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When Men Cry: Male Demonstrations of Grief in Beowulf, The Song of Roland, and Sir Orfeo

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WHEN MEN CRY: MALE DEMONSTRATIONS OF GRIEF
IN *BEOWULF*, *THE SONG OF ROLAND*, AND *SIR ORFEO*

WHEN MEN CRY: MALE DEMONSTRATIONS OF GRIEF
IN *BEOWULF*, *THE SONG OF ROLAND*, AND *SIR ORFEO*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

By

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John Brown University
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ABSTRACT

Frequently in medieval texts, writers make mention of men who cry, wail, and faint. However, in modern scholarship, these records of men who cry are often overlooked, and masculine mourning is a largely neglected feature. My purpose in this thesis is to explore some of the reasons for male tears and displays of grief in three works of medieval literature. While male mourning appears in hundreds of medieval texts and is a topic worthy of extensive exploration, I have narrowed my focus to three works: *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo*. Although the three tales are written in different languages and centuries, every narrative includes central male protagonists who mourn. Namely, each story includes a weeping king, masses of weeping subjects, and a hero who learns to experience and display grief throughout the course of the tale.

The kings Hrothgar, Charlemagne, and Orfeo emerge in the tales as figures embodying and bearing the grief of their entire people. Rather than being criticized as weak or effeminate rulers, all three of these sorrowful kings are honored by the poets and by their subjects. The mourning of the rulers is shown to be a clear portrayal of their commitment and care for their people and kingdoms. In response to the grief of the kings, the thanes, knights, and subjects publicly weep, demonstrating their loyalty by suffering with their sovereigns. In contrast, the heroic figures—Beowulf, Roland, and Orfeo—initially stand apart emotionally from the kings and other subjects in the texts. They maintain a focus on gaining glory through deeds of prowess, and their concept of suffering only acknowledges physical pain, disregarding emotional pain. However, the three heroes undergo a transformation as they personally encounter suffering and loss. By the end of each poem, the heroes display empathy by mourning, joining their sorrow with

that of grief-filled kings and weeping subjects. In these three poems, male demonstrations of grief serve essential social and political roles and are affirmed rather than being demeaned.

This thesis is approved for
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Introduction

Frequently in medieval texts, writers make mention of men who cry, wail, and faint in order to demonstrate religious repentance, physical anguish, or grief at the loss of a loved one. However, in modern scholarship, these records of men who cry are often overlooked, and masculine mourning is a largely neglected feature. As Tom Lutz begins his book, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, he speculates that “perhaps no other fundamental human activity has received so little direct and sustained attention.”¹ Indeed, the vast literary and historical record of weeping on the part of both men and women is often overlooked in scholarship. When anthropologists have given their attention to the subject of emotions, many have made the sweeping categorization “that in the West the ‘emotions’ are associated with the ‘female,’ unaware of the history of male ‘sensibility’ and its attendant weeping, unaware of the literary record of massive weeping by medieval warriors and monks, and unaware of the emotional expressivity of the ancient warrior heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas.”² Lutz is one of few who has taken time to note the many accounts of male tears throughout the ages, and his observations led him to assert that “men have always cried, and for many reasons.”³

My purpose in this thesis is to explore some of the reasons for male tears and displays of grief in three works of medieval literature. While male mourning appears in hundreds of medieval texts and is a topic worthy of extensive exploration, I have narrowed my focus to three works: *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland [La Chanson de Roland]*, and *Sir Orfeo*.⁴ Although the three tales are written in different languages and centuries, all share the common denominator of being recorded and preserved in England.

Moreover, every narrative includes central male protagonists who mourn. Namely, each story includes a weeping king, masses of weeping subjects, and a hero who learns to experience and display sorrow throughout the course of the tale.

In order to provide a context for the exploration of male demonstrations of grief in *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo*, I will begin by surveying existing scholarship regarding the definitions of “male” and “mourning” in the Middle Ages. Studies of emotions and of masculinities are two fairly new fields of scholarship. While interest is growing in both of these areas, still only a relatively small number of scholarly works exist addressing two key questions: “What does it mean to be male in the Middle Ages?” and “What does mourning mean in the Middle Ages?”

What does it mean to be male in the Middle Ages?

While women’s roles and lives in the Middle Ages has been a popular subject of study thanks to the feminist movement, studies of medieval masculinities have been slower to emerge. *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, published in 1994 and edited by Clare A. Lees, includes essays on Anglo-Saxon, French, Middle English, Italian, and Spanish subjects from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, and explores both daily society and literary texts.⁵ Various essays in this collection examine male pursuits of battle, territorial expansion and aggression, and their literary representations. Essays also investigate the role of the confessor, the bachelor, and the husband. The various descriptions of roles medieval men enact emphasizes that there are multiple masculinities, rather than one definitive image of what it is to be a man. The men of these various classes, countries, and centuries behave in very different ways, so “no single and unified picture of masculinity in a seamless medieval world emerges.”⁶ In

her essay “Men and *Beowulf*,” Clare A. Lees argues that the poem favors masculinity and the aggression of the elite warrior class.⁷ She does not address the instances when warriors and King Hrothgar demonstrate sorrow and vulnerability through tears. While *Medieval Masculinities* is foundational as one of the first sustained efforts exploring masculinities in the Middle Ages, the collection overlooks the topic of male mourning.

Another study of medieval men, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, appeared in 1997, edited by Jeffery Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler.⁸ This collection of essays focuses more on the male body and sexuality in both religious contexts and in literary texts, particularly Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The generally upheld viewpoint, influenced by feminist theorists like Sedgwick and Butler, is that “gender is a culturally specific process of becoming,” and so the text explores various instances of individuals “becoming male” in the Middle Ages.⁹ The editors of this collection insist, as Lees does, that multiple masculinities emerge when one studies what it is to be a medieval male; the essays of the collection represent different moments “in which we can observe masculinity in performance and masculinity as performance.”¹⁰ However, once again, masculine performances of mourning are not addressed or analyzed. Other physical and sexual aspects of masculinities receive the primary focus.

The two aforementioned texts set out to explore what it is to be male in the Middle Ages, and neither offers a definitive standard of masculinity but instead emphasizes the varying roles men filled. Interest in the subject of men in the Middle Ages continues, as evidenced by various articles which continue to appear on the subject of medieval masculinities. In a recent essay, “Masculine Identity in Late Medieval English Society and Culture,” Derek Neal observes that men were generally favored as the

dominant gender, and he argues that this is reflected even in the English language, which “still conflates maleness with a default setting or humanity—the baseline norm.”¹¹ Neal refers to the use of the term “man” to apply to all of humankind, a practice which has continued until the late twentieth century.¹² He emphasizes the problematic nature of the medieval definition of male, which, by conflating “man” with “human being,” appropriates all virtues that set humans apart from the rest of Creation for the male gender, leaving little positive for the category of “woman.” Neal states that the general medieval perspective favors males and casts “the feminine in terms of lack, insufficiency and subordination.”¹³

However, in Cordelia Beattie’s article, “Gender and Femininity in Medieval England,” she rightly notes that the study of medieval gender “is not just about knowing the stereotypical gender notions that prevailed in medieval society. Medieval people were not so simple-minded that their cultural clichés say everything there is to know about them, any more than our clichés reveal everything about us.”¹⁴ Many stereotypes about medieval gender roles still dominate scholarship and perhaps contribute to the continual inattention to actions such as male weeping, which defy enduring gender stereotypes. It is important to sift through common conceptions of typical male and female behavior both in the past and in the present and to be willing to consider new and different aspects of masculinity which may emerge as a result of the study of mourning men in medieval texts.

What does mourning mean in the Middle Ages?

Just as the study of medieval masculinities is a relatively new field, the exploration of medieval emotions is also an area which has recently begun to receive

more scholarly attention. In *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, a collection edited by Lisa Perfetti in 2005, the subjects of gender and emotion come together. Perfetti observes that “while emotions have emerged as an important and lively subject of concern among medievalists in recent years, gender has only occasionally been applied as a primary category of analysis.”¹⁵ Perfetti’s collection is the first volume I have encountered which is devoted specifically to women’s emotions in the medieval and early modern periods. As far as I have been able to determine, no book specifically studying medieval men’s emotions yet exists.

As Perfetti introduces the topic of medieval female emotions, she says that women were “thought to be less endowed with the rational faculties that enable one to control the passions...[and] were considered to be more emotional than men, a belief that persists in many respects today. One might even say that in the medieval way of thinking, emotions *were* female.”¹⁶ While Perfetti has good reason to assert that medieval women were often considered to be the more emotional sex, the exclusive statement that “emotions *were* female” completely disregards the many medieval narratives, both religious and fictional, in which men cry, faint, and wail. Perfetti is not the only scholar who focuses on female rather than male mourning in medieval literature. In her essay “From Kinship to Kingship: Mourning, Gender, and the Anglo-Saxon Community,” Patricia Ingham focuses on the role of women who mourn the loss of kin, arguing that mourning provides the women with important cultural power.¹⁷ She does not explore the moments in *Beowulf* when the men cry or join in the commemoration of the lost, although in every death men are part of the mourning rituals, often weeping as well.

A thorough new collection of essays, *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, published in 2010 and edited by Jane Tolmie and M.J. Toswell, begins with a contextualizing paper introducing medieval lament.¹⁸ In Anne L. Klinck's paper, "Singing a Song of Sorrow: Tropes of Lament," she insists that this topic needs to be situated in a broad context, considering influences from antiquity alongside medieval materials.¹⁹ While Klinck acknowledges that both men and women mourn, following the biblical pattern of David and Job by mourning through tearing of garments, weeping, or fasting, she says that "the most extreme actions of lament, wailing and self-defacement by cutting off the hair and lacerating the cheeks, are performed by women in particular."²⁰ Klinck and many other scholars uphold the view that women display grief more dramatically and physically than men do, but overlook scenes such as those in *La Chanson de Roland* in which Charlemagne weeps, faints, and tears out his beard.

Even as Klinck outlines an overall summary of mourning, in a footnote, she adds a small comment, almost an afterthought: "Interestingly, the heroic world seems not to have shared the prohibition on male tears—although it is still women who express the most extreme mourning. Priam and Achilles weep and moan together for their losses in *Iliad*."²¹ Klinck's small admission of men's mourning vastly understates the massive record of male demonstrations of grief, both in classical and medieval sources. Not only do Priam and Achilles weep, but Odysseus frequently breaks into tears, and many Greek tragedies contain elaborate displays of grief and lamentation on the part of both men and women. Male mourning continues to be performed by kings, warriors, and subjects in medieval texts, as well.

Tears were not necessarily censored or relegated to women. One of the purposes of drama and lament in both antiquity and the medieval era was to move the audience to tears; Tom Lutz draws attention Aristotle's theory of cathartic tears, which suggests that tears allow release and help to wash away pent-up pain and sorrow.²² Likewise, in the Middle Ages, Marian laments became an incredibly widespread genre, allowing for personal expressions of sorrow to be fused with religious meditation on the suffering of Christ and Mary.²³ In addition to these laments from a female perspective, records of weeping saints carry back as far as Augustine and served as influential models of genuine repentance and sorrow before God.²⁴ Tears were often considered to be the most sincere evidence of contrition and a changed heart. Furthermore, as already mentioned, both men and women in medieval fiction are portrayed as mourning the dead. Weeping heroes and kings fill medieval literature, but male mourning is a largely neglected feature in modern scholarship.

Rituals of mourning in the Middle Ages are informed and shaped by two primary influences: Greco-Roman writings, and Christian tradition. In his book *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750*, Ralph Houlbrooke explains that the theory of the four humors, carried into the Middle Ages from Greek antiquity, taught that an individual with an overabundance of the humor of black bile would be "melancholic—" prone to moodiness, dejection, and more intense expressions of grief.²⁵ Moreover, medieval thinkers believed that in general the female body was colder and moister than that of the male, and therefore led women to be more emotionally unstable than men.²⁶ While these general paradigms were present both in the classical and the medieval eras, texts still belie these blanket assertions.

In the introduction to the 2003 work *Grief and Gender 700-1700*, Jennifer C. Vaught points out that the prevailing medieval categorization of women as the more emotional sex contradicts the records within actual texts:

Although the humoral theory of personality identifies woman as the ‘moist sex,’ both sexes mourn in public and private spaces in...literature and the visual arts. Men in these works respond emotionally to loss in terms other than stoicism, melancholy, or anger and are as prone to hysteria as women.²⁷

The responses to sorrow and loss on the part of both medieval men and women share much more in common than most readers or scholars acknowledge. In the face of the death of a loved one, both men and women can be found to weep, wail, and faint.

There has never been societal consensus regarding the appropriate procedure for mourning on the part of men or women. Within the medieval Catholic Church, an ongoing debate about mourning and weeping took place. As Jennifer Vaught explains, “Those associated with the Church during the Middle Ages tended to view excessive grief as offensive to God because it exhibited a lack of faith by denying or overlooking salvation.”²⁸ A general attitude gradually developed that discouraged excessive weeping and wailing at funerals, instead encouraging believers to focus on the hope of new life and resurrection.²⁹ However, at the same time the Scriptures themselves included books such as Job, Lamentations, and the Psalms, which contain many laments and describe men weeping before God to express repentance, mourning, and pain in the face of loss. Moreover, the aforementioned Marian laments enabled believers to more deeply value Christ’s sacrifice by contemplating Mary’s suffering. Saints’ lives often portrayed the saints as weeping before God in order to demonstrate genuine repentance. While excessive grief was deplored as signifying despair rather than Christian hope, subdued

tears of repentance or sorrow were generally accepted and were evidence of genuine feeling and sincerity.³⁰

Beowulf, La Chanson de Roland, and Sir Orfeo

It should be evident from the introduction thus far that the study of gender and medieval emotions is a vast field, defying neatly drawn boundaries which would delineate acceptable or inappropriate displays of feeling. While written records offer evidence for how medieval emotions were experienced and expressed, obviously such displays of feeling can never be observed firsthand. Studying emotion within fictional medieval texts is even more speculative. To what extent does the fictional account of an emotional display reflect actual cultural practices? Are the frequent descriptions of thousands of weeping and fainting subjects or soldiers meant to be interpreted literally, or should they be read as symbolic representations of internal sorrow? While answers to such questions are uncertain, it is still possible to gain much insight about medieval emotions through examining the displays of feeling described in the fictional works of the Middle Ages.

Many common elements exist in *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo*. In all three poems, public weeping and mourning serves as evidence of the devotion and affection that exists between a king and his subjects. Also, all three kings are shown to experience a grief greater than that of any of their subjects, and they become figures bearing the heaviest weight of all the sorrows their people suffer. The weeping kings are initially contrasted by dry-eyed heroes, who possess self-confidence and seek glory and renown rather than being moved by grief. However, in the course of each poem, the heroes suffer into wisdom and learn to respond to tragedy with genuine grief. Finally, the

groups of warriors and subjects in each poem also collectively respond to tragedy by mourning, thereby demonstrating their grief, sympathy, and loyalty.

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- ¹ Lutz, Tom. *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*. (New York: Norton, 1999) 26.
- ² Lutz 27.
- ³ Lutz 61.
- ⁴ Henceforth I will refer to *The Song of Roland* with its original French title, *La Chanson de Roland*.
- ⁵ *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees, Medieval Cultures Ser. Vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- ⁶ Clare A. Lees, "Introduction," xx.
- ⁷ Clare A. Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 129-48.
- ⁸ *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, The New Middle Ages Ser. Vol. 4, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997).
- ⁹ Cohen and Wheeler xi.
- ¹⁰ Cohen and Wheeler xiii.
- ¹¹ Derek Neal, "Masculine Identity in Late Medieval English Society and Culture," *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner, Writing History Ser. Vol. 3, (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005): 171-88; 171.
- ¹² Neal 171.
- ¹³ Neal 172.
- ¹⁴ Cordelia Beattie, "Gender and Femininity in Medieval England," *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner, Writing History Ser. Vol. 3 (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005): 153-70; 166.
- ¹⁵ Lisa Perfetti, "Introduction," *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Lisa Perfetti, (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005): 1-22; 1.
- ¹⁶ Perfetti 4.
- ¹⁷ Patricia Clare Ingham, "From Kinship to Kingship: Mourning, Gender, and Anglo-Saxon Community," *Grief and Gender 700-1700*, eds. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 17-31; 31.
- ¹⁸ *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. Jane Tolmie and M.J. Toswell, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe Ser. Vol. 19 (Turnhout: Brepolis Publishers, 2010).
- ¹⁹ Anne L. Klinck, "Singing a Song of Sorrow: Tropes of Lament," *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. Jane Tolmie and M.J. Toswell, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe Ser. Vol. 19 (Turnhout: Brepolis Publishers, 2010): 1-20.
- ²⁰ Klinck 11.
- ²¹ Klinck p. 11, ft. 51.
- ²² Lutz 23.
- ²³ Klinck 7.
- ²⁴ Lutz 36-37.
- ²⁵ Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 226.
- ²⁶ Perfetti 5.

²⁷ Jennifer C. Vaught, "Introduction," *Grief and Gender 700-1700*, eds. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 1-14; 7.

²⁸ Vaught 4.

²⁹ Houlbrooke 223.

³⁰ Vaught 5.

Chapter 1

Weeping Hlafords, Mourning Thanes: Loyalty Portrayed through Grief in *Beowulf*

In the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, an aura of mourning, grief, and lamentation pervades the text, just as Grendel's presence haunts Heorot—an ever-present force, shaping the actions and outlook of the central characters. The passages in which women mourn the death of a kinsman regularly receive scholarly attention, but the moments in which men mourn or weep are often overlooked.¹ While the text portrays two scenes in which women lament, there are four instances in which a whole warrior band weeps and six occasions in which a king mourns. These male demonstrations of grief receive much less attention than does the attitude of young Beowulf as he plans to combat Grendel's mother and advises Hrothgar, “Selre bið æghwæm / þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.” [It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.]² Beowulf's attitude in this moment has been used to extrapolate a heroic stoicism on the entire epic. However, Beowulf undergoes a transformation throughout the epic, and by the end, he, like Hrothgar, becomes a mourner, sensitive to suffering and loss. At the close of the epic, a young new hero, Wiglaf, arises, who also demonstrates the capacity to be moved by grief, which inspires him to loyally defend his lord, Beowulf. The poet repeatedly emphasizes the importance of sorrow as a response to suffering, and suggests that mourning serves as clear evidence of the loyalty and affection one bears for a deceased lord, thane, or kinsman.

The vocabulary of mourning in *Beowulf* is extensive—just as sorrow pervades the text, a wide vocabulary of grief fills the Anglo-Saxon language. *Sorgian* is a verb

meaning “to care, to sorrow, grieve, be anxious,” and its accompanying noun, *sorh*, is translated “care, anxiety, sorrow, grief, affliction, trouble.”³ Forms of these two words appear nineteen times in *Beowulf*.⁴ Another verb, *murnan*, can also mean “to be sad, be anxious,” but it can also be used more specifically as “to mourn,” and this word appears five times in the text.⁵ It is interesting to note that both *sorgian* and *murnan* carry connotations not only of sorrow, but also of anxiety, which perhaps suggests that trouble or loss brings not only grief, but also worry and fear for those left behind. Another verb with these connotations, *meornan*, translates as “to care, feel anxiety, trouble oneself about anything,” and is used four times in *Beowulf*.⁶ Yet another similar verb is *mænan*, which is used twice at the very end of the epic and means “to lament, mourn, complain.”⁷ Another key word which appears eleven times in various forms as an adjective, adverb, noun, and verb is *geómrian*: “to be sad, sigh, groan, murmur, mourn, sorrow, lament, bewail.”⁸ Many times this word suggests vocal expression of grief.

The most specific noun describing crying is *wop*, which is “a cry of grief, wailing, lamentation, weeping,” and this word appears three times, on all three occasions referring to males who are weeping or lamenting.⁹ In addition, when Hrothgar is bidding Beowulf farewell, here the text says he breaks into “tearas,”¹⁰ meaning “tears, drop[s] of water from the eye.”¹¹ Not only does a king weep, but men weep for their king; when they receive word that Beowulf is slain, the war band goes to see him, “wollenteare,”¹² which translates as “with gushing tears.”¹³ The vocabulary above takes into account forty-six occasions when *Beowulf* includes words referring to mourning, weeping, and sorrow. Repeatedly throughout the epic, the *Beowulf*-poet’s goal seems to be to intensify, rather than to mitigate, the experience of grief.

Throughout the epic, the *Beowulf*-poet is greatly concerned with portraying people's responses to loss and death. Both in the action of *Beowulf* and in the narratives related by scop and by Beowulf himself, accounts of death and mourning appear repeatedly, and every scene of mourning occurs in public rather than in private. Anne Savage takes note of the frequent appearances of mourning and of the poet's interest in responses to loss: "*Beowulf* refers...often to grief and loss, to their reconstruction in poems and the ways in which these are received by audiences."¹⁴ The *Beowulf*-poet is concerned with portraying not only death but also responses to death on the part of both individuals and communities. Every description of death is followed with a scene of mourning.

The only occasions on which people do not respond to death with a display of grief take place when a death is related in a historical narrative by a scop or by Beowulf. The audiences fail to respond with a display of sympathy when listening to stories of past grief—and in each case, soon after they fail to respond with sorrow, they experience personal suffering and loss which parallels that of the characters in the narrative. The first such tale is that of Hildeburh mourning the death of her son and brother. The response of the audience stands in stark contrast with the tragic content of the performance:

Leoð wæs asungen,
gleomannes gyd. Gamen eft astah,
beorhtode bencsweg; byrelas sealdon
win of wunderfatum.

[The poem was over,
the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
started on the benches, stewards did the rounds
with wine in splendid jugs.]¹⁵

The audience does not respond to the narrative of sorrow and loss with a sympathetic display of emotion. They are unmoved, and shortly after this they experience tragedy

firsthand when Grendel's mother, a terrifying embodiment of a bereaved mother, tears through Heorot to gain vengeance for her son's death. A second instance when an audience fails to be moved by sorrow occurs when Beowulf relates a tragic tale of the death of a king to his twelve warriors, and his men are unmoved. Beowulf then goes to face the dragon, and the warriors soon experience the loss of their own king. The *Beowulf*-poet's portrayal of the dry-eyed audiences who endure loss after refusing to empathize with suffering suggests that the poet places a premium value on mourning as a right response to death or tragedy, and perhaps wishes his audience to demonstrate genuine sorrow in response to the epic's portrayals of suffering and loss.

From the opening scene forward, the *Beowulf*-poet imposes grief and loss on the reader. *Beowulf* begins with the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing, a king of the Danes, and ends with the burial of Beowulf himself. Both funerals display a king honorably buried and mourned by a band of warrior men. The men of Scyld's warrior band display their grief as they send the treasure-laden boat to sea:

þa gyt hie him asetton segen gy(l)denne
 heah ofer heafod, leton holm beran,
 geafon on garsecg; him wæs geomor sefa,
 murnende mod.

[They set a gold standard up
 high above his head and let him drift
 to wind and tide, bewailing him
 and mourning their loss.]¹⁶

Seamus Heaney chooses to translate *geomor* in this situation as "bewail," suggesting that the men are weeping or crying. However, later the *Beowulf*-poet uses the same phrase, "him wæs geomor sefa," to describe the attitudes of Beowulf and then Wiglaf as they prepare to face the dragon, and in both of those cases when Heaney gives the phrase an

alternate translation, “He was sad at heart.”¹⁷ *Geomor* comes from the verb *geomrian*, which, as previously defined, can be translated as “to be sad, to sigh, groan, murmur, mourn, sorrow, lament, bewail.”¹⁸ The varying definitions applicable to the same word make it possible that Beowulf and Wiglaf were also vocally mourning or wailing, or perhaps that Scyld’s men were only “sad at heart” instead of “bewailing him.” Whether or not the warrior men are literally weeping at this moment, the text twice reiterates that they are mourning and sorrowing to the very core of their being.¹⁹

The next occasion in which men mourn follows almost immediately, as Grendel tears through Hrothgar’s hall for the first time, taking thirty men back to his lair.²⁰ As dawn breaks after the first attack and the Danes discover their loss, they “wop up ahafen, / micel morgensweg.” [They wept up to heaven, making great sound that morning.]²¹ The narrator first describes collective weeping and shock on the part of the entire community. Certainly Hrothgar’s men who slept in the hall all night are weeping, while the text does not specify if women were also a part of the company as they first discover Grendel’s desolation. Immediately after the image of collective weeping on the part of the Danes, the focus shifts to the king Hrothgar. He is stricken with sorrow due to the loss of his men and the injury to his hall.

	Mære þeoden,
æþeling ærgod,	unbliðe sæt,
þolode ðryðswyð,	þegnsorge dreah,
syðþan hie þæs laðan	last sceawedon,
wergan gastes;	wæs þæt gewin to strang,
lað ond longsum.	

[Their mighty prince,
the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon’s trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief.]²²

The king is the embodiment of sorrow after tragedy strikes the Danes. He, as king, bears the greatest responsibility to protect his people, and he also bears the greatest grief at their injury. While later in the epic Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he had many heroes face Grendel, there is no mention of combat or war as a part of the king's response at this point. Instead, the poet focuses entirely on the community's experience of grief and anguish.

The heart-felt mourning of Hrothgar and the Danes stands in contrast to the callousness of Grendel, who feels no sense of sorrow in the face of death. Immediately after describing the grief of the Danes, the poet narrates Grendel's second attack and describes the nature of the foe: "[A]c ymb ane niht eft gefremede / morðbeala mare ond no mearn fore, / fæhðe ond fyrene; wæs to fæst on þam." [[F]or one night later merciless Grendel / struck again with more gruesome murders. / Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.]²³ Grendel is "merciless," and as he attacks, the poet uses the phrase "no mearn," which translates literally as "he did not mourn."²⁴ Grendel's failure to mourn contrasts with the sincere, mournful spirit of the Danes. The portrayal of the protagonists' grief suggests that mourning is right response to tragedy, while Grendel's remorseless attitude makes him more monstrous.

While Hrothgar and the Danes show sympathy and sorrow in response to suffering, Beowulf initially fails to do so, but throughout the course of the epic his attitude undergoes a transformation. Beowulf as a young hero in Heorot seeks glory and scoffs at suffering. His demeanor stands in contrast with that of the mourning king Hrothgar. Grendel's reign of terror ends thanks to Beowulf, but then Grendel's mother attacks, taking Aeschere, the king's most trusted adviser, and again Hrothgar experiences

sorrow; he is “on hreon mode,” [heart sore and weary.]²⁵ As Hrothgar mourns the loss of Aeshcere, Beowulf speaks the aforementioned stoic lines urging Hrothgar not to grieve: “Ne sorga, snotor guma. Selre bið æghwæm / þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murna.” [Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.]²⁶ Beowulf reveals that his focus is on glory, not suffering: “[W]yrce se þe mote / domes ær deape.” [Let whoever can / win glory before death.]²⁷ He pledges that he will kill Grendel’s mother, and concludes by urging Hrothgar, “Dys dogor þu gepyld hafa / weana gehwycles, swa ic þe wene to.” [Endure your troubles today. Bear up / and be the man I expect you to be.]²⁸ Beowulf’s entire speech broadcasts his youthful, heroic view that pursuit of glory is primary. Beowulf values the performance of heroic deeds and the pursuit of vengeance rather than a demonstration of mourning in response to tragedy. As he speaks, the young hero sounds as if he is trying to teach the king a lesson, and Hrothgar’s response is to jump to his feet and thank God for Beowulf’s pledge.²⁹ While Beowulf’s words enliven the king, Hrothgar seems heartened by Beowulf’s promise to slay Grendel’s mother, rather than by his exhortation not to grieve.

Beowulf’s lines are the only occasion in the epic when mourning is censured. Throughout the rest of the poem mourning is shown to be sincere evidence of loyalty and devotion to kinsman or king. Beowulf’s reversal from seeking glory to sympathizing with suffering begins after Beowulf returns from slaying Grendel’s mother, and Hrothgar warns Beowulf about the inevitability of suffering and grief. The aged king’s extended warning to the young hero supersedes the earlier moment when Beowulf seemed to be admonishing the king. Hrothgar warns Beowulf not to be prideful, and reminds him the inevitability of decline: “oððe eagenas bearhtm / forsitedð ond forsworcedð; semninga bið /

þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.” [Your piercing eye / will dim and darken; and death will arrive, / dear warrior, to sweep you away.]³⁰ Gnostic statements and characters’ words throughout the epic repeat this theme of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. Hrothgar also warns Beowulf based on his own life experience, relating how he ruled fifty years in prosperity and believed he would never face another enemy. “Hwæt, me þæs on eþle edwenden cwom, / gyrn æfter gomene.” [Still, what happened was a hard reversal / from bliss to grief.]³¹ Hrothgar’s warning to Beowulf is one that echoes a theme throughout the epic: life may be going well, but grief is sure to follow. Beowulf would do well to realize that suffering, both physical and emotional, is an inevitable part of life.

A final scene of mourning among the Danes takes place as Hrothgar weeps when he bids Beowulf farewell, and on this occasion Beowulf does not rebuke Hrothgar’s tears. The poet gives a detailed description of Hrothgar’s public grief:

Gecyste þa cyning æþelum god,
 þeoden Scyldinga, ðegn bet[e]stan
 ond be healse genam; hrunon him tearas
 blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen,
 ealdum infrodum, oþres swiðor,
 þæt h[i]e seoðða(n no) geseon moston,
 modige on meþle. (W)æs him se man to þon leof
 þæt he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte,
 ac him on hreþre hygebendum fæst
 æfter deorum men dyrne langað
 beorn wið blode.

[And so the good and gray-haired Dane,
 that highborn king, kissed Beowulf
 and embraced his neck, then broke down
 in sudden tears. Two forebodings
 disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
 nevermore would they meet each other
 face to face. And such was his affection
 that he could not help being overcome:

his fondness for the man was so deep-founded,
it warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings
tight in his breast.]³²

When male mourning receives any attention in *Beowulf*, it is most often as scholars criticize Hrothgar's tears and argue that they are a sign of weakness and effeminacy.³³ Mary Dockray-Miller holds this view: "Rather than a shared masculine bond, [Hrothgar's] inability to control his emotions and Beowulf's neglect of their expression show him to be a figure of impotence, crying while Beowulf walks away."³⁴ By demeaning Hrothgar's tears, Dockray-Miller suggests that the ability to control one's emotions is a virtue, a sign of strength. Such an assumption cannot stand when one examines the entire text and sees the multiple occasions in which the warriors, kings, and heroes mourn and weep.

Mary Dockray-Miller also says of Hrothgar's tears as he bids Beowulf farewell, "Hrothgar cannot find an unambiguously masculine gesture of parting from the younger man."³⁵ However, perhaps the problem lies not in Hrothgar's manner of parting from Beowulf but in Dockray-Miller's perception of tears as a gesture which is not "unambiguously masculine." She seems to suggest that weeping is more appropriate for women than men. If she were to consider that many more moments of male mourning in the text appear than those of female mourning, and if she recalled the poet's outright praise of mourning at Beowulf's funeral, perhaps she would be more cautious in her critique of male tears.

In contrast with Mary Dockray-Miller's view, Allen Frantzen argues that Hrothgar is a "manly man."³⁶ Frantzen's interpretation of Hrothgar as a figure meant to be admired and respected seems more consistent with the text itself. Repeatedly Hrothgar

is praised by the poet, by his thanes, and by Beowulf. One of his warriors describes Hrothgar as “freaan Scildinga, frinan wille, / beaga bryttan... / þeoden mærne” [our noble king, / our dear lord, friend of the Danes, / the giver of rings.]³⁷ Even when the Danes gather to praise Beowulf’s defeat over Grendel, the poet is sure to assert: “Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon, / glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning.” [Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord, / the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.]³⁸ Also, the poet repeatedly emphasizes Hrothgar’s great age and wisdom. Perhaps it is only his age which prevents him from fighting Grendel himself. Although the king is not capable of destroying Grendel, he is upheld as a model of a good ruler, admired by his subjects and capable of feeling deep sorrow when they experience any injury. At their parting, Beowulf shows Hrothgar respect and honor, and as Hrothgar sheds tears, on this occasion Beowulf does not urge Hrothgar to cease his weeping. Perhaps the warrior has taken to heart Hrothgar’s earlier warning that as time goes by he, too, could suffer grief or defeat.

Beowulf becomes a mirror of Hrothgar in the second half of the epic, as he returns to Geatland and eventually becomes king. Just like Hrothgar, Beowulf reigns as a wise and respected king for fifty years.³⁹ Then, the Geats suffer from the attack of a monster, as did the Danes, and Beowulf’s response parallels the Hrothgar’s:

þæt ðam godan wæs
 hreow on hreðre, hygesorga mæst...
 ...Breost innan weoll
 þeostrum geþoncum, swa him geþywe ne wæs.

[It threw the hero
 into deep anguish and darkened his mood...
 His mind was in turmoil,
 unaccustomed anxiety and gloom confused his brain.]⁴⁰

Beowulf sits stunned, grieved, and bewildered, just as Hrothgar did. He has now endured “a hard reversal / from bliss to grief,” as Hrothgar warned him could take place, and Beowulf’s first response is one of anguish and confusion, for he has enjoyed success his entire life.⁴¹

Beowulf does differ from Hrothgar in his superhuman strength and in his previous experience combating monstrous threats. So, in spite of his age, he decides to take action, but Beowulf’s attitude as he goes to battle the dragon is drastically different his ebullient confidence when he faced Grendel and the monster’s mother. Instead, the poet says, “him wæs geomor sefa.” [He was sad at heart.]⁴² As mentioned previously, *geomor* can also signify wailing and lamentation, so while Heaney opts for a more reserved translation, Beowulf could be vocally expressing his grief.

Indeed, immediately after this phrase appears, Beowulf speaks to the twelve men in his warrior band of sorrow and woe, performing in a scop-like manner as he recounts past memories which are filled with mourning men. However, his warriors do not respond with sympathy or displays of sorrow. Silence reigns, and Beowulf goes alone to face the dragon. It is only as they see the king losing his battle that finally one of the twelve is moved. A young warrior, Wiglaf, rises up. Wiglaf is capable of compassion, moved by sorrow, and willing to fight in defense of his lord. As the rest of Beowulf’s hand-picked warriors flee for safety, he remains: “Hiora in anum weoll / sefa wiþ sorgum; sibb æfre ne mæg / wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.” [But within one heart / sorrow welled up; in a man of worth / the claims of kinship cannot be denied.]⁴³ The *Beowulf*-poet places primary emphasis on Wiglaf’s capacity to feel grief in response to suffering. Sorrow is shown to be an essential attribute which spurs Wiglaf to aid his lord

and kinsman. The other warriors' primary feeling when watching Beowulf suffer injury is to feel fear for themselves, while Wiglaf's response of sorrow moves and enables him to take action.

The poet draws a specific parallel between Wiglaf and Beowulf. When Beowulf speaks to his twelve warriors before going to fight the dragon, the poet states, "Him wæs geomor sefa," and now as Wiglaf prepares to join in the fight and addresses his eleven companions, the poet states, "Wiglaf maðelode, wordrihta fela / sægde gesiðum—*him was sefa geomor.*" [Sad at heart, addressing his companions, / Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words.]⁴⁴ The mournful spirit of the young warrior Wiglaf echoes that of Beowulf. Just as Beowulf became sensitive to sorrow through the course of the epic, Wiglaf arises as a young new hero, moved by grief to take action. As he addresses the other warriors, he reminds them of Beowulf's generosity and urges them to go to his aid. Yet, silence follows Wiglaf's words, leaving a void where there should be a response of grief and compassion. Wiglaf turns alone to join Beowulf. The failure to be moved by sorrow on the part of the rest of the warriors leads to their failure to be loyal thanes to their king.

After Beowulf's death, the ten who abandoned Beowulf emerge, ashamed, and see Wiglaf with the dead king. They then send a rider to a greater host of the Geats camped on a hillside above, and he brings word of their king's death. The response of the entire company is to weep: "Weorod eall aras; / eodon unbliðe under Earnanæs, / wollenteara wundur sceawian." [The entire band, / rising sorrowfully to see the astonishing sight / under Earnanæs, went with gushing tears.]⁴⁵ Finally, too late, the warriors and the rest of Beowulf's people respond with sorrow. Perhaps, if the all twelve of the warrior band had been willing to respond with sympathy and sorrow to Beowulf's

narrative of a king's death, they would have joined him in battle and never would have had to experience the death of their own king. Instead, they now face personal grief and loss. The warrior band builds a pyre for Beowulf, and finally they display sorrow:

“Higum unrote / modceare mændon, mondryhtnes cw(e)alm.” [They were disconsolate/ and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.]⁴⁶ Then, for only the second time throughout the epic, the *Beowulf*-poet depicts a woman's grief. A Geatish woman sings a song of lament, speaking of the upcoming desolation she fears for her people. Then the focus returns to the mourning of the twelve warrior men:

þa ymbe læw riordan hildediore,
 æþelinga bearn, ealra twelf(e),
 woldon (care) cwiðan (ond c)yning mænan,
 wordgyd wrecan ond ymb w(er) sprecan;
 eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc
 duguðum demdon— swa hit gede(fe) bið
 þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
 ferhðum freoige, þonne he forð scile
 of l(i)chaman (læ)ded weorðan.
 Swa begnornodon Geata leode
 hlaforðes (hry)re, heorðgeneatas.

[Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb
 Chieftains' sons, champions in battle,
 all of them distraught, changing in dirges,
 mourning his loss as a man and a king.
 They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
 and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
 for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
 and cherish his memory when that moment comes
 when he has to be conveyed from his bodily home.
 So the Geat people, his hearth-companions,
 sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.]⁴⁷

The *Beowulf*-poet specifically praises the way in which the men mourn Beowulf. Their grief, and their speeches about the king's greatness, are hailed as “the proper thing.” The poet has portrayed widely varying responses to tragedy and death throughout the epic,

and finally, at the conclusion, the poet openly affirms men's public demonstration of grief. The epic concludes, as it began, with a scene of sorrow in which a noble king is properly mourned by all of his subjects.

¹ See Helen Bennett, “The Female Mourner at Beowulf’s Funeral: Filling in the Blanks/Hearing the Spaces,” *Exemplaria* 4.1 (1992): 35-50; Joyce Hill, “Pæt Wæs Geomuru Ides!”: A Female Stereotype Examined.” *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 235-47; Anne L. Klinck, “Singing a Song of Sorrow: Tropes of Lament,” *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. Jane Tolmie and M.J. Toswell (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010): 1-20.

² Lines 1384-85. All of the quotes from *Beowulf* in Old English come from Klaeber’s *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, eds. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). For the translation to modern English, I will use Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2000). This translation is widely recognized to be one of the best renderings of the poem into English, although on some occasions Heaney sacrifices precision for poetic or descriptive effect. On some occasions, I will offer my own alternate translation and make a note accordingly.

³ “Sorgian.” Def. 1. and “Sorh.” Defs. 1 and 2. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, eds. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (London: Oxford University Press, 1882).

⁴ The total number of appearances for a word comes from the glossary of *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, which cites the English definition of the Anglo-Saxon word and offers a line number for each occasion that word or a variation of that word appears in the *Beowulf* text. Bosworth and Toller’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* also includes every instance a word appears in an Old-English text, and the count consistently corresponds between Klaeber’s glossary and Bosworth and Toller’s dictionary.

⁵ “Murnan.” Def. 1. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

⁶ “Meornan.” Def. 1. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

⁷ “Mænan.” Def. 3. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

⁸ “Geomrian.” Def. 1. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

⁹ “Wop.” Def. 2. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

¹⁰ 1872.

¹¹ “Tear.” Def. 1. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

¹² 3032.

¹³ “Wollen-tear.” Klaeber’s “Glossary of *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburg*.” I prefer Klaeber’s definition to Bosworth and Toller’s definition: “Wollen-tear: Having hot tears, with hot tears.” *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

¹⁴ Anne Savage, “The Grave, the Sword, and the Lament: Mourning for the Future in *Beowulf*,” *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, eds. Jane Tolmie and M.J. Toswell (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010): 67-80; 67.

¹⁵ 1158-61.

¹⁶ 47-50.

¹⁷ Line 2419 *Beowulf* is “sad at heart,” and again in line 2631, *Wiglaf* is “sad at heart.” But the Old English reads, “Him wæs geomor sefa,” and “Him wæs sefa geomor,” respectively.

¹⁸ “Geomrian.” Def. 1. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

¹⁹ The poet states that the men “murnende mod,” and *mod* is the word used to refer to the heart or soul, the core of a person “Mod,” Def. 1, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

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- ²⁰ 115-125.
- ²¹ 128-29. The modern translation is my own. Heaney translates these lines, “They wept to heaven / and mourned under morning” (128-29).
- ²² 129-34.
- ²³ 134-37.
- ²⁴ My translation, based on Klaeber’s glossary entry, “Murnan.”
- ²⁵ 1307.
- ²⁶ 1384-85.
- ²⁷ 1387b-88a.
- ²⁸ 1395-96.
- ²⁹ 1397-98.
- ³⁰ 1766b-68.
- ³¹ 1774-75a.
- ³² 1870-80.
- ³³ Mary Dockray-Miller, “*Beowulf*’s Tears of Fatherhood,” *Exemplaria* 10.1 (1998): 1-28; 9.
- ³⁴ Dockray-Miller 24.
- ³⁵ Dockray-Miller 2.
- ³⁶ Allen Frantzen, “When Women Aren’t Enough,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 445-71.
- ³⁷ Klaeber 351b-352a, 353a; Heaney 351-53.
- ³⁸ 862-63.
- ³⁹ 2208-10.
- ⁴⁰ 2327a-28, 2331b-32.
- ⁴¹ 1774b-75a.
- ⁴² 2419b.
- ⁴³ 2599b-2601.
- ⁴⁴ 2419, 2631-32, italics mine.
- ⁴⁵ 3030-32, my translation.
- ⁴⁶ 3148b-3149.
- ⁴⁷ 3169-79.

Chapter 2

Weeping Kings, Mourning Vassals: Grief and Vengeance in *La Chanson de Roland*

La Chanson de Roland contains a prolific number of references to male mourning. On twenty-four occasions men cry, and six times men faint because of the intensity of their sorrow. Two characters die of grief. The text alternately portrays the sorrow of one individual and the collective mourning of a vast group of men. Most often the individual mourner is King Charlemagne, who weeps on twelve occasions and faints twice. His grief is often closely followed by that of the entire Frankish army; in nine instances the text states that thousands of Charlemagne's soldiers weep in distress and pain, and on two occasions when the king is most distraught, thousands of Frankish soldiers faint. Mourning is shown to be an essential response to tragedy, demonstrating devotion to those injured and empathy with those who have suffered.

At the opening of the epic, Roland stands apart emotionally, seeking glory and overlooking grief, but by the conclusion, he has been transformed by suffering. He begins to mourn, weeping and then fainting, once he sees the massacre of the Franks in his rearguard and the death of his closest friend Oliver. Roland's emotional transformation and the uninhibited mourning of Charlemagne and the Franks suggests that grief, displayed through physical acts such as weeping and fainting, is an acceptable and even necessary response to the suffering of the king or his vassals. Grief also serves a political purpose in the epic, as emotional suffering legitimizes acts of vengeance against the Saracens as a form of compensation. Yet even after vengeance has been

attained, grief remains, and *La Chanson de Roland* ends with the weeping of King Charlemagne. The entire epic maintains a focus on the emotional experience of grief.

In his article, “The Politics of Anger,” Stephen D. White endeavors, as few other scholars have done, to examine emotion within *La Chanson de Roland*.¹ He observes, “The poem represents emotions very frequently, giving anger and grief special prominence.”² White’s essay focuses primarily on anger, but many of his points regarding the political and social role anger plays in the poem are equally applicable to the role of grief throughout the epic. White begins by summarizing the views scholars have held regarding emotions in the Middle Ages. More than fifty years ago Marc Bloch and Johan Huizinga expressed their opinions that the epidemics, famines, and social turmoil of the Middle Ages produced an unusually “nervous sensibility” in the populace. Bloch attributed “‘the emotionalism’ of medieval civilization to an absence of ‘moral or social’ conventions that would later require even ‘well-bred people to repress their tears and their raptures.’”³ Bloch viewed public displays of feeling as “signs of emotional instability and political irrationality.”⁴ Bloch demeans public portrayals of emotion and expresses an unfounded opinion that the most advanced, moral societies are those which are emotionally reserved.

As Stephen D. White studies emotions in medieval literature, and anger in *La Chanson de Roland* in particular, he contradicts Bloch’s stance, asserting that anger “has a well-defined place in political scripts in which other emotions figure as well.”⁵ White suggests that public displays of anger and “other emotions” on the part of the king and his court serve as a catalyst for political action. One of the most prominent “other emotions” which holds a significant position in the political script of *La Chanson de Roland* is that

of grief. White acknowledges the importance of grief even though he focuses primarily on anger: “Like public grief and mortal enmity, lordly anger was not an unrestrained, unrepressed force that stimulated political irrationality and generated rampant violence. It was an important element in a secular feuding culture.”⁶ Like anger, the prolific performances of grief throughout *La Chanson de Roland* are not merely evidence of the “emotionalism” of medieval civilization. Mourning demonstrates loyalty between lord and vassals and legitimizes taking vengeance.

Charlemagne is the first figure to shed tears in *La Chanson de Roland*. As the Franks leave Spain, they must appoint a leader for the rearguard, and treacherous Ganelon nominates Roland. “Li quens Rollant quant il s'oït juger, / Dunc ad parled a lei de chevalier.” [Count Roland, when he heard himself assigned / spoke out, adhering to chivalric code.]⁷ Roland reveals that his primary concern is to display loyalty to Charlemagne by following the chivalric code. He proudly accepts this dangerous position and swears to protect the army from all foes. Charlemagne’s deep care and concern for Roland appears visibly as he weeps for the first time: “Li empereres en tint sun chef enbrunc, / Si duist sa barbe, e detoerst sun gernun; / Ne poet muër que des oilz ne plurt.” [The emperor, his head as yet inclined, / tugs gently at his beard, twists his moustache. / He cannot keep his eyes from shedding tears.]⁸ Charlemagne’s concern for Roland is so great that he weeps in anticipation of any possible injury. While Roland’s focus is on following the chivalric code, Charlemagne models an emotional code of conduct in return. The king’s tears demonstrate his care for his kinsman and vassal, and suggest that loyalty can be demonstrated not only through heroic deeds but also through emotions such as grief.

Roland's buoyant eagerness to fight for Charlemagne contrasts with his king's grieved mood. At this point, while zealously following the chivalric code, he does not demonstrate emotional empathy with the king. When Charlemagne tries to send half the army with Roland in the rearguard, Roland ardently refuses and boasts that with just twenty thousand men he will defend the king from harm.⁹ Roland will undergo an emotional transformation throughout the course of the *chanson*, but at this point Charlemagne is cast as the primary emotional figure within the text.

Charlemagne's army does not fully enter into his sorrow yet, either. As Roland remains behind to lead the rearguard, Charlemagne feels a great sense of foreboding, and once again, he weeps at the anticipation of possible injury to his nephew: "Carles li mages ne poet muër n'en plurt. / .C. milie Francs pur lui unt grant tendrur, / E de Rollant merveilluse pour." [Charlemagne cannot help weeping. / A hundred thousand Franks sympathize with him deeply / And feel terrifying fear for Roland.]¹⁰ Charlemagne's grief is described first and is given primary importance. His sadness surpasses that of his subjects. Although his men feel troubled by the king's distress, they do not yet join him in weeping. Charlemagne, as king, bears the greatest burden and displays the deepest sensitivity to the suffering, both present and anticipated, of his subjects. In his book *The Subject of Violence*, Peter Haidu comments on the portrayal of Charlemagne as a figure of grief throughout the epic:

While portraying the generality of the surviving Frankish troops as grieving their losses, the narrative focuses on the figure of Charles as survivor. It is Charles who is cast into the textual figure of the consciousness of loss. The rhetorical charge of this aspect of the figure is not to be denied.¹¹

Charlemagne is indeed an embodiment of sorrow and suffering throughout the epic, more than any other figure. Repeatedly the poet emphasizes that “Sur tuz les altres est Carles anguissus.” [Charles is anguished more than all the rest.]¹²

While some critics such as Marc Bloc would see such statements as a sign of the king’s weakness or instability, Eugene Vance asserts that “in the example of Charlemagne, suffering moves to the fore and is proffered as heroic action in its own right.”¹³ Vance upholds the idea that Charlemagne’s weeping, fainting, and suffering makes him more of a heroic king, not less. As Robert Harrison introduces his translation of *The Song of Roland*, he expresses a similar concept, saying that fainting and weeping, “far from diminishing a man’s heroism, were taken as evidence of that quality from which heroism derives its significance: sensibility. The greatness of a man’s soul was measured largely by his capacity for suffering.”¹⁴ *La Chanson de Roland* repeatedly emphasizes the preeminence of suffering and portrays the two protagonists as those who undergo the greatest suffering. Charlemagne bears the burden of sorrow, and while Roland initially views physical suffering as the highest demonstration of loyalty to the king, by the end of the battle he has entered into emotional suffering as well, mirroring that of Charlemagne. If, as Harrison says, “sensibility” is the criteria by which men are proved heroes, Charlemagne is certainly portrayed as a hero throughout the poem, and Roland becomes one in the course of battle.

Gerard J. Brault also takes notice of Charlemagne’s frequent tears but focuses on a different explanation for their appearance in the *chanson*:

The Emperor’s overwhelming grief is not a sign of weakness or merely a classical reminiscence. The public shedding of tears by men would later be regarded as unseemly, but this is not true for the Middle Ages, when

mention of weeping could be expected to evoke corresponding emotions from the audience.¹⁵

Brault's argument that accounts of mourning are meant to move the audience to tears is intriguing, but unproven. However, it is true that almost every display of grief in *La Chanson de Roland* occurs in public rather than in private. Stephen White notes that "emotions are often performed *publicly* instead of being shared among intimates or experienced in isolation. Those who show grief by weeping weep openly. Those who are angry sooner or later broadcast their anger to others, enacting their enmity before audiences."¹⁶ Neither men nor women within *La Chanson de Roland* ever hesitate to publicly display their emotions. Also, on almost every occasion, those observing a display of grief reciprocate with tears and fainting of their own. Within the text, "suffering with" is modeled over and over. It is uncertain whether a similar emotional response was expected from the poet's audience. However, within *La Chanson de Roland* itself, the poet leaves no doubt that the most heroic, devoted individuals are those who openly display grief in response to the injury, death, or sorrow of their companions.

Whether or not the characters' emotional displays are meant to provoke weeping in the audience, the king's tears are shown to have that affect on Charlemagne's soldiers. Charlemagne's depth of sensitivity and concern has been shown to be the greatest, as he wept even before Roland had suffered any injury. However, once Roland's horn sounds and the Franks know for certain that the rearguard must be under attack, Charlemagne's knights begin to share in his anguish. As the army turns back towards Roland, the entire company weeps: "N'i ad ceλοι ki durement ne plurt, / E de Rollant sunt en grant poür."
[No man there fails to weep with bitterness, / and they are much afraid for Roland's

sake.]¹⁷ Tears appear as the primary response to tragedy and serve as evidence of the Franks' concern for Roland.

An even more dramatic display of grief occurs when the Franks arrive at the scene of battle and find a field of corpses:

“Deus!” dist li reis, “tant me pois enragerue
Que jo ne fui a l'estur cumencer!”
Tiret sa barbe cum hom ki est iret;
Plurent des oilz si baron chevalier.
Encuntre tere se pasment .XX. millers.

[The king says: “God! I’ve cause enough to grieve
that I was not here when the battle started!”
He tugs upon his beard like one enraged;
the eyes of all his noble knights shed tears,
and twenty thousand fall down in a faint.]¹⁸

The text again focuses first on Charlemagne’s distress, followed by that of all his knights. He is still the primary, individual figure of grief within the text, and the weeping and fainting of his knights seems correlated not only to the sight of the devastation before them but also to the anguish of the king. This moment is also the first occasion when widespread weeping is joined by multitudes of men fainting. Rather than being a sign of weakness, fainting can be a display of the deepest sympathy, as it mirrors death itself. As the mourners pass out of consciousness, they come as close as possible to joining the deceased. Yet the living must return to consciousness, and learn to respond and cope with pain of loss.

The grief of the king and his knights reveals personal sorrow, and also sympathy for the fallen. As with his grief, the poet describes Charlemagne’s sympathy first, before that of his knights. When he wanders through fields with flowers stained by blood, “Pitet en ad, ne poet muër n’en plurt.” [He is moved to pity, he cannot help weeping.]¹⁹ His

tears reveal kingly compassion and sympathy for his fallen soldiers. When Charlemagne discovers his slain nephew, he displays his extreme distress through fainting: “Sur lui se pasmet, tant par est anguissus.” [By sorrow torn, he falls across him, senseless.]²⁰

Charlemagne returns to consciousness only to faint again. When he awakens, his noblemen help him to stand and the Frankish army looks on as he displays his grief through both words and actions:

Carles le pleint par feid e par amur:
Jamais n'ert jurn que de tei n'aie dular.
Trait ses crignels, pleines ses mains amsdous,
Cent milie Franc en unt si grant dular
N'en i ad cel ki durement ne plurt. AOI.

[Charles mourns for him in love and loyalty:
“The day will never come that I shan’t mourn you.”
He rips out handfuls of his curly hair.
A hundred thousand Franks so pity him
That there’s not one of them but weeps with pain.]²¹

The poet clearly states that Charlemagne’s mourning is evidence of his love and loyalty; once again a display of emotion serves as evidence of the depth of devotion that exists between lord and vassal. Charlemagne enacts this emotional code of conduct, and his knights respond in like fashion, weeping in pity for the grief of Charlemagne. Their sorrow demonstrates their devotion to and sympathy for their suffering king.

The scene of mourning at Roland’s side only continues to escalate, as Charlemagne proclaims, “‘Si grant doel ai que jo ne vuldreie estre!’ / Sa barbe blanche cumencet a detraire.../ Cent milie Francs s'en pasment cuntre tere.” [‘I feel so sad I do not want to live.’ / He starts to yank upon his whitish beard... / A hundred thousand Franks fall down unconscious.]²² Charlemagne bears physical and emotional anguish, inflicting pain on himself and saying that life no longer holds any attraction. His subjects

respond to his wish to die by mirroring death through fainting. They enter into their king's grief and suffering to the greatest extent possible, demonstrating their sorrow at Roland's death and their loyalty to their living king.

The death of Roland is like a stone dropped in a pond, a centerpoint from which waves of grief ripple into the lives of every individual. Jane Gilbert observes that Roland's death creates a void which drives the action in the rest of the *chanson*:

A significant death behaves, in Freud's memorable description, 'like an open wound, drawing to itself...energies...from all directions' in an effort to heal the damage it threatens to cause. Roland's death is a trauma generating the energy which powers the...*Chanson de Roland*.²³

As painful as Roland's death is, it is also a catalyst for action within the epic. The annihilation of the rearguard causes Charlemagne and the Franks first to mourn, and then to pursue vengeance. Bonnie Wheeler asserts that "Charlemagne's grief then mobilizes his anger and propels his exacting revenge. Grief is almost but not entirely a male prerogative in the poem."²⁴ Indeed, masculine demonstrations of grief fill the epic, although the two female figures of Alde and Brammimonde are also portrayed as mourners whose grief equals that of the men throughout the *chanson*. The grief of men receives the primary focus, however, as most of the action of the plot takes place in the masculine space of the battlefield.

Revenge closely follows after the sorrow of Charlemagne and the Franks; their grief serves as a foundation for action. Peter Haidu cites Duke Naimés' words to the Franks who are about to enter battle, "Avenge this pain!"²⁵ and argues that emotional suffering legitimizes vengeance as compensation:

Vengez ceste dolor! provides the link between the emotion and the succeeding action. The grief is experienced as an impermissible trespass upon the survivor, a damage done him for which legal reparation can be

claimed...In any case, the survivor experiences his grief as an injury done him for which the appropriate mode of treatment is the exaction of vengeance, conceived as a legal mode of compensation. The expression of grief here transforms what a twentieth-century consciousness would consider pure interiority into a social and semiotic fact that is the basis for narrative action.²⁶

Haidu's concept that emotional suffering legitimized vengeance as a legal form of compensation is further supported in the text itself. *La Chanson de Roland* correlates grief with revenge when Charlemagne hears that the Saracen king Baligant is advancing with a mighty army:

Carles li reis en ad prise sa barbe;
Si li remembret del doel e [del] damage,
Mult fierement tute sa gent reguardez;
Puis si s'escriet a sa voiz grand e halte:
"Barons franceis, as chevaux e as armes!" AOI.

[At this, King Charles, his hand upon his beard,
recalls to mind the losses and the grief;
and then, with pride surveying all his men,
he calls out in his strong and ringing voice:
"French barons, to your horses and your arms!"]²⁷

Charlemagne's memory of the injury and the sorrow that the Saracens have inflicted on the Franks leads him to respond by taking up arms and giving the Saracens return on the pain the Franks have suffered. The greater the grief, the greater is the need for retribution.

The clearest connection between grief and revenge occurs as the Franks are routing the pagans in the final battle, and Charlemagne addresses his army:

Co dist li reis: "Seignurs, venges voz doels,
Si esclargiez voz talenz e voz coers,
Kar hoy matin vos vi plurer des oilz"
Respondent Franc: "Sire, co nus estoet."

[The king now says: "My lords, avenge your griefs
and thus relieve your feelings and your hearts—
I saw your eyes shed tears this very morning."
The Franks reply, "We *have* to do it, sire."]²⁸

In the feudal code of *La Chanson de Roland*, the experience of grief is directly correlated to the pursuit of vengeance. Charlemagne's knights share his view that their sorrow necessitates revenge. Stephen White focuses on the role anger plays in inciting vengeance, but he acknowledges that "grief, too, had political significance in feuds. Whether or not those whom medieval sources represented as weeping felt what we would understand as grief or sorrow, their displays of grief often constituted political acts inextricably associated with the process of making a legitimated political claim."²⁹ The Franks certainly view their grief as the basis of making a legitimate political claim, and Charlemagne also suggests that attaining vengeance will relieve their emotional pain. Yet, at least for Charlemagne, revenge does not assuage grief. Even once the Franks vanquish all of the Saracen forces, the king's sorrow endures.

Although Roland's attitude initially contrasts that of King Charlemagne as the dry-eyed knight leaves his weeping king, Roland undergoes an emotional transformation in the course of the *chanson*. As the heroic figure of a war epic, Roland shares much in common with Beowulf. Both are introduced as young warriors serving older, experienced kings. Both possess optimism and insuperable confidence as they face powerful foes. Both seek glory and renown through battle. Most importantly, both of these heroes stand apart emotionally. They are placed in contrast with the kings they serve. While the wise, aged kings weep at anticipated suffering and loss to come, the young warriors are initially dry-eyed, focused on gaining glory and conquering foes. But by the end of each epic, the heroes become acquainted with suffering, and they display deep sorrow at loss or injury done to their people or their fellow warriors. The presentation of the honored, aged kings as the bearers of grief, followed by with the

progression of the heroes from dry-eyed warriors to sorrowful, empathetic leaders, suggests that demonstrations of mourning and suffering are valued as masculine virtues, rather than demeaned as signs of weakness.

At the opening of *La Chanson de Roland*, Roland stands apart emotionally as a self-confident, eager soldier. He zealously follows the chivalric code, and he desires to gain glory and serve his king. He looks forward to combat with enthusiasm, and “plus se fait fiers que leon ne leupart.” [[H]e is fiercer than a leopard or a lion.]³⁰ Ironically, it is Roland’s eagerness to suffer for his king that leads himself, his rearguard, Charlemagne, and all the Franks into the experience of grief. Oliver predicts the upcoming need to enter into combat with Saracens; “Respont Rollant: ‘E! Deus la nus otreit! / Ben devuns ci estre pur nostre rei: / Pur sun seignor deit hom susfrir destreiz.’” [And Roland answers: ‘Grant us this, oh God! / It’s fitting we should stay here for our king: / a man should suffer hardships for his lord.]³¹ Roland’s understanding of the chivalric code makes him ready and willing to suffer in order to protect Charlemagne. However, he does not yet consider or comprehend the emotional suffering that his own physical suffering will inflict on Charlemagne and the rest of the Franks.

Roland’s concept of suffering focuses purely on physical anguish. As the Saracens draw near, Roland expresses his definition of what suffering encompasses: “Pur sun seignor deit hom susfrir granz mals / E endurer e forz freiz e granz chalz, / Sin deit hom perdre del sanc e de la char.” [A man should suffer hardships for his lord, / and persevere through dreadful heat and cold; / a man should lose, if need be, flesh and blood.]³² Roland’s definition of suffering focuses entirely on physical hardship. He does not yet have a concept of anguish of the heart rather than of the body. If he had had

greater emotional insight, he may have realized he would be inflicting greater pain on Charlemagne by dying than if he had called for aid. But as the battle progresses, Roland suffers into wisdom.

The outnumbered rearguard fights courageously, until only sixty of the twenty thousand Franks remain alive. “Li quens Rollant des soens i veit grant perte.” [Count Roland sees the great slaughter of his men.]³³ As he surveys the death of so many, he is moved by the suffering before him, and for the first time Roland is willing to consider blowing the horn to summon Charlemagne’s aid. When the Archbishop Turpin approves of this action, once again emotions and vengeance come into consideration together: “Venget li reis, si nus purrat venger; / Ja cil d’Espaigne ne s’en deivent turner liez.” [The king will come, and then he can avenge us— / the men from Spain will not depart in joy.]³⁴ Two goals are accomplished by blowing the horn: the Franks can attain vengeance and the Saracens will be deprived of the emotional experience of joy. They will undergo suffering and grief equal to that of the Franks.

Roland becomes more emotionally sensitive and responsive to suffering after blowing the horn. He surveys the carnage of battle: “Rollant regardet es munz e es lariz, / De cels de France i veit tanz morz gesir, / E il les pluret cum chevalier gentill.” [Count Roland scans the mountains and the hills: / he sees so many dead French lying there, / and like a noble knight he weeps for them.]³⁵ For the first time Roland sheds tears, and the poet directly states that a gentle or noble knight is one who weeps. Roland’s growing emotional sensitivity to suffering indicates that he has not only performed according to the chivalric code, but has begun to understand and act by the emotional code of conduct that accompanies knighthood, as well.

Roland's deepest sorrow occurs at the injury of his closest comrade, Oliver, and it is clear by this point that Roland's attitude has been entirely transformed. Instead of being dry-eyed, his mourning foreshadows the grief Charlemagne will experience when he encounters his slain nephew and the vanquished rearguard. Roland faints twice as he realizes Oliver will die, he weeps profusely, and he proclaims that he no longer wishes to live when Oliver is gone.³⁶ He also displays compassion for the slain as he wanders the battlefield. "Li quens Rollant, quant il veit mort ses pers / E Oliver, qu'il tant poeit amer, / Tendrur en out, cumencet a plurer." [Count Roland sees his peers dead / And Oliver, whom he loved so well, / He was moved with pity, he begins to weep.]³⁷ Roland has learned to empathize emotionally and to enter into grief.

Roland's last moments are tearful, as he recalls the past and prays for God to show him mercy in eternity.³⁸ He dies a hero, having fought with courage, and also expressed sorrow "like a noble knight."³⁹ Roland has changed through the course of the epic, undergoing an emotional transformation from dry-eyed, glory-seeking soldier to a sympathizing, suffering leader. He suffers into wisdom, becoming, like his king, a compelling figure who willingly bears the sorrow of his men and enters into suffering, not only physically, but emotionally.

La Chanson de Roland concludes with yet another display of sorrow. As Charlemagne is about to sleep after gaining vengeance on the Saracens, Saint Gabriel appears before him with a commission to travel to another area to aid Christians besieged by Saracens.

"Li emperere n'i volsist aler mie:
 'Deus!' dist li reis, 'se penuse est ma vie!'
 Pluret des oilz, sa barbe blanche turet.
 Ci falt la geste que Tuoldus declinet."

[The emperor had no desire to go:
the king cries: "God, how tiring is my life!"
His eyes shed tears, he tugs at his white beard.
The story that Tuoldus tells ends here.]⁴⁰

Charlemagne's tears began before Roland was even engaged in battle, and they continue after Roland's death has been avenged. His tears now may be in anticipation of the physical and emotional suffering that he and his men will experience by entering yet another battle. As king, he is an embodiment of sorrow and suffering throughout the epic, bearing the grief of his people, past, present, and future.

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- ¹ Stephen D. White, "The Politics of Anger," *Anger's Past: the Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara H. Rosenwein, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998): 127-52.
- ² White 132.
- ³ White 128, quoting Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
- ⁴ White 131.
- ⁵ White 142.
- ⁶ White 145.
- ⁷ The Old French text comes from the analytical edition of the Oxford text and English translation by Gerard J. Brault. *Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*, Vol. 2: Oxford Text and English Translation, trans. Gerard J. Brault, (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978). While Brault also includes an English translation, for the most part I prefer the translation by Robert Harrison. *The Song of Roland*, trans. Robert Harrison, (New York: Signet Classic, 1970). I will use Brault's copy of the Oxford text and Harrison's translation, unless otherwise noted. This quote is ll. 751-2.
- ⁸ 771-3.
- ⁹ 783-91.
- ¹⁰ 841-43, Brault in the original as well as the translation.
- ¹¹ Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983) 120.
- ¹² 823.
- ¹³ Eugene Vance, "Style and Value: From Soldier to Pilgrim in *Song of Roland*," *Yale French Studies*, Special Issue (1991): 75-96; 84.
- ¹⁴ Robert Harrison. "Introduction." *The Song of Roland*, trans. Robert Harrison, (New York: Signet Classic, 1970): 1-46; 23.
- ¹⁵ Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*, Vol. 1: Introduction and Commentary, (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 166.
- ¹⁶ White 139.
- ¹⁷ 1814-15.
- ¹⁸ 2412-2416.
- ¹⁹ 2873, Brault in the original as well as the translation.
- ²⁰ 2880.
- ²¹ 2897, 2901, 2906-08.
- ²² 2929-30, 2932.
- ²³ Jane Gilbert, "The *Chanson de Roland*," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, eds. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008): 21-34; 26.
- ²⁴ Bonnie Wheeler, "Grief in Avalon: Sir Palomydes' Psychic Pain," *Grief and Gender 700-1700*, eds. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 65-77; 66.
- ²⁵ 2428
- ²⁶ Haidu 122.
- ²⁷ 2982-86.
- ²⁸ 3627-30.

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- ²⁹White 146-47.
³⁰1111
³¹1008-10
³²1117-19.
³³1691, Brault in original and translation.
³⁴1744-45.
³⁵1851-53.
³⁶1980-2020.
³⁷2215-17, Brault in original and translation.
³⁸2375-92.
³⁹1853.
⁴⁰3999-4002.

Chapter 3

Weeping Monarchs, Mourning Subjects: Transformation through Grief in *Sir Orfeo*

The composition of *Sir Orfeo* is dated to approximately 1330, but the origins of its narrative lie in Greco-Roman mythology.¹ Mentions of the harper Orpheus appear as early as the sixth century B.C., and the tragic tale of Orpheus's loss of Eurydice and his descent to the underworld in pursuit of her appears first in Virgil's *Georgics* 4 and then in Ovid's elaboration of the narrative in Books X and XI of *Metamorphoses*.² Both Virgil and Ovid's versions of the myth were known in the Middle Ages; evidence suggests that Ovid's narrative was the most popular.³ The myth of Orpheus enjoyed continued attention thanks to the sixth-century commentator Boethius, who allegorized the tale in Book III of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* as a portrayal of the tension between the soul's search for higher truth and the human inclination for earthly things.⁴ In the ninth century, King Alfred translated Boethius into Old English, and from the tenth century onwards Ovid's account was adapted and allegorized by Christian commentators, who often interpreted Orpheus as a Christ-figure descending into hell and returning with lost souls, or as a harper-king like David.⁵ A more immediate source for *Sir Orfeo* may have existed in a twelfth-century French lai, as several French romances of that era refer to "le lai d'Orphey."⁶ Any such lai in French is lost, but the Middle English lay of *Sir Orfeo* has been successfully preserved in three manuscripts, the earliest of which is the Auchinleck MS, which is recognized as the most complete and accurate version.⁷

The lay of *Sir Orfeo* is just over six hundred lines long—significantly shorter than *Beowulf* and *La Chanson de Roland*. Yet even in such a brief narrative, mourning

manifests itself frequently in the text in the form of weeping, fainting, and even self-mutilation. Every significant event in the lay is accompanied with a description of an emotional reaction. While even the earliest versions of the myth have narrated the unassuaged grief of the Orpheus, the Middle English lay transforms harper to king and describes not only the king's sorrow but also the grief of the queen, knights, courtiers, commoners, and steward. Every demonstration of grief occurs because of injury, either real or believed, that has been done to the king or the queen. Arthurian legends of the Grail Quest introduce the figure of the wounded Fisher King, whose entire kingdom suffers as a result of the monarch's injury. When the king is wounded, the land is blighted.⁸ *Sir Orfeo* also contains striking visible proof of how a king's pain causes a kingdom to suffer; in this case the suffering appears in the form of emotional displays of anguish written on the subjects themselves. A strong emotional bond exists between the king and queen and their people, and repeatedly grief is uplifted as evidence of compassion, loyalty, and devotion.

Orfeo, like Beowulf and Roland, undergoes emotional transformation in the course of the narrative and gains wisdom through suffering. Initially, acting as heroic warrior, Orfeo seeks to take action rather than to mourn, but all of his efforts prove ineffective. It is through immersing himself in grief in the wilderness that Orfeo encounters Heurodis once again and can reclaim her. Every other character in the lay also has to publicly mourn and grieve before the restoration of joy can result. The knights, nobles, and commoners in the kingdom weep at the loss of king and queen, and then at the close of the lay they weep tears of joy at their return. Orfeo's steward's display of grief at the report of his king's death results in the promise that he will become

the next ruler. The lay of *Sir Orfeo* demonstrates that those who openly display sorrow and pass through the process of grieving are those who will eventually receive reward and experience the restoration of joy.

The first demonstration of grief and lament occurs after Queen Heurodis awakens from a dream in great distress:

Ac as sone as sche gan awake,
She crid and loþli bere [outcry] gan make.
Sche froted hir nonden and hir fet,
And crached hir visage—it bled wete.⁹

Even as the knights of the court carry her to her chamber, “euer she held in o cri.”¹⁰ It is only when Orfeo arrives and urges his wife, “Let ben all þis reweful cri,” that she ceases her screaming and wailing.¹¹ Although Heurodis finally stops crying out, she continues to display her distress: “Þo lay she stille ate last / And gan to wepe swiþe fast.”¹²

Heurodis finally explains that the reason for her distress is dream-vision in which the king of the faeries took her on a tour of his realm and informed her that the next day he would return to take her with him forever to his realm. It is the thought of separation from her husband, the king, which causes Heurodis to awake in anguish.

The queen’s cries and self-inflicted injuries have been alternately interpreted as a sign of female weakness and madness or as a demonstration of her love for her husband and her loyalty to her kingdom.¹³ The latter interpretation seems more in accordance with the text, as the words and actions of both king and queen throughout the lay emphasize their love for and loyalty to one another. Heurodis, rather than being demeaned by her grief, displays a passion and devotion equal to that of Orfeo. Both are willing to grieve publicly and to undergo physical suffering as evidence of their love for one another.

The loss of Queen Heurodis will injure not only Orfeo, but all of England.

Dominique Battles asserts that the abduction of Queen Heurodis is as much “a political crime as a personal one, and...the loss of Heurodis very quickly turns into the loss of a kingdom.”¹⁴ In fact, repeatedly throughout the lay, Heurodis is almost always referred to as the “quen,” or as the “quen, Dame Heurodis” which gives her a title doubly emphasizing her position as nobility and royalty.¹⁵ Her identity is inextricably tied to her role as ruler of England. When injury is done to the queen, it is an act not only against Orfeo but against all of England.

The king and queen of the faeries emerge as foes, as a competing court seeking to injure England. Dominique Battles draws attention to the fact that the faerie king first takes Heurodis on a tour of his kingdom, which seems vast and perhaps superior to her own, and then returns her home, with the warning that she will be abducted the following day. He therefore transforms “what would have been a private act (i.e. an abduction/rape) into a public and political act.”¹⁶ The faerie king, by abducting Heurodis, seeks to inflict injury on not only the king and queen, but the entire nation.

While Heurodis responds with weeping and great distress at the warning of her impending abduction, Orfeo’s initial response is to take action rather than to mourn. Orfeo undergoes an emotional transformation through the course of the lay. Although Orfeo expresses his own distress at Heurodis’s sorrow, he is not yet moved to tears as she is. He plans to remain with Heroudis no matter what, and tells her so:

“Allas!” quap he, “forlorn icham!
Whider wiltow go, and to wham?
Whider þou gost, ichil wiþ þe,
And whider y go, þou schalt wiþ me.”¹⁷

His words express his confidence that nothing can separate him and his queen unless he wills it. Orfeo does not yet demonstrate deep grief because he has not yet experienced

tragedy. He plays the role of self-confident warrior and leader, leading “ten hundred kniȝtes wiȝ him, / Ich y-armed stout and grim” to stand guard around the queen.¹⁸ Orfeo’s efforts to act as hero and defender are in vain. He and his knights can do nothing to prevent the fate which the faerie king has proclaimed to Heurodis, and she vanishes, mysteriously spirited away through faerie magic.¹⁹

Now, finally, upon encountering inevitable tragedy firsthand, the king and the knights enter into grief, as Heurodis did: “Men wist neuer wher sche was bicomē. / Þo [then] was þer criing, wepe, and wo!”²⁰ The *Orfeo*-poet paints an image of widespread weeping and wailing at the scene of the abduction, and though precisely who is crying is unspecified, those known to be present at the scene are Orfeo and all his knights. Defense and heroic deeds failed, and now, finally, the men enter into the experience of grief.

Immediately after describing the weeping on the part of the entire community who witnessed the tragedy, the poet focuses on Orfeo himself, whose sense of loss is, of course, the deepest of all. He has now come face to face with tragedy, and finally his emotional response parallels that of his queen:

The King into his chaumber is go
And oft swooned opon þe ston
And made swich diol [lamentation] and swiche mon,
Þat neiȝe his liif was y-spent.²¹

Orfeo’s demonstration of grief surpasses that of his knights, for he not only moans and cries out, but he also “oft swoned” and comes near dying of sorrow. In swooning, he is displaying the deepest empathy by coming as near Heurodis’ experience as possible. He passes out of consciousness, leaving reality and entering a void, just as the queen has passed out of her own land and entered another unknown realm. The motif of *katabasis*, descent into the underworld, has always been part of the Orpheus myth, but in the lay of

Sir Orfeo this image is transformed, becoming more interior as both Orfeo and later the steward descend into mental unconsciousness and return to reward. Orfeo's swooning at this moment also foreshadows his decision to leave his kingdom and live in the wilderness, passing out of the known realm and entering into the Otherworld of the faerie kingdom before returning with Queen Heurodis.

Orfeo's lamentation and fainting also reveals a new sensitivity and emotional depth. His former heroic confidence in his own abilities fades as he becomes acquainted with sorrow. His distress now finally mirrors that of his queen. From the beginning, Heurodis recognized the otherworldly power of her foe and believed in the ability of the faeries to carry out their threat. Orfeo underestimated his enemies and put confidence in his physical strength, which failed him. He now recognizes that the foe he faces cannot be conquered with weapons. He chooses, therefore, to immerse himself in grief and to sentence himself to exile in the wilderness.

Many critics blame Orfeo for his failure to protect Heurodis and scorn his subsequent self-exile, interpreting him as a *rex inutilis*, a weak king.²² More recently, scholars have examined *Sir Orfeo* in light of the political situations of early fourteenth century England when the lay was recorded.²³ Ruth Evans argues that Orfeo parallels Edward II, the English king who was forced to abdicate in 1327.²⁴ Evans claims that Edward II is, "like the exiled Orfeo...neither sacred, nor a martyr, but utterly expendable."²⁵ Alternately, Oren Falk suggests that the lay supports Edward II and critiques his court.²⁶ He speculates that a poet-performer under Edward II's patronage included subtle portrayals of a court resisting their king within *Sir Orfeo*.²⁷ For example, he finds the knights' failure to defend Heurodis suspect, and suggests that they are only

feigning loyalty when they weep at the loss of the queen.²⁸ Falk also recasts Orfeo's steward as an unfaithful retainer who secretly plans to usurp the throne and only feigns his fainting as part of the political intrigue.²⁹ Falk claims that Orfeo is subtly driven out of his kingdom by his own subjects, as Edward II was.³⁰ This imperative to historicize the narrative seems procrustean. Imposing such a specific political scenario on a myth that has existed for centuries is implausible. Similarities may exist, but such a reading is coincidental, not fundamental.

Moreover, the tone of the lay itself does not uphold such a negative interpretation, particularly when one examines the emotional reactions of Orfeo and Heurodis' subjects throughout the poem. The *Orfeo*-poet never gives the reader reason to suspect the sincerity of the displays of grief throughout the lay. Instead, the poet carefully describes the spread of sorrow, as mourning extends from queen to king and knights, and then to the court and the commoners. The entire court weeps when Orfeo expresses his resolution to enter exile and leave his kingdom under the steward's rule:

Po was þer wepeing in þe halle
 And grete cri among hem alle.
 Vnneþe miȝt old or ȝong
 For wepeing speke a word wiþ tong.³¹

Here once again lamentation and a physical display of grief takes the foreground as the response of first importance, and the weeping of the court suggests their sense of distress for their rulers and for themselves. Such mourning seems to display deep-rooted loyalty and devotion, rather than resistance to an unpopular king.

The grief of the entire kingdom is reinforced once again as the subjects of Orfeo's kingdom watch him pass through the city and set out into the wilderness:

And dede him barfot out atte ȝate:

No man most wiþ him go.
 O way, what þere was wepe and wo,
 When he þat hadde ben king wiþ croun
 Went so pouerlich out of toun!³²

A rising tide of grief, beginning with Heurodis and extending to Orfeo, knights, court, and commoners, has flooded the kingdom. This overwhelming demonstration of grief serves as a display of loyalty to king and queen, and clearly depicts the anguish the whole kingdom experiences as a result of the suffering of the monarchs. Grief, performed by rulers and subjects alike, is a visible picture of the emotional and political injury the kingdom has suffered.

Orfeo's grief and self-exile can be interpreted as evidence of the highest loyalty and fidelity, both in Orfeo's mind and in the opinion of his people. Orfeo is not negligent in caring for his kingdom. He takes care that the transfer of his rule is clearly communicated to the high steward and that the proper procedure for the appointment of a new king by a parliament is in place in case he should die in the wilderness.³³ Also, in a kingdom in which people of every station and situation have responded to tragedy with weeping and deep sorrow, the response of the king to enter the desolation of the wilderness as a display of deepest grief could be viewed as evidence of his love and loyalty to Queen Heurodis. Moreover, although he does not even set out with the goal in mind of finding and reclaiming his wife, the choice to fully enter into grieving is what leads him to the eventual recovery of his queen. It is by passing through grief that later joy and restoration result.

As King Orfeo enters fully into the sorrow of his loss in the desolation of the wilderness, he is transformed by grief and by time: "Þis King sufferd ten þere and more! / His here of his berd, blac and rowe, / To his girdle-stede was growe."³⁴ A.C. Spearing

observes that *Sir Orfeo's* "glimpse of aging is uncommon in medieval romances, where time usually passes without affecting human bodies as it does in the real world."³⁵ The poet describes Orfeo's aging in conjunction with suffering, emphasizing that he passes through a long period of grief, both emotionally and physically. The visible picture of Orfeo as a king marked by sorrow and hardship is highlighted again when Heurodis, riding with the faeries, happens upon Orfeo, and weeps to see her husband's condition: "For messais [misfortune] þat sche on him seiȝe, / Þat had ben so rich and so heiȝe, / Þe teres fel out of her eiȝe."³⁶ The queen's tears show once again that an appropriate response to suffering is to demonstrate sympathy through mourning. Heurodis sees the visible evidence of Orfeo's grief and responds with sorrow in return.

The emphasis on Orfeo's aging and anguish also creates a clear contrast between the English king and the ageless faeries, who are insensitive to sorrow or suffering. The clearest picture of the cruel nature of the faeries and the unchanging stasis maintained in their kingdom occurs in a gruesome catalogue of prisoners the faeries have brought to their court:

And sum non armes nade,
 And sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,
 And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
 And sum armed on hors sete,
 And sum astrangled as þai ete,
 And sum were in water adreynt,
 And sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt.³⁷

The captives remain eternally trapped in the condition in which they were taken, never changing, ever suffering. Orfeo passes by all the prisoners, who fill the grounds of the castle, into the hall of the faerie king where he and his court are surrounded by beauty and splendor, a stark contrast with the anguish outside their doors.

The faeries do not care about harm they do or the harm they witness. They represent an emotional indifference, as opposed to Orfeo, who has become acquainted with sorrow and has suffered into wisdom. He now possesses insight the unchanging faeries never will. The faeries are affected only by pleasure, and Orfeo, discerning this, plays a joyful song before the court. In earlier versions of the Orpheus myth, the harper sings a song of such sadness that all the fiends of Hades are moved by pity, and the king and queen of the Underworld decide to release Eurydice.³⁸ However, in the lay of *Sir Orfeo*, the faerie monarchs of the Otherworld are entirely different creatures, invulnerable to suffering. Therefore, Orfeo plays music which will appeal to their pleasure-loving natures:

And blisseful notes he þer gan...
 Hem þenkeþ his melody so swete.
 The king herkneþ and sit ful stille;
 To here his gle he haþ gode wille:
 Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;
 Þe riche Quen al so hadde he.³⁹

Orfeo's blissful harping delights the faeries and causes the king to offer an unspecified boon to the musician, who naturally asks for, and obtains, Heurodis' freedom.⁴⁰

As Orfeo returns to his own kingdom, once again a display of grief proves true loyalty and leads to restoration and reward. Orfeo goes in the disguise of a minstrel into his own court, where the steward still rules in Orfeo's stead.⁴¹ As Orfeo plays before the court, the steward recognizes the king's harp and asks Orfeo where he obtained the instrument. Orfeo lies, saying that he found it ten years ago, lying by the body of a man slain by lions.⁴² The steward believes that the slaughtered man was Orefo his king, and he cries out, "Now me is wo!" and then he faints: "Adoun he fel aswon to grounde."⁴³ Both the steward and Orfeo experience a grief so deep that they enter into the realm of

the unconscious. Orfeo's sorrow not only caused him to faint, but also to pass out of his kingdom and into the otherworld of the faeries before he could return through grief to restoration. Likewise, the steward's feels a grief so great that he passes out of consciousness, and it is this emotional, visible display of grief which serves as undeniable evidence of his loyalty to Orfeo: "King Orfeo knewe wele bi þan / His steward was a trewe man, / And loued him as he auȝt to do."⁴⁴

When the steward returns to consciousness, he awakes to restoration and reward. Orfeo explains that he came disguised to the court "for to asay þi gode wille" (568). The steward's loyalty, proven through a display of grief, leads to the promise of kingship:

And ich founde þe þus trewe,
 Pou no schust it neuer rewe:
 Sikerlich for loue or ay
 Pou schust be king after mi day.
 And ȝif þou of mi deþ hadest ben bliþe,
 Pou schust haue voided [been banished] also swiþe.⁴⁵

Orfeo places supreme emphasis on the importance of emotional response in this moment, contrasting joy, which would be inappropriate, with grief, which truly demonstrates loyalty. Ruth Evans critiques Orfeo's speech: "The stern final pronouncement seems both unnecessary (the steward has already proved himself to be loyal) and discordant (it breaks the mood of joyful homecoming)."⁴⁶ However, Orfeo's statement should not be interpreted as stern or discordant. The king is revealing his own ability to value the display of grief as a sign of loyalty and is reinforcing mourning as a proper response to injury or death. For the steward, as for Orfeo and Heurodis, passage through grief brings triumph, restoration, and reward.

The lay of *Sir Orfeo* ends with a display of great joy and exultation. Just as the queen's disappearance led the king and country into a time of grieving, her return

represents a movement from grief to joy. Heurodis is welcomed into the city in a procession, and the people of the kingdom once again express their emotions through weeping, but in this case they shed tears of joy: “For ioie þai wepe wiþ her eiȝe / Ðat hem so sounde y-comen seiȝe.”⁴⁷ Just as the appropriate response to great tragedy was an outward display of distress through tears, the most fitting response to great joy is also a public display of emotion. The subjects of Orfeo and Heurodis display a sympathetic bond with their monarchs, mourning when they mourn and rejoicing when they rejoice. The willingness of queen, king, court, and subjects to fully immerse themselves in grief enables them to now fully immerse themselves in rejoicing. The lay of *Sir Orfeo* demonstrates that only by willingly passing through grief can restoration and joy ultimately be found. The poet celebrates Orfeo’s journey through grief to joy in the last lines of the lay: “þus come Sir Orfeo out of his care. / God graunt ous alle wele to fare!”⁴⁸

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- ¹ A. J. Bliss, "Introduction," *Sir Orfeo*, (London: Oxford UP, 1954):ix-li; x.
- ² Ann Higgins, "Love in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*: Ovid's Orpheus Transformed," *Ovid's Metamorphoses in English Poetry*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Gortschacher, (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009) 35.
- ³ Higgins 36.
- ⁴ Higgins 38.
- ⁵ Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 15.
- ⁶ Bliss xxxi.
- ⁷ Bliss xv.
- ⁸ Kisha G. Tracy, "Representations of Disability: The Medieval Literary Tradition of the Fisher King," *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010) 105-118.
- ⁹ Lines 77-80. All quotes from *Sir Orfeo* come from the version preserved in the Auchinleck manuscript as edited by A. J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, (London: Oxford UP, 1954), and will be cited in the text by line. The translation of *bere* as "outcry" comes from Bliss's glossary. Any words which need a modern rendering will be translated from this glossary.
- ¹⁰ 95.
- ¹¹ 114.
- ¹² 117-18.
- ¹³ In favor of female madness and weakness is A. C. Spearing, "*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender," *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, (Harlow: Longman, 2000): 258-72; Ann Higgins, "Love in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*: Ovid's Orpheus Transformed," views Heurodis as a strong, devoted wife and queen.
- ¹⁴ Dominique Battles, "*Sir Orfeo* and English Identity." *Studies in Philology* 107.2 (2010): 179-211; 179.
- ¹⁵ See lines 51-52, 63, 322, 406, and 594 for some examples.
- ¹⁶ Battles 179.
- ¹⁷ 127-30.
- ¹⁸ Bliss 183-84.
- ¹⁹ 192-3.
- ²⁰ 194-5.
- ²¹ 196-99.
- ²² Edward Donald Kennedy, "Sir Orfeo as *Rex Inutilis*," *Annuaire Medievale* 17 (1976): 88-110; Ruth Evans, "*Sir Orfeo* and the Bare Life," *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, eds. Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006): 198-212.
- ²³ Dominique Battles, "*Sir Orfeo* and English Identity"; Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (2000): 247-74.
- ²⁴ Evans 208.
- ²⁵ Evans 208.

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- ²⁶ Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *JMEMS* 30:2 (Spring 2000): 247-74.
- ²⁷ Falk 264.
- ²⁸ Falk 252.
- ²⁹ Falk 258-59.
- ³⁰ Falk 253.
- ³¹ 219-22.
- ³² 232-6.
- ³³ 215-18.
- ³⁴ 264-6.
- ³⁵ Spearing 265.
- ³⁶ 325-27.
- ³⁷ 391-98.
- ³⁸ Ovid, "Orpheus and Eurydice," *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Horace Gregory, (New York: Viking Press, 1960). 273-76; 274.
- ³⁹ 438, 442-6.
- ⁴⁰ 448-474.
- ⁴¹ 499-520.
- ⁴² 525-41.
- ⁴³ 542, 549.
- ⁴⁴ 553-55.
- ⁴⁵ 569-74.
- ⁴⁶ Evans 202.
- ⁴⁷ 591-92.
- ⁴⁸ 603-04.

Conclusion

Male grief is such a prominent feature in many medieval texts that once one begins to take notice of weeping and mourning men, one finds them everywhere—in Arthurian legends, in saint's lives, in the courtly love tradition, in Chaucer's tales. My choice to examine the three fictional works of *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo* provides a focus for a thesis which otherwise could continue without end. This thesis is a beginning, rather than an ending, of a vast subject in need of much more exploration.

As I examined male demonstrations of grief in *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo*, I began to see common patterns emerging. All three texts contain weeping kings, who publicly display their grief before their subjects. The kings display grief not only to show their personal loss and suffering, but also for the death or injury of their subjects. Hrothgar, Charlemagne, and Orfeo emerge in the tales as figures embodying and bearing the grief of their entire people. Rather than being criticized as weak or effeminate rulers, all three of these sorrowful kings are described by the poets and by their subjects as kings possessing wisdom, nobility, and honor. The poets and the people alike seem to view the mourning of the rulers as clear portrayal of the lord's commitment and care for his subjects and his kingdom as a whole.

Another pattern emerging in all three works is the collective weeping of masses of thanes, knights, or subjects in response to injury to the king or the king's subjects. In *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo* bands of warriors publicly weep and mourn when the king or his people are attacked. Their tears often appear in response to the weeping of the king, thus demonstrating their ability to suffer with their sovereign,

showing their loyalty and devotion. While weeping has been interpreted as a weak or passive response on the part of warriors, instead, it shows the ability of the soldiers to share in the suffering of their king and fallen companions. Further communal displays of grief also appear in all three works as groups of subjects, both men and women, mourn for a king or hero's death. Again, their public sorrow serves as a visible display of devotion, empathy, and loyalty for their kings, kinsmen, and countrymen.

A third pattern emerges in the way that the heroic figures, Beowulf, Roland, and Orfeo, initially stand apart emotionally from the king and other vassals or subjects in the texts. They maintain a focus on combat and deeds of prowess. Their concept of suffering only acknowledges physical pain, overlooking emotional pain. All three heroes are initially dry-eyed, but they change as they personally experience suffering and loss. By the end of each poem, the heroes, like the king and the other subjects, display sorrow and empathy by publicly mourning. In these three poems, the transformation of the heroes, along with portrayal of mourning kings and weeping warriors, come together to suggest that male demonstrations of grief are not signs of weakness but are proofs of loyalty, heroism, and sensibility. Emotional sensitivity to suffering is valued rather than scorned in these medieval men.

The three similar patterns regarding male mourning which I focused on in my thesis are not the only subjects related to mourning which could be explored in these—and many other—medieval texts. For example, further study could be given to the ways grief is enacted in these works. Grief is portrayed primarily in physical performances of sorrow—weeping, fainting, tearing one's beard, or scratching one's face. Sometimes the poets allow the characters verbal expressions of feeling following physical displays of

grief, but more often the poets describe the external, visible actions of the mourners or narrate to the audience how the protagonists are feeling. The poets convey a sweeping sense of the emotional atmosphere through these outward descriptions of sorrow. In all three works, the poets seem to wish to intensify rather than to mitigate the experience of grief. They may have been suggesting and urging their audiences to respond to the tragic poetic narratives by openly mourning, as do the protagonists within the stories.

Repeatedly the poets show that the proper response for observers of tragedy is to join in the suffering emotionally by weeping and mourning.

Another subject worthy of further exploration is that of public versus private grief. All three works include a high number of public displays of grief. On almost every occasion mourning is performed in public; the community collectively shares in suffering. However, there are a few moments of private grief, when a man mourns alone, such as the night in *La Chanson de Roland* when Charlemagne weeps under the night sky as he recalls the slaughter of Roland and the rearguard.¹ Also, in *Sir Orfeo*, the king faints and weeps alone in his chamber after Heurodis is abducted, before emerging to declare his resolution to enter exile in the wilderness.² Do the poets mean to suggest that there are some moments when grief should be displayed in private, kept out of public knowledge? Yet these kings also publicly mourn the same events that they grieve over alone.

Another important comparison within the texts is the differences or similarities that exist between male and female grief. Although male grief is often overlooked and while the mourning of women in these poems has received considerable scholarly attention, in reality, in all three texts the number of occasions men mourn far outnumbers

the number of descriptions when women grieve. Is this yet another observation feminist critics could draw on to emphasize the way women are marginalized in narratives of the Middle Ages? I think not, for when women's sorrow is shown, it neither seems to be more intense or less heartfelt than the sorrow of men. Both men and women weep, wail, tear their hair, and faint in these texts. In *La Chanson de Roland*, Roland's fiancé Alde dies of grief, but her death is preceded by that of Marsilla, the Saracen king, who also died of grief. Rather than women's sorrow being greater or less than that of men, it seems that often women equal men in moments of mourning. Perhaps this suggests that the experience of grief and loss is a human condition, equally painful for both men and women.

The general scholarly trend has been to examine female mourning in the Middle Ages, and subject of male mourning still stands in need of extensive exploration. Male grief appears in many medieval texts, whether religious, historical, or fictional. The many instances of male mourning in Scripture influence the religious texts of the Middle Ages, which are also replete with occasions when men mourn to display true repentance and devotion to God. St. Benedict and St. Francis encourage tears of contrition and sincerity; St. Francis is said to have gone blind in his old age because he wept so profusely.³ Similar traditions of penance as displayed through weeping exist in Jewish and Muslim writings, as well.⁴

In the realm of fiction, many works in addition to *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Sir Orfeo* have tales of men who cry. Weeping men appear in Chaucer's writings. Within the realm of Arthurian legend, Merlin, Arthur, and many of the king's knights weep and mourn. Male weeping and fainting continues to appear in the courtly

love tradition, and while their emotional displays are often interpreted as effeminate, perhaps these tears are in fact influenced by texts like *La Chanson de Roland* and *Sir Orfeo* in which weeping and fainting are signs of the deepest devotion, empathy, and heroism.

Male displays of grief manifest themselves in the historical, religious, and fictional works not only of the Middle Ages but also in literature from many time periods and diverse cultures. Men cry onstage in Shakespeare's plays and in many other Renaissance dramas. Weeping men appear in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and *The Ramayana* of Valmiki, to mention just a few. In summary, male displays of grief are prolific throughout world literature, and yet they are frequently overlooked in scholarship and discussion. The academic avoidance of this topic perhaps says more about modern American culture than it does about any of the original texts. In general, the current societal conception of acceptable emotional behavior holds that men should not display their feelings. Yet, as is evident in medieval works of fiction, there was no such stigma about weeping men in the Middle Ages, and the study of male mourning in medieval texts is a field awaiting extensive exploration.

¹ *La Chanson de Roland*, laisse 184.

² *Sir Orfeo* 196-99.

³ Lutz 47.

⁴ Lutz 47-48; the Tanakh and Koran both include mentions of mourning men, which influences the Hebrew and Arabic medieval poetry, such as elegies and *ritha*. Lutz also makes mention of Jews at the Wailing Wall and “Weeping Sufis,” whose tears “are considered signs of the authenticity of their mystical experience.”

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