In the 2005 monograph *In A Queer Time and Place*, Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam conceptualises queer time and space in terms of ‘a way of life’, and suggests that those who identify as queer are subject to different life experiences. Whilst Halberstam’s work specifically explores homosexuality and ‘models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism’, the assertion that queerness provides an alternative life pattern can also be applied effectively to medieval romance and the lai genre. ‘Queer’ as a term indicates not what is different from the norm or what can be seen as Other, but rather how the norm itself can be subverted and destabilised; it is therefore a way in which normative bodies, structures and acts can be transformed and reconstructed, or ‘queered’. Elena Levy-Navarro similarly suggests that the term ‘queer’ can have a more expansive definition that ‘is more expressly inclusive of all who challenge normativity’. Thus, whilst it is unnecessary

---


2 Elena Levy-Navarro, ‘Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?’, in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. by Sondra Solovay and
to detach the term ‘queer’ from sexual identity and the heterosexual–homosexual dichotomy, it is crucial to explore other examples of queerness when reading queerness in medieval literature. In medieval romance and lais, the most visible expressions of queer identity are arguably supernatural or monstrous beings that are not bound to the same heteronormative life patterns as human characters. In addition, these non-human beings also act as queering agents, as they transform the human characters of medieval literature into queer, Othered beings.

This article examines examples of Otherness and queer identity in the Middle English Breton lai Sir Orfeo. The analysis focuses first on the fairies of the text and their monstrous characteristics; then on the transformations of Sir Orfeo and his queen Heurodis, following her encounter with the fairies and their exile from the human world; and finally on the queer nature of the Otherworld itself, with specific reference to the ways in which time and space are used to queer the Fairy Realm.

Sir Orfeo can be found in three surviving manuscripts: National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, known as the Auchinleck MS; British Library MS Harley 3810; and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61. This article uses a version of Sir Orfeo based on the earliest surviving manuscript, the Auchinleck MS, which has been chosen because it contains detailed descriptive material relating to the fairy Otherworld that is ei-

Fairies, Monsters and the Queer Otherworld

ther shortened or omitted in the other two manuscripts. The language used in the Auchinleck manuscript suggests that it was composed between the late thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, and the lai is loosely based on the classical myth of Orpheus, who travels to the Underworld to bring back his dead wife Eurydice. One of the major differences between classical versions of the tale and Sir Orfeo is that Heurodis is not killed in Sir Orfeo, but rather is abducted by the Fairy King and taken to the Fairy Realm.

As is common in medieval literature, the fairies in Sir Orfeo are described as extremely beautiful, and we are told that Heurodis has never seen ‘so fair creatours y-core’. Heurodis’s description of the Fairy King’s crown also indicates that the beauty of the fairies is conceptualised through courtly norms:

> It nas of siluer, no of gold red,  
> Ac it was of a precious ston—  
> As briȝt as þe sonne it schon.  

*(Sir Orfeo, ll. 150–52)*

The fairies, however, are always described in terms of excess. The excessive and ethereal beauty of the fairies both hints at their queerness and masks their more sinister nature. Dana Oswald, in her study *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*, argues that monstrous bodies differ from human bodies in three

---

3 The opening section of the poem (ll. 1–39) is missing from the Auchinleck version of *Sir Orfeo*; consequently, this section is not referenced in this article.

ways: ‘They can be more than human, less than human and human plus some other element not intrinsic to an individual human body.’

Oswald therefore identifies three types of monstrous human bodies: ‘Monsters of excess, monsters of lack and hybrid monsters.’ The fairies of *Sir Orfeo* belong to the first category as they appear to resemble humans but are presented as creatures of excess, and can therefore be seen as ‘more than human’. The fairies are queered further by the fact that they do not seem to age but are instead depicted as eternally youthful and fair, which indicates that they are not bound by the restrictions of earthly time. This is reinforced by James Wade in his introduction to *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, where he writes that fairies are exempt from ‘the physical laws of normal time and space’.

The only specific time that we are given with reference to the fairies is that Heurodis is visited by the Fairy King at ‘none’ (l. 75). In medieval romance and lais, noon, or the ‘vnder-tide’ (l. 76), is a time that allows human contact with the Fairy Realm. In her study of queer time, Carolyn Dinshaw notes the strangeness of this time, called the ‘howre of vnderon’, in her example taken from the *Northern Homily Cycle*, and describes it as ‘a moment of instability or vulnerability in both secular and biblical traditions’. This is because both the ‘vnderon’

---

6 Ibid.
and the ‘vnder-tide’ refer not only to the time of noon, but also to nine in the morning and three in the afternoon. In Sir Orfeo, we know that the use of the word ‘vnder-tide’ is related to noon because this is revealed in the line above. The use of this odd time, however, does suggest that the fairies do not operate within the same temporal dimension as the human characters. This is reinforced later in the lai when it is revealed that the stonework of the Otherworld castle also has a strange relationship to the time of noon: ‘Pe riche stones liȝt gonne | As briȝt as dop at none þe sonne’ (ll. 371–72). It is therefore suggested that the spatial properties of the Otherworld are always connected to this queer time of the ‘vnder-tide’, and it is because of this that fairy interaction with the human world is possible within the presumed safety of the enclosed orchard.

Heurodis is in her orchard with her ladies when she falls asleep very suddenly under an ‘ympe-tre’, where her maidens let her sleep until ‘after none’ (ll. 70–75). The ‘ympe-tre’, or grafted tree, represents a transitional space between the human world and the Otherworld. Corinne Saunders argues that the ‘unnatural, artificial quality of grafting and the association in Celtic legend of the most common type of grafted tree, the apple tree, with the otherworld, render the “ympe-tre” a powerful symbol of the faery’.9 By falling asleep under the ‘ympe-tre’ at ‘vndrentide’ (l. 65), Heurodis places herself in a dangerous position. Often when a character in a medieval romance

---

or lai lies down under such a tree or natural place a magical encounter occurs, as happens to the heroine of *Sir Gowther*, to Lancelot in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, and to the eponymous hero of Marie de France’s lai *Lanval*.

What happens to Heurodis, however, takes this motif to a darker and more disturbing level, as it becomes apparent that the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* have a penchant for violent acts. Thus, the most disturbing feature of the fairies is that they are not only represented as uncanny, but also act as queering agents by transforming Orfeo and Heurodis into queer, monstrous beings. The first instance of this occurs following Heurodis’s initial encounter with the Fairy King. Almost immediately after waking, Heurodis begins to scratch at her face until it bleeds and tears at her clothes, transforming herself from ‘þe fairest leuedi þat eu er was bore’ (l. 210) into a disfigured shell unable to remain in the human sphere:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þat vnder-tide was al y-done.} \\
\text{Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,} \\
\text{Sche crid, & loþli bere gan make:} \\
\text{Sche froted hir honden & hir fet,} \\
\text{& crached hir visage—it bled wete;} \\
\text{Hir riche robe hye al to-rett,} \\
\text{& was reueyd out of hir witt.}
\end{align*}
\]

(*Sir Orfeo*, ll. 76–82)

---

Heurodis is quickly transformed from a perfect exemplum of queenly beauty and virtue into an unpredictable and hysterical being, externalised by her disfigured and queered body. Whilst Heurodis can be viewed as a victim at this point in the text, the loss of her human reasoning as she mutilates her body suggests that Heurodis has become, to use Oswald’s phrase, a ‘monster of lack’: a creature less than human. The violence associated with the fairies is literally written on her body, causing Orfeo to lament:

O lef liif, what is te,  
Pat euer ȝete hast ben so stille  
& now gredest wonder schille?  
Þi bodi, þat was so white y-core,  
Wiþ þine nailes is all to-tore.  
Allas! þi rode, þat was so red,  
Is al wan, as þou were ded;  
& al-so þine fingres smale  
Beþ al blodi & al pale.

(Sir Orfeo, ll. 102–10)

This graphic description of Heurodis’s broken body thus removes Heurodis from her previous identity as ‘the fairest leuedi’ (l. 53), and consequently Others her. As Wade stresses, what is most disconcerting about Heurodis’s mutilation is that it is self-inflicted, and thus has a dimension of terror that would have been absent if she was directly attacked by the Fairy King or some other external force. Heurodis’s self-
mutilation is also reminiscent of the female saints, such as Mary of Egypt, who put their bodies through pain in order to protect their chastity and display the abandonment of their corporeal self.\textsuperscript{13} If one of Heurodis’s reasons for her self-mutilation is to shield her chastity from the Fairy King, as Ellen Caldwell has suggested,\textsuperscript{14} Heurodis is not entirely successful. Whilst there is no suggestion that the Fairy King makes a sexual attack on her body, Heurodis’s mutilation does not result in her remaining in the human sphere. In other words, by queering her body, Heurodis inadvertently opens her body up to the fairies of the Otherworld while simultaneously removing herself from the human world. This is again similar to the casting off of the female saints’ physical bodies, which enabled them to take on a non-temporal existence.

The violence with which Heurodis mutilates her body is shocking, but it is made clear that her body would be threatened with far more physical pain if she were to resist the fairies. When he appears to Heurodis, the Fairy King tells her that she must return to the ‘ympe-tre’ the next day, where she will be taken by the fairies to their realm. If she refuses, her limbs will be torn apart and she will still be taken:

\begin{verbatim}
& to-tore þine limes al,
Pat noþing help þe no schal;
\end{verbatim}

& þei þou best so to-torn,
þete þou worst wiþ ous y-born.

(Sir Orfeo, ll. 171–74)

The Fairy King’s threat is very real: if Heurodis resists abduction, she will expose her body to horrific acts of violence.

This is in stark contrast to the first exchange between Lanval and the Fairy Maiden in Marie de France’s twelfth-century lai Lanval. Like Heurodis, Lanval is first approached by two fairy messengers who take him to their ‘dameisele’.¹⁵ The Fairy Maiden then tells Lanval that she has left her country, presumably the Otherworld, in search of him, as she loves him above everything else: ‘Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien.’¹⁶ The Fairy King of Sir Orfeo expresses no such sentiment, and the most perplexing aspect of the lai is that the only apparent reason for Heurodis’s abduction is her spatial positioning within the orchard and under the ‘ympe-tre’. The monstrous behaviour and detached demeanour of the overtly beautiful fairies in Sir Orfeo indicates that they do not conform to the conventional categories of medieval romance or lais and they are thus ‘Other’, operating outside of the normative limitations and boundaries of the corpus. The relative ease with which they manipulate time and space in order to carry out violence further consolidates their position as queered.

The fairies’ manipulation of time and space is also emphasised later in the lai when, following her abduction into the Otherworld, Heurodis is described as if she inhabits a differ-

¹⁵ Lanval, l. 71.
¹⁶ Ibid., l. 116.
ent body, one that binds her to the Fairy Realm and the fairies. In her position within the Gallery of Bodies, discussed in detail in the final section of this article, Heurodis is eerily displayed sleeping under another ‘ympe-tre’ (l. 407). Significantly, this is not a mirror-image of the way in which she was spirited from the human world. When she is taken by the fairies she is not sleeping, but is next to Orfeo beneath the tree, surrounded by ‘ten hundred kniȝtes’ (l. 183). This strongly suggests that it is the fairies who arrange her into the passive sleeping position once they secure her body in the Otherworld. All subsequent references to Heurodis omit allusions to her disfigured face. Heurodis’s mutilated body is thus contained within the time and space of the human realm, and she is either restored to her former ‘fair’ body upon her entrance into the Otherworld or gifted with a new one that can be configured in terms of the fairies’ own supernatural bodies. When Orfeo next sees her she is presented as one of ‘sexti leuedis’ riding on horseback during a Fairy Hunt (l. 304), indistinguishable until Orfeo nears the party. Whilst this initial proof is precarious, Orfeo sees Heurodis again in the Gallery of Bodies—a collection of bodies displayed by the fairies—but only recognises her ‘bi her cloþes’ (l. 408), indicating that Heurodis’s appearance has changed in some way. Finally, when the Fairy King offers Orfeo any gift of his choosing for playing his harp so well, Orfeo asks that he have Heurodis, whom he describes as bright of complexion, ‘briȝt on ble’ (l. 455). The Fairy King is surprised by this request, exclaiming ‘nay! [...] þat nouȝt nere!’ as he sees Orfeo and Heurodis as an ill-matched couple: ‘A sori cou-

dle of ȝou it were’ (ll. 457–58). Orfeo is ‘lene, rowe & blac’,
whilst Heurodis is beautiful, ‘louesum, wiþ-outen lac’ (ll. 459–60). The *Middle English Dictionary* defines *lac* literally as ‘lack’, but also gives the meanings ‘fault, failing; misdeed, offense, sin; disfigurement, blemish’.\(^{17}\) If Heurodis still inhabited her disfigured body at this point, it would make little sense for the Fairy King to specifically state that she is ‘wiþ-outen lac’. Even with the passing of time, the severity of Heurodis’s injuries would have left scarring, which would be visible enough to preclude such a comment. It is therefore apparent that within the Fairy Realm, Heurodis’s body is flawless; her own mutilation of her flesh has been eradicated and her beauty is praised by the Fairy King, who was the cause of her disfigurement in the first place. Furthermore, the fact that Heurodis is shown participating in the Fairy Hunt and then sleeping under the ‘ympe-tre’ implies that her body has the same metaphysical properties as the fairies, who appear to her when she first falls asleep. Her inclusion in the Fairy Hunt demonstrates her complete removal from normative corporeal limitations.

Not only does Heurodis’s body become a possession of the Fairy Realm but her return to the human realm is marred by a further disruption to normative patterns. At the end of the lai it is established that Heurodis is unable to bear children, and we are told that after their reinstatement to the human realm and the roles of king and queen, Orfeo and Heurodis lived for a long time, and afterwards the loyal steward became king: ‘& seþþen was king þe steward’ (ll. 595–96). Oren Falk discusses

\(^{17}\) *Middle English Dictionary Online* <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/> [accessed 4 March 2015].
this ending and its potential political implications in depth, and argues that ‘for a medieval audience, Orfeo’s lack of an heir of his flesh effectively undermines all his other achievements’. It may be further argued that the absence of a biological heir cements in the mind of the reader that Orfeo and Heurodis are irreversibly changed following their interactions with the fairies and their sinister dwelling. Their experiences during their exile indicate that Orfeo and Heurodis’s Othered bodies are forever distanced from their human associates; they are marked as queer by their failure to adhere to a heteronormative life cycle and their subsequent lack of an heir. When they return to the human realm, Orfeo and Heurodis thus embark on a ‘way of life’ that is queer, as it does not follow a heteronormative pattern in which one of the main objectives is to produce progeny. Furthermore, it is worth noting that when Orfeo returns to his kingdom at the end of the lai, he meets the steward at ‘none-tide’ (l. 497), suggesting that, as they are now queered, Heurodis and he use noon as the time to reintegrate themselves into human society. Heurodis’s various transformations not only mark a loss of her previous identity as a heteronormative woman and queen but also deprive Orfeo of his identity. Following in the same pattern as his wife, Orfeo exiles himself from the human world and enters a space intrinsically linked to the Otherworld, that of the forest.

As an indication of Orfeo’s queered identity, his decision to remove himself to the wilderness is linked to his assertion that

---

‘neuer eft y nil no woman se’ (l. 211). It is this desire never to see another woman, and not the belief that he will find Heurodis, that drives Orfeo into the forest. This point has been made by Kenneth Gros Louis, who notes that ‘there is no search in the entire poem, nor does Orfeo ever plan to make one’.

Orfeo’s exile is not a heroic quest but a withdrawal from normative life; he extracts himself from heteronormative society in order to live a secluded life that operates outside of the ideals of kingship, marriage and progeniture. In addition, Orfeo considers his seclusion in the forest permanent and tells the steward he will ‘liue þer euermore’ (l. 213), and that upon his death a new king should be elected. In the introduction to this article, I referred to Orfeo and Heurodis’s departure from their human society as an ‘exile’, as this word signifies that they are literally expelled from the heteronormative human realm after their encounter with the Otherworldly fairies. It is also the word used by the steward when relaying the story; he states that Orfeo ‘en exile ȝede’ (l. 493).

Orfeo’s queered identity is also signified by corporeal changes. Upon his withdrawal, Orfeo neglects his physical appearance, causing his conventionally masculine body to become queered. The first indication we have of this change is that Orfeo’s ‘bodi was oway duine’, and ‘His here of his berd, blac & rowe, | To his girdel-stede was growe’ (ll. 261 and 265–66). This emphasis on his dwindling body is reinforced later in

---

the lai when we view Orfeo’s unnatural body through the eyes of the citizens, who remark:

Hou long þe here hongeþ him opan!
Lo! Hou his berd hongeþ to his kne!
He is y-clongen al-so a tre!

(Sir Orfeo, ll. 506–08).

Orfeo’s transformation from king to Othered being may be less explicit than Heurodis’s, but his Otherness is nevertheless emphasised when he is reunited with Heurodis in the wilderness. Neither of them is able to speak to the other, but when Heurodis sees Orfeo she is overcome by sadness and succumbs to tears at his appearance:

Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke,
For messais þat sche on him seiȝe,
Þat had ben so riche & so heiȝe.
Þe teres fel out of her eiȝe.

(Sir Orfeo, ll. 324–27)

In her study of the Wild Man, Penelope Doob notes that Orfeo’s ugliness is necessary as a physical mark of his suffering. Doob, however, reads Orfeo’s ugliness as an asset, as it also allows Orfeo to pass as a minstrel and be reunited with Heurodis in the Otherworld; she reads this in correlation with Christ’s suffering, arguing that it is only through the physical manifestation of their pain that Christ and Orfeo are able ‘to
rescue the souls they sought’. This further suggests that the fairies are drawn to violence and pain, and it is only in this guise that Orfeo is able to enter the Fairy King’s castle.

When Orfeo crosses the physical boundary separating the human and Otherworldly spheres, ‘a roche’ (l. 347) through which he sees the fairies ride, the Otherworld itself is presented as a parallel space to Orfeo’s kingdom, familiar and yet once again excessively beautiful. In Middle English texts, fairies are often intrinsically linked with the Celtic Otherworld. Neil Cartlidge stresses that the fairies’ incursions in medieval literature by the fourteenth century act as a ‘symbol of moral or social disorder’, which functions through ‘the continual and deliberate cultivation of the fairies’ Otherworld as an embodiment of chaotic signification’. This indicates that the concept of fairies in medieval literature is closely associated with the Otherworldly realm that they occupy and which signifies a threatening alternative space to that of the court. The link between the Otherworld and the fairies is made explicit in the Auchinleck manuscript, where the word ‘fairi’ or ‘fairy’ is used to refer to the physical space of the Fairy Realm and is used in direct reference to the fairies themselves. When Heurodis is taken, for example, it is ‘wiþ fairi forþ y-nome’ (l. 193), and it is clear that the meaning of the word ‘fairi’ is used here to describe the supernatural beings that spirit her away. The Fairy King, however, is described later in the lai as ‘þe king o

---

fairy’ (l. 283). The singularity of the word ‘fairy’ in this instance highlights that it is the name of the Fairy Realm that is being referenced, and not the physical beings that inhabit it. It is thus apparent that space is a crucial component of supernatural identity and seems to act as an extension of the fairies’ power.

In tangent with other introductions to fairies in medieval romance and the lai genre, the first thing we are told about the Otherworld as witnessed by Orfeo is that it is a ‘fair cun-tray’ (l. 351). It is described as an idyllic pastoral space, ‘As briȝt so sonne on somers day, | Smoȝe & plain & al grene’ (ll. 352–53). The castle is then detailed as extraordinarily beautiful as it is ‘riche & real & wonder heiȝe’ and ‘clere & schine as cristal’ (ll. 356 and 358). It is also made up of strong battlements and buttresses of gold, vaultings adorned with every kind of enamel and spacious dwellings comprised of precious stones that shine so brightly the land is always lit (ll. 360–72). This vast description indicates that, visually, the Otherworld is magnificent and ethereally beautiful.

The beauty of the Otherworld, however, also works to hide the darker undertones of the space in a way similar to the dualistic nature of the fairies. The imagery of majesty and opulence is strikingly juxtaposed with the Gallery of Bodies that confronts Orfeo when he enters the Fairy King’s castle:

Þan he gan bihold about al
& seiȝe liggeand wiȝ-in þe wal
Of folk þat were þider y-brouȝt,
& þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt.
Sum stode wiȝ-outen hade,
& sum non armes nade,
& sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,
& sum lay wode, y-bounde,
& sum armed on hors sete,
& sum astrarlæged as þai ete;
& sum were in water adreynt,
& sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt.
Wiues þer lay on childe-bedde,
Sum ded & sum awedde,
& wonder fele þer lay besides:
Riȝt as þai slepe her vnder-tides
Eche was þus in þis warld y-name,
Wiþ faiði þider y-come.

(Sir Orfeo, ll. 387–404)

The horrific image of these broken and distressed bodies once more indicates that the fairies are implicitly associated with violent action. It is probable that the bodies sleeping peacefully under trees, like Heurodis, have obeyed the Fairy King’s demand to return to the ‘ympe-tre’, and have thus come to the Otherworld somewhat willingly. On the other hand, the broken bodies that are headless or limbless have resisted the Fairy King’s summons, and are therefore victims of the severe cruelty threatened to Heurodis when she first encounters the Fairy King. There is, however, a third category of bodies that suggests another dimension of the fairies’ queer identity. The women portrayed on their birthing beds are neither limbless nor headless, but nor are they resting peacefully. This leads us to question why they are placed alongside the other bodies. Childbirth was a dangerous time for women in the Middle Ages and the physical distress of these women may have
alerted the fairies, who spirited their bodies to the Otherworld to add to their gruesome collection. I propose that these bodies hint further at the link between the fairies and violence; the fairies not only inflict violent acts but are also attracted to pain that is disconnected from their power. A similar argument is put forward by Tara Williams, who states that ‘the fairies both are drawn to suffering and produce it’. If this is the case, the Gallery of Bodies becomes a more ambiguous and dangerous place as the women are suffering due to the heteronormative, human act of childbirth, but have nevertheless been taken to the Otherworld to endure the pain eternally.

The Gallery of Bodies in *Sir Orfeo* has traditionally been read as a static collection that more closely resembles a statue gallery than an assortment of human bodies. Gail Ashton, for example, refers to this space as a ‘frozen-in-death tableau’, while Anne Marie D’Arcy argues that there is ‘no sense of animation’ when Orfeo views Heurodis’s body within the walls. Conceptualising the action in this way, however, fails to fully take into account that the bodies Orfeo sees appear to be dead but in fact are not: ‘Þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt’ (l. 390). This line is of crucial significance to understanding the temporal dimension of the Otherworld, which, as shown above, is distinct

---

from the normative time of the human world. In his analysis of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo*, Wade suggests that the Fairy Realm provides a space where ‘the logical laws that govern the normal world of the text give way to the liminal and strange, the non-law of the supernatural exception’.\(^{24}\) I argue that this failure to adhere to ‘logical laws’ of time and space means that the Gallery of Bodies has its own queer temporality in which the bodies are not necessarily frozen but are depicted in the physical act of dying, forced to re-enact the moments of death over and over again. In the text this possibility is suggested in two specific ways in connection to the second and third categories of bodies highlighted above. First, the bodies that Orfeo sees are portrayed in different stages of death. The clearest example of this is the women who are depicted in the act of childbirth. They are distinguished into two separate categories: some are described as in the process of being ‘awedde’ (driven mad), whilst others are explicitly referred to as simply ‘ded’ (l. 400). This is a direct contradiction of the earlier claim that the bodies appear to be dead but are not. In *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*, Jane Gilbert summarises Pope Innocent III’s *De miseria condicionis humane [De contempt mundi]*: ‘Life in the body is a long process of dying that begins with conception and ends only with death’s consummation.’\(^{25}\) This concept has important implications in *Sir Orfeo* and helps us to understand the women who are ‘ded’ in the Gallery, as the bodies of this space are denied ‘death’s con-

\(^{24}\) Wade, p. 80.

summation’ and visually depict the concept of perpetual dying. The bodies are suspended between life and death and take on the role of the ‘living dead’. Furthermore, if instead of being trapped in a frozen state these bodies carry out a continuous repetition of death, this adds a voyeuristic horror to the scene, which can be conceptualised through Dinshaw’s idea that time itself is ‘full of queer potential’.

The second suggestion in the text that the bodies presented in the Gallery are not static is the poem’s emphasis on the association between a proportion of these dying bodies and madness: ‘Sum lay wode, ybounde’ and ‘sum awedde’ (ll. 394 and 400). These textual references echo Heurodis’s earlier reaction to the Fairies and their Otherworld, where she is ‘reueyd out of hir witt’ and described by her maidens as ‘awede wold’ (ll. 82 and 87). If the bodies were trapped in a never-ending cycle of dying then it logically follows that they, like Heurodis upon her first awakening, are driven mad because of their interaction with the queer space of the Otherworld and their inability to actually die. Furthermore, like Heurodis’s descent into madness, this suffering is most likely evidenced by the physical deterioration of their bodies and thus suggests a shift or some sort of decline that separates them from the ‘ded’ women, the headless and limbless bodies and those sleeping peacefully. This reading is reinforced by Doob’s emphasis on the Christian parallels in Sir Orfeo, where she indicates that the ‘living dead’ were common in medieval thought as Christian souls were similarly ‘eternally alive to

---

26 Dinshaw, p. 4.
torment’ in the confines of hell. The key difference in *Sir Orfeo*, however, is that it is not only the souls that endure this suffering but the physical bodies that should have been buried in the human realm, adding a darker resonance to their pain.

Not only is the Gallery of Bodies a strange place in contrast to the brightly shining exterior of the castle, it is also directly compared with the Fairy King’s hall, which is draped by a beautiful canopy and made more dazzling by the occupancy of the Fairy Queen, ‘fair & swete’ (l. 414), whose crown and clothes shine so brightly, Orfeo can scarcely behold them. In classical mythology, the underworld is conceptualised as having two distinct places: the connecting rivers in which the souls drift, and Hades and Persephone’s palace in which the two gods dwell and can be petitioned. In *Sir Orfeo*, however, these two unrelated spaces are contained within the boundaries of the castle and are spatially connected to each other, as evidenced by Orfeo’s ability to single Heurodis out to the Fairy King when he requests ‘Þat ich leuedi, briȝt on ble, | Þat slepþ vnder þe ympe-tre’ (l. 455). The spatial proximity between the Gallery of Bodies and the Fairy King’s hall adds a further element of unease to the text, as the ‘living dead’ are displayed by and for the immortal fairies, who take a perverse, voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing human pain and suffering.

This article has looked at three specific ways in which queerness permeates *Sir Orfeo* and transforms the space and bodies with which it comes into contact. First, the supernatural and excessive bodies of the fairies indicate that they are

---

27 Doob, p. 199.
more than human, yet they are still unsettlingly familiar. Through their appearances and their monstrous actions, the fairies highlight the potential of queerness to pervade human society and challenge normative spaces and conventions, offering an altered way of life. Second, Orfeo and Heurodis’s transformations into queer, less-than-human beings, following their initial encounter with the supernatural fairies, demonstrates queerness functioning as a destabilising force. Finally, the way in which the Otherworld is presented in *Sir Orfeo* demonstrates another facet of queerness through its illogical and sinister use of space and its manipulation of time. The Otherworld is depicted as a queer space that is out of sync with normative time, life cycles and boundaries. Rather than being a place of complete exclusion for supernatural or queer beings, the queer Otherworld represents a powerful yet dangerous alternative to heteronormative society.