges the very real chance of failure that Orfeo only just manages to avoid. Despite the odds, his skills are enough to allow him to prevail in this particular version of the tale, constituting the same secular eucatastrophe that informs *Calamity's* ending. His successful rescue of Heurodis is "the sudden joyous 'turn'" that denies complete defeat "in the face of much evidence" (Tolkien 153)—or, in Orfeo's case, centuries of textual precedent and the seemingly unbreakable rule that "It is no bot of mannes deth" (line 502).⁴⁰ In stark contrast to the need for divine or aristocratic intervention that is so central to the Knight's tale, it is the ruling antagonist, not the desperate lover, who falls to the rash promise in this one. Orfeo's assertion that he is "nam bot a pover minstrel" (line 430) invokes both his success and the looming potential of his failure, both of which are essential to the tale's happy turn.

Even the joy of Orfeo returning similarly references his limitations and failure. Noting that onlookers describe the exiled Orfeo as "y-clogen also a tre" (line 508), Griggs draws a connection between the grafted tree, which Orfeo's court alters and the Fairy King uses as a portal to abduct Heurodis, and the human body, which Orfeo's court would similarly graft to ensure heirs and which the fairy court has the power to pose in static tableaux, as "both are manipulated and purposefully used by the courts of human and fairy" (107). Orfeo's triumphant return incorporates and is informed by the fact that he does not have complete control of the narrative, and yet, partially because of his incomplete control, he can still seize a happy ending.

Much like *Calamity*, this is not a perfect outcome. Heurodis is silent and childless, and the couple has only pushed back the date of their eventual deaths. Even amidst the court's celebration, the steward overturns the table (line 578), hinting at the remaining kernel of disorder

⁴⁰ Liuzza similarly highlights the importance of *Orfeo's* oblique allusions to its classical source: "the happy ending of Orfeo works most profoundly and dramatically when it is read against the story of Orpheus as a surprising redemption and reversal of the expected pattern of the narrative" (277).

that they cannot dispel. While Robert Longworth argues that the romance follows the common medieval theme of enforcing order in a chaotic world, with the overturned table thus emphasizing the poet's splendid control that can allow "a little and trivial sign of disorder creep[ing] in even at the climactic moment of restoration" (11), this sign is not so playful. Taken with the ambiguity of the couple's happy ending, it emphasizes that no protagonist can completely determine their fortune. Unlike the Knight, who glosses over the suffering that leads to his tale's conclusions, *Sir Orfeo's* narrator acknowledges and incorporates the reality that this ending is not a complete or eternal victory for the reigning couple.

Even still, the poem concludes with Orfeo recounting his successful journey to his gathered court (lines 558-574), which Liuzza reads as the boundary between the performer of the romance and Orfeo blurring in his "narratization of his own aventour" (28). However, Orfeo is not the ultimate author of his story. Much like Chaucer's emphasis on chance and other possibilities, Orfeo's speech begins as a hypothetical, stating "Yif ich were Orfeo the king" (line 558), and concludes with another in appointing the steward as regent (lines 573-4). Schmidt and Jacobs note in their edition of the poem that his speech's eight conditional clauses mimics the narrator's similarly constructed Boethian railing against ill-fortune. In doing so, Orfeo's speech, unlike Theseus' concluding oration, acknowledges rather than obfuscates the reality of chaos and disorder. Orfeo is not the final arbiter of his fortunes—chance is forever a factor that will not always fall in his favour, and his own limitations ensure that failure is sometimes unavoidable. That fact makes the story of his success, partial as it may be, more hopeful both because of its realism and because it does not change the reality that chance can be a source of good fortune, that you can keep trying after failing. Like the Ring of Brass, Orfeo weave his success and failures, his fortune good and bad, into an ultimately, even if not perfectly, happy ending.

Conclusion: The Many Branches on the Tree of Tales

“Of course, I do not deny, for I feel strongly, the fascination of the desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales . . . It is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it.”

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*

Tolkien employs many metaphors to discuss the lineage of fantasy, but his Tree of Tales (120) is perhaps the most apt analogy for the connections between medieval romance and TTRPGs. The similarly relational and collaborative mediums grew out of a shared hopeful tradition, and through following the path of their branches, we can not only see more clearly how they are linked, but also find new similarities and insights into each medium. After all, “[t]he seed of the tree can be replanted in almost any soil” (145), be it in medieval courts and taverns or modern living rooms and tabletop cafes. Trees also happen to link the texts I examined. From *Calamity’s* Tree of Names, to *Sir Orfeo’s* ympe tree, to the “okes olde” (line 2866) of Arcite’s pyre in the *Knight’s Tale*, their arboreal connections hint not only at their shared lineage, but also their function of engendering both the characters’ emotional journey and a feeling of agency in the participating audience to prepare them to face the chance happenings of their own lives.

The vicarious experience of narratives is far from unique to *D&D*; as Jonathan Gottschall succinctly states, “[k]nowing that fiction is fiction doesn’t stop the emotional brain from processing it as real” (60). However, the sheer intensity of the emotions players experience is frequently commented on by both critics and players. In my opinion, René Reinhold Schalleger best summarizes the source of this emotional impact; incorporating Janet Murray’s argument that the collective emergent narratives and immersive qualities of RPGs replicate “the immediacy of personal experience” (42), Schalleger states that “the immersive power of games gives RPGs an

emotional impact unparalleled among narrative media, as they bind, touch, and move their participants” (73). Through actual play content, we can see these embodied emotional responses; as Luis Carazo narrates how Zerxus finishes an opponent, he struggles to deliver a coherent description, breathlessly stating “wow this is so much adrenaline” (“Blood and Shadow” 2:14:46). The depth of these emotions often linger, allowing them to impact the participants’ lives outside the game. Building on Jonaya Kempers discussion of what she terms the “emancipatory bleed” of TTRPGs, where she proposes that marginalized individuals adopting a fantastical persona with new possibilities for subversion can bring liberative benefits into their daily lives, Aaron Hollander argues that “it is the positive feedback of collaborative imagination itself that is edifying” (326). The process of creating and living a story together allows the PCs’ experiences and emotions to readily transfer to the players embodying their characters.

While this emotional transference is arguably more intense for the players,⁴¹ this can still occur for the viewing audience. In one of the few examinations of actual play content, Anthony David Franklin notes that the form creates a “participant-audience model of focalization . . . as the narrative must first pass through the participants to reach the audience” (82). Seeing the players react to the twists and turns of the emergent narrative is not only part of the fun of actual play, but it also helps bring the audience into the story through the participants’ own experience of the narrative, allowing the audience to mirror and feel the emotions of those at the table.

Brennan Lee Mulligan draws attention to this dual emotional experience as he closes *Calamity*; he tearfully invites the audience into their own emotional state, stating “we hope that you . . . share in all of the feelings that we have” (“Fire and Ruin” 6:06:51). Just as the players

⁴¹ See Sarah Lynne Bowman’s chapter on “Role-Playing as Alteration of Identity” in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* for an in-depth discussion of the ways in which PCs serve as magnifications, refractions, and explorations of a player’s own multifaceted identity. Mackay’s argument is less exhaustive, but he highlights the role of identification for the emotional impact of TTRPGs: “the investiture of self that the players and the gamemaster put into the narrative seems to elevate the experience into a world of meaning and catharsis . . . [p]layers deeply identify with their character’s actions, backgrounds, personal weaknesses, and unresolved issues” (130).

experience a narrative where even their characters' apocalyptic failures can be narrativized into a hopeful and happy ending, the audience personally experiences that same narrative as it unfolds right alongside them. The lack of an omnipotent guiding hand guaranteeing that all the threads coalesce into a satisfying conclusion makes the experience of *D&D*'s happy endings all the more real for both its players and audience, as *D&D*'s ability to acknowledge and narrativize chance and failure mirrors reality more closely than more structured and edited forms of media.

Much like the embodied experience of both playing TTRPGs and watching actual plays, Orfeo's journey becomes that of the audience. Seth Lerer argues that *Orfeo* "brings its readers and listeners into the shared experience of loss and restitution," as the poem's concluding "celebration of Heurodis' return and [the] celebration of the Breton minstrel merge into one, as poet, audience, and fictional characters all participate in praise" (108). Just as *Calamity* concludes with hoping that the audience shares in their emotions, Mary Hynes-Berry highlights that *Orfeo*'s ending explicitly "calls for *empathetic participation*" (670). The audience's own embodied emotional participation ensures that Orfeo's success feels like the audiences' as well. After all, as James and Peggy Knapp note in their analysis of alternate realities within romance, "when a character travels to another possible world, then that world becomes actual, not only for the fictional character, but also for the reader who empathizes with the character" (17). We may not be able to cheat death outside of the fantastical world of romance, but the audience still experiences the no less edifying story in which the hero manages to seize a happy ending both because of and despite their own limitations. In fact, the realism preserved in Orfeo's ability to narrativize all turns of fortune and both his successes and failures makes the romance's happy ending all the more relevant to the audience's real life. Just as Laerryn can use the invention that caused the Calamity to help rectify it, which she describes as finally doing "my best" ("Fire and

Ruin” 05:37:33), an individual can “do thi best” (line 126) and hope that is enough. The inspiring and uplifting endings of both *Calamity* and *Orfeo* derive from the fact that, both despite and because the characters are not completely in control, it just barely is. In an uncertain world where putting your faith in God and Kings can be a fraught prospect, where long odds are so often the norm and philosophy assuages only the rational mind, these communal and participatory rituals console the emotional body through the audience’s embodied experience of fantastical narratives that are all the more hopeful for the realities they include.

Finally, the *Knight’s Tale* highlights the agency of the audience to determine the meaning of their own endings. In revealing how both the Knight’s and Boethius’ predilections affect the narrative game of romance, Chaucer allows the audience to stray from orthodox interpretations of Boethian doctrine rather than resigning themselves to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that God deems necessary. The text ensures that the audience retains their interpretive power, allowing them to feel that, like Orfeo, they can combine the episodes of their lives into their desired happy ending, even if that outcome might challenge societal norms. While the narrator of both romances may, as tradition dictates, invoke God in their concluding prayers, the audience is free to seek hope in the emotional power of romance instead. Like the participants of TTRPGs, the audience remains both viewer and author of the performance they experience.

Romance’s uplifting ethos and agential positioning of the audience did not conclude in the Middle Ages. Though Roy Michael Liuzza notes that the modern transference of Orfeo’s experience is imperfect, as “the text cannot contain the music of which it sings” (284), TTRPGs ensure that medieval romance’s hopeful legacy remains alive and well. This branch of the narrative game continues on in its many myriad forms. What other branches remain, and the new connections they may reveal, need not be left only to the elves.

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