

Rivers of Divinity:
The Impact of a Classical and Medieval Tradition on Chaucer and Malory
by
Anthony G. Cirilla

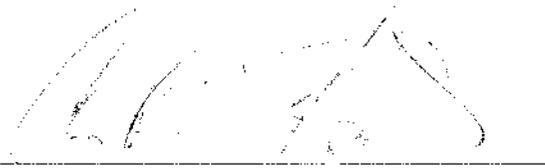
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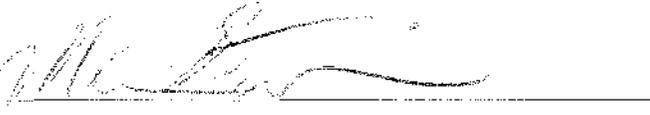
The Impact of a Classical and Medieval Tradition on Chaucer and Malory

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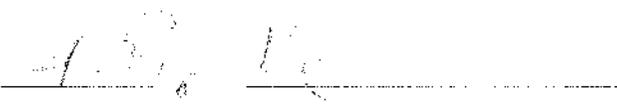
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Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Malory both place at crucial points in their narrative a scene where a hero encounters the authority of a river. This project traces the tradition used by Chaucer and Malory to classical river god providence, where epic poets wrestle with the ideas of empire and fate by questioning the river god's ability to exert his autonomy. Because river god providence is finite, it is susceptible to a peculiar frustration in exerting its legitimate authority at the hands of fate. Homer, Statius and Lucan all present versions of a failed river god providence, while Virgil alone creates a successful example of the tradition. His example, however, is in turn parodied by Ovid, which highlights further the ambiguities of river god providence. Medieval chroniclers and romancers utilize a Virgilian theme of river providence, removing the local gods and putting in their place either God's will or some other supernatural force (such as ghosts or fairies). River providence may be ambiguous at times in medieval literature, but is for the most part successful; the sovereign autonomy of river providence is questioned less than the moral autonomy of the hero who encounters these divinized rivers. Chaucer, through Criseyde's oath in *Troilus and Criseyde*, suggests that river providence is a failure because it cannot assist a will in moral choices due to its pagan origins. Malory, on the other hand, presents in *Le Morte D'Arthur* river providence which successfully executes its authority, ultimately suggesting that pagan traditions are acceptable when used to

highlight Christian virtues. River providence ultimately investigates the frustration of autonomy in general, in a world which often aggressively limits any being's ability to make moral choices.

Introduction: Tracing Rivers of Divinity

And thow, Symois, that as an arwe clere
 Thorough Troie rennest downward to the se,
 Ber witesse of this word that seyde is here;
 That thilke day that ich untrewed be
 To Troilus, myn owene herte fre,
 That thow retourne backward to thi welle,
 And I with body and soule synke in helle! (Chaucer 4.1548-54)

. . . and when they came to the river they found there a stone fleeting,
 as it were of red marble, and thereof were precious stones wrought
 with subtle letters of gold. Then the barons read the letters which said
 in this wise: Never shall man take me hence, but only he by whose
 side I ought to hang, and he shall be the best knight of the world.
 (Malory 658)

In both of these moments, a story is transformed. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde makes her oath on the river Simois, an oath which will be broken and will help create the circumstances of Troilus's tragic death. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the sword enchanted by Merlin is about to be taken up by Sir Galahad, the knight to victoriously complete the most important quest of the narrative and also die tragically. Chaucer and Malory are radically different writers in many ways, but when they prepare to set their tales on the path to their equally dramatic conclusions, both employ a relationship between a protagonist and a river. Criseyde's choice to strengthen her promise by means of the Simois demonstrates the reverent attitude she must have to it (or at least is pretending to have towards it), and Galahad's association with the river vindicates his place as the lead adventurer in search of the Holy Grail. Criseyde calls upon the Trojan river to strengthen her vow, but the reader is keenly aware of the oncoming disaster approaching Troy; Galahad

takes on the quest as a representative of Camelot, a doomed empire. Furthermore, both rivers have a supernatural association, for Criseyde leads up to the Simois by calling on “every god celestial,” “each goddess” and upon “every nymph and deity infernal,/ on satyry and fawny ore and lesse” (4.1541-44), making the Simois not a part of the list but the finishing touch, the trump card in her oath which should inspire faith in Troilus. In the same way, Merlin is the one who has sent the blade downstream, and after Galahad takes it there comes “riding down the river a lady on a white palfrey” who addresses the knights present concerning the event. The scene in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a moment where a river’s authority is called upon, but which fails to uphold the promise made by Criseyde upon it; the scene in *Le Morte D’Arthur* is one where the authority of the river successfully renders its hero, Galahad, victorious.

Criseyde’s oath is momentarily successful, in so far as she is able to temporarily assuage Troilus. The failure of the Simois to actually secure her promise in the long-run, however, is twofold. First, her intent is probably to deceive Troilus, and even if it is not she does break her oath to return, and breaks her fidelity to Troilus with Diomedes. On the other hand, the sword Galahad takes from the water does empower him to become the champion of the Grail Quest. His death is more akin to apotheosis; it is true that it is tragic for his fellow knights, but for himself it is a heavenly rapture. Unlike the authority of the Simois called upon by Criseyde, the authority Galahad derives from the river, embodied in the sword, is actually effective. Even so, Malory introduces ambiguity by having the Damosel of the Lake (who

follows the sword downstream) lament Lancelot's choice to refuse the sword. Oddly, the authority and the will of this river are literally separated: the authority of the river (the sword) makes Galahad a champion, but the will of the river (the Damosel) is disappointed by events nonetheless. It is important, though, that the Damosel does not rebuke Galahad; she rebukes Lancelot, but does not actually try to change what has happened.

We can see both of these moments as drawing on a tradition of what I call "river providence." Criseyde calls upon the providential, supernatural qualities of the river Simois, and the intervention of Merlin in Galahad's life is facilitated by a river. In the first case, river providence is simply a failure. In Malory's scene, it is in some ways more complex, and at least more positive (no one does anything immortal as a result of the sword or the Damosel, and the sword does in fact help Galahad in his endeavors). If we are to understand how Chaucer and Malory are exploring the efficacy of river providence, we must first look back and understand how previous writers, both classical and medieval, have dealt with the question, Can river providence execute its authority? To my knowledge, no critic has joined these passages in Chaucer and Malory together, nor explored the extensive potential of the tradition as it exists, and so that will be the task here.

Usefully, Chaucer has already identified five of the classical texts, modestly telling his "litel book" to "kis the steppes where as thou seest pace/Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace" (4.1789-92). Some critics have mentioned, in a myopic way, the relationship between epic writers and their use of rivers, or at least of water

imagery in general. Because there has been no scholar, however, to argue for a tradition of river god providence in classical epic, no one has been able, by extension, to ask how this tradition has been drawn upon by later periods of literature. Some work has been done, such as an excellent essay by Jonathan Fenno in “A Great Wave Against the Stream: Water Imagery in Iliadic Battle Scenes,” which argues “that an ancient antithesis between saltwater and freshwater lends the *Iliad* a sense of unity in setting and plot and endows heroic action with greater cosmic and theological significance” (475). He goes on to argue that this significance allows us to understand Achilles as the demigod of saltwater, heightening the significance of his battle with Skamandros, the Trojan river god. In “Vergil and Ovid on the Tiber,” Eleanor S. Rutledge points out the significance of the Tiber as used by both poets and discusses Ovid’s parodic employment of Virgil’s river god, Tiberinus in the *Fasti*, but only mentions *The Metamorphoses* in a footnote. Similarly, Barbara Weiden Boyd discusses some of the significance of rivers in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in “Two Rivers and the Reader in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8,” but does not explain Ovid’s use of rivers in a larger context. In his commentary on the ninth book of the *Thebaid*, Michael Dewar writes that “the river-battle is directly inspired by that of Achilles with the Scamander” (xxx), but gives little comparative analysis for the significance of this use and does not discuss a larger theme of river god providence, except to point out that another poet, Silius, also imitates Homer with a river battle in the *Punica*. He even writes that Statius was “surely attracted to the theme [of river battles] by the fact that neither Virgil nor Lucan had attempted it” (102), an important observation but

one which misses an opportunity to point out that Statius is not only using Homer's model for the river god encounter, but that he is pointedly *not* using the models created by Virgil, Ovid or Lucan. After establishing the importance of river god providence to classical epic, it will then be easier to see how Greco-Roman themes influenced British writers. As Katherine Lever points out in "Classical Scholars and Anglo-Classic Poets," many medieval writers knew these texts so well (especially Virgil), that "they can be called Anglo-classic poets," and that "the English poets may have inspired us in the first place to become classical scholars," since writers like Chaucer regarded "the classical world as a mint providing them with their language of value" (216). However, although struck by the beauty of classical works, Chaucer and other medieval writers would recognize the trouble with using pagan literature in their own writing, as Katherine Lever points out in another essay, "The Christian Classicist's Dilemma," where she writes of Chaucer, "As a Christian by birth and as a classicist by education and taste, he, like Milton and many another learned man, recognized the conflict between the beauty and brilliance of the classics and their paganism. When Beauty is Falsehood, which is a man to choose?" (356) This question posed by medieval writers will further complicate the question posed by classical poets, Can river providence work? Before we can see how this problem arises, then, we must first understand the epic writers' exploration of the problems raised through river god providence.

In each of these epics, a hero has an important encounter with a river god (or, in Lucan's case, a pseudo-river goddess). Homer, Virgil and Lucan provide the

general templates for river god scenarios: a river god hostile to the hero, a river god benevolent to the hero and able to help him, or a river god who is helpless to change events. We will see that Statius provides a much darker, albeit Homeric image of river providence in the *Thebaid*, whereas in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid parodies Virgil. For classical river god providence, the question of whether it can succeed, essentially, can the river god exert his will in relationship to the hero who encounters him? This may mean, can the river god punish the hero for his transgressions? Or, can the river god help the hero on his quest? There are two related factors which affect the answer to this question: Is the god a guardian of a river located in an empire which will, in the context of his epic, prove victorious? The second is, do river gods' intentions towards the hero (whether benevolent or hostile) have the support of destiny? For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, Skamandros attempts to destroy Achilles for his transgression into the river god's sovereign territory, the river Xanthus. To escape the violent attack of the Olympian gods, Skamandros is forced to submit both to the destiny of Achilles (which is to die at someone else's hands), and the destiny of Troy to fall, relinquishing his role as a guardian of the Trojan empire. His will is thwarted because, although a local god has local providence, his authority can be trumped by the higher providence of Olympian gods and fate itself. I will begin the first chapter, after a brief discussion of Roman religion, by carefully analyzing this confrontation between Achilles and Skamandros, arguing that it is a major depiction of failed river god providence. This section of the chapter will be concluded with a brief discussion of Statius, who, like Homer, pits the hero and river god against each other in battle,

although the outcome here is very different. From Statius we will transition into Virgil's *Aeneid*, where we will find Tiberinus, the paradigm of successful river god providence.

Tiberinus is the very substance of piety, a clear depiction of the benevolent sort of deity which is a fitting object of worship from a pious man such as Aeneas. It is the will of Tiberinus to comfort and help Aeneas, and since fate is favorable to both the hero and the empire he represents, Rome, Tiberinus preserves his sovereignty. Virgil complicates this by reminding us of the failure of Skamandros, but his river god is a very strong image of successful providence, thanks to the favor of imperial destiny. I will spend a little time concluding Virgil by turning to Achelous, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a parody of Tiberinus where the sobriety of Virgil's themes of fate and empire are subordinated to an almost comic, if sympathetic, view of Achelous as little more than a nice storyteller. The third major epic poet I will use to illustrate this theme, along with Homer and Virgil, will be Lucan. It will be seen that Lucan fuses the frustration of Homer's Skamandros with the benevolence of Tiberinus, creating Cornelia, Pompey's wife, as a false river goddess. In Lucan's aesthetic world where the chance turns of history govern all, no local divinity can exist, much less receive the favor of fate or alter the course of an empire's future. Exemplifying the tension between the local and the Olympian gods, between the hero and his destiny, and between the victory or defeat of empire and its enemies, river god providence and its ability (or inability) to actually execute its autonomy reveals profound attitudes of each epic writer towards the possibility of freedom where

enemies and chance are continually attacking. Local authority or sovereignty is only as effective as the larger forces substantiating its claim to autonomy, and only Virgil of these five poets countenances a mostly optimistic view of river god providence and its relationship to these problems, through a faith in the imperial destiny of Rome.

The second chapter will focus on medieval British chronicles and romances, to better assess the literary climate in which Chaucer and Malory will have received the river providence tradition, by paying attention to how previous and contemporary medieval writers employ the *topos*. Ideally, medieval French and German texts would also be included, but this is simply beyond the scope of the present project. Since we are leaving the Greco-Roman world of gods and goddesses and entering the world of Christianity, there will be no literal river gods. River providence remains, however, as a means for discussing empire and destiny. Except for Virgil, classical epic attributed the failure of river god providence to exercise its benevolent authority to a misalignment of the river god with imperial destiny.

Now, in medieval chronicles and romances those who benefit from river providence benefit not because of the benevolence of local gods (usually), but because of personal or shared moral insight received at the riverside. Both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon hint at a strange, almost supernatural relationship between the rivers of their countries and the success of Arthur's empire. Rivers seldom have autonomy in these texts; now the autonomy at stake is the moral choice of each mortal throughout each narrative, akin to Virgil's optimistic piety rather than Lucan's pessimistic atheism or Homer's brooding ambiguity. At times,

spokespersons do emerge who operate as voices for river providence, such as Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth, the ghastly knight in *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight*, or the namesake of the poem *Pearl*. Some of these, especially the ghost, do have a degree of autonomy which is important, but it is the choices of the heroes who encounter them which are key. River providence will succeed, *if* the hero cooperates with what is to be learned from that providence. This results, perhaps, from an unstated belief in a benevolent God, rather than the cold mechanics of classical fate. Empire and destiny are still crucial to the scenes of medieval river providence, but it is the moral autonomy of the individual rather than the authoritative autonomy of the river god which is the focus of medieval river providence.

It is not surprising that, though utilized, Greco-Roman traditions like river providence are not incorporated seamlessly into Christian narrative. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin is associated with demonic influence; in Layamon, Arthur's river providence comes directly from God, where the supernatural beings of conquered lands are merely "elves." *Awntyrs off Arthur* replaces the river god with a river ghost, and in *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* the tale is in the providence of the dubious Morgan le Fay. The tension is not made explicit by these authors, but it is indispensable to the techniques of Chaucer and Malory.

The question is no longer simply, Can river providence succeed in exerting its autonomy? The question becomes, what is the role of river providence in a Christian writer's work? Virgilian river providence dominated previous medieval river scenes, but Chaucer and Malory are explicitly dealing with the problem of how to live in a

world where inherited, non-Christian themes abound. Fate has, as already said, become the will of God, and the concerns of empire lose primacy in a worldview which fundamentally mitigates the role of worldly achievement in moral success. Aeneas was pious for founding Rome; so is Arthur as king of Camelot, but this fusion of Virgilian commitment to empire and Christian dedication to moral purity is not necessary. It is even potentially problematic, for excessive investment in worldly fortune is, of course, out of line with traditional Christian teaching. For Chaucer, then, the Simois becomes an empty image, the providence of a false god who cannot save Troy, nor give any substance to Criseyde's oath. Furthermore, Criseyde fails morally, in part because she is handicapped by having only pagan concepts at her disposal. As a false river goddess she is like Lucan's Cornelia, but she is even more Homeric in the danger she poses to Troilus's emotional well being. Chaucer admits to Homer's and Lucan's indictment of river god providence, though like Ovid he is not without sympathy to the futility of people attempting to realize happiness with pagan traditions. He may deconstruct any possible benefit from the river god providence, but its futility remains a valuable lesson to the Christian reader, something neither Homer nor Lucan can provide.

On the other hand, Malory asserts a river providence which is capable of success. Although he does not create an explicit dichotomy between the Christian and pagan, he indicates two systems of ethics, Christian morality and knightly "virtuous love." If Galahad is the champion knight of Christianity, Lancelot is the champion knight of worldly virtue. These lines are blurred by the fact that both are

knights (both part of the thics of chivalry), and Galahad is, after all, Lancelot's son. Furthermore, Galahad dies as a knight, whereas Lancelot turns in the end to the monastic life. Malory does not portray knighthood as antithetical to Christian virtue, though he seems to admit that a successful pairing of the two is an exceptional feat. Nevertheless, the "voice" of river providence, the Damosel, would have preferred Lancelot, and in fact weeps over his failure to choose the sword. She is reminiscent of Cornelia (though probably not intentionally on Malory's part), except that the river providence is real and proves successful. In terms of imperial destiny, we must remember that, not so different from Galahad, Arthur's sword comes from the Lady of the Lake. Galahad is a knight of Arthur's court, and the quest for the Holy Grail is a mission of the Round Table, and so both river providence and Christianity appear amenable to empire. If Arthur's empire fails it is equally a result of a failure of knightly chivalry (Mordred's betrayal), mercy (Gawain's refusal to forgive Lancelot), and virtuous love (Lancelot's betrayal of Guenivere), as it is a failure of Christian virtue. Galahad's success as a champion of imperial destiny temporarily reconcile Christianity with empire, and his reception of that honor, from a river providence behind which Merlin is the source (himself a product of pagan tales) indicates that Malory accepts both narratives of empire and pagan traditions as viable vehicles for Christian virtue. If the hero is a truly pure Christian and a truly chivalrous knight, he can receive real benevolence from river providence, as a local extension of divine favor. The Christian writer, for Malory, can use worldly themes not only as negations of, but as positive (if only partial) illustrations of Christian values.

Both Chaucer and Malory fuse the theme of autonomy from classical river god providence with the theme of moral testing from medieval river providence. Criseyde's failure to use the authority of the Simois results not only from her moral failure, but from the falsehood of the system she calls upon, so that the promise is made with no real moral autonomy. On the other hand, in Malory's scene Galahad draws upon the real providence of the river (ultimately derived from God's will), although the Damosel's will to give Lancelot the sword is thwarted by Lancelot's own moral failings. Universal providence, God's will, is unchanging and reliable, so the failure of river providence is, by extension, predicated on whether that river providence is sided with God or not, and the moral autonomy of characters can only succeed if they approach a river providence in line with God's will. Chaucer puts forth the idea that river providence, as inherently pagan, cannot be used as such by a Christian, whereas Malory conceives of it as an appropriate vehicle for Christian truth. In the conclusion, I will discuss Spenser's use of these themes in the first two books of the *Faerie Queene*, where he gestures at both Chaucer's and Malory's answer, coming some place in between (and perhaps a touch closer to Malory). Afterwards, I will point out later uses of river gods, to demonstrate the overall impact of river providence as a means of achieving transcendental experience of the divine.

Chapter 1: Classical River God Providence

In Greco-Roman epic, the river god is, I propose, a spiritualized counterpart of the hero. The hero has personal motivation, a relationship to the empire he represents, and a relationship to destiny as depicted in the epic in which he appears. The river god he encounters has all three of these as well. It is impossible to discuss any of these factors in total isolation from one another; empire and religion often drive the hero, empire is often defined in terms of its heroes and its gods, and the gods are created as facilitators or obstacles to the success of the hero's destiny and the empire with which the river god is associated. Achilles and Skamandros battle out of personal anger, defending something they love, but have opposing destinies. Skamandros attacks Achilles to both protect his own sovereignty and that of Troy, but destiny is on the side of Achilles, and not the Trojan empire which Skamandros seeks to protect. Aeneas and Tiberinus come together as figures motivated by piety, and share any ambiguities their empire may suggest, for as much as Aeneas is the "first" Roman, Tiberinus is the first local god to assist Aeneas in his quest to establish the Roman empire. In one way or another, because the river god is a representative of personal, imperial and spiritual autonomy, it is inevitable that river god providence is never a given. Instead, the authority of the river god is constantly under fire, or at least subtly undercut, even in the use of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The *topos* of river god encounters and their providence is used to investigate the very possibility of any entity exercising its will satisfactorily, whether it is the will of a human, a nation or a god. Empire and religion come together in scenes of classical river god providence;

sometimes it is a peaceful and sometimes an explosive meeting, but ultimately an empire's ability to survive and a religion's ability to provide comfort is tested through river god providence.

Because Greco-Roman religion informs the background of these river gods, and because their pagan origin will be important to later chapters, I must refer briefly to Georges Dumézil's indispensable work, *Archaic Roman Religion*, to establish the dichotomy of local and universal gods with which readers of the epic in their own day would have resonated. He argues that Roman religion conceived of their gods as anthropomorphic very early on, for the earliest "usage and etymology . . . attest the primacy of the concept of the personal god. Throughout the centuries, *numen* was only *numen dei*, the will expressed by such and such a god" (Dumézil 30). He goes on to argue that the early, impersonal aspect of "teams" of Roman gods results not from a lack of belief in anthropomorphic gods, but a projection of Roman society itself, where the names of the "teams" of gods are only associated with their function, much like the slaves and servants of Roman society who had personhood but were recognized formally only for their social role (32-45). The Roman gods who acquired more personality were of a higher order than these "functional gods," and were given even more individuality after being associated with Grecian divinities (45-46). He further points out that Indo-European religion, from which Roman religion evolved, engaged in the "elevation of abstractions, desirable qualities, or powerful forces . . . to the rank of divinities" (397).

The concept of an anthropomorphized god who is given distinct qualities but

little personality beyond his function is well captured in Virgil's Neptune, for although Virgil would have also associated Neptune with the Greek god Poseidon, Neptune proves himself to be far more impersonal than that god. His rationale for saving Aeneas from the storm out at sea is not out of benevolence, but because Aeolus has invaded his sovereignty. Dumézil goes on to argue that if the early Romans considered a neighbor to be benevolent, they had no trouble in adopting that neighbor's gods: "Diana, with her beautiful Latin name, is probably not Roman but was given to Rome by its neighbors in Latium" (407). A literal depiction of this adoption process of the friendly gods from other peoples also occurs in the *Aeneid*: the benevolence Aeneas receives from Tiberinus is, after all, not the benevolence of a god who is strictly his own, but a god Latinus would have worshiped. The relationship between hero and river god goes deeper, however, than even this, for Dumézil makes the case that Roman heroes are the narrative descendants of Indo-European gods: "The myths have merely been transferred from the world of the gods to the world of men, and their heroes are not gods but the great men of Rome, who have assumed the characteristics of those gods" (76). Aeneas, a son of Venus who will be deified, Hercules a son of Zeus who will be deified, both occupy this state of demigodly heroism, a necessary marriage of mythology and history for the personas to serve as ambassadors between the world of mortals and immortals. It is no surprise, then, that they would have a special relationship to river gods, who are perhaps higher on the great chain of being, as it were, but who exist in a similarly subordinate way to the powers that be.

This begins to touch upon not only the theme of the personhood of the river gods, but their relationship to empire. Dumezil explains that as “Rome developed into an imperial power, it admitted . . . a multiplication of the possible degrees of difference in the status of the conquered gods” (428). Considering the plethora of river gods, goddesses and nymphs in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of them were brought into Roman culture by this means of imperial appropriation of divinity.

Mostly absent from most of the river god scenes in ancient epic is anything like a “numinous experience”; the closest is with Aeneas, but even the reverential awe Tiberinus commands seems more a product of his benevolence than his divinity. A transcendental experience with river providence will become key to the *topos* in the medieval tradition, but the classical tradition is more interested in using river god providence to explore destiny than it is interested in exploring the beatification of divine experience. This preoccupation with destiny is, I believe, a product of the Roman alliance between religion and empire, a claim supported by both Dumezil and David Quint, author of *Epic and Empire*. Quint argues that the “epic loser,” such as Lucan, who is writing about the fall of his hero, Pompey, “ascribes the victor’s success to Fortune, to chance rather than to the victor’s superiority,” suggesting that such a writer is working to undermine the traditional, religious belief in a fate which presides over historical events (Quint 103). Dumezil also notes that the “Etruscans had a theory of destiny . . . which seems to have helped them to accept their own defeat and the triumph of Rome,” and that “Virgil shows in the second half of the

Aeneid that the settlement of the Trojans in Italy was brought about by the conjunction of three *fata*” (Dumezil 499, 501). Unlike Wordsworthian divinity, the numinous aspect of divinity is not employed to achieve personal fulfillment here, but serves as a justification or salve for imperial victory and defeat.

The result of this is that a river god’s providence is highly suspect if imperial fate is not on his side. If the hero and the river god are on the same imperial “team,” and if fate is with their empire, as in *The Aeneid*, things might turn out okay. However, if the hero and the river god are rivals, the success of the river god to protect his autonomy violently (as in the *Iliad* and *Thebaid*) depends on whether the river god is associated with an empire which has a positive destiny. More powerful than mortals, but less powerful than the higher gods, the fates and the destiny of empires, river gods are used in classical epic for an investigation into the problem of free will, and the results, with little exception, are not highly positive. The river god’s authority is different from imperial authority only in that he is immortal rather than mortal, and his success in autonomously executing that authority is directly impacted by whether his sovereignty is aligned with an empire which will be victorious, and a hero who is favored by destiny. The classical employment of river god providence serves to remind us that autonomy is possible only insofar as fate favors the intentions of one’s will.

The *Iliad*’s Frustrated River God

Homer's Skamandros, as the first concrete example of the tradition, is a case study in the failure of river god providence. As Skamandros attempts to protect his sovereignty from Achilles, he finds his reasonable requests dismissed, and upon seeking revenge, gods of more universal status intervene, infringing on his ability to decide how to mete justice to the impious intruder. This tension between local and universal authority, manifested in gods rather than men, may suggest the likelihood that the episode is representative of a larger tradition Homer is responding to. This supposition is supported by other instances in the epic, where the sovereignty of gods such as Juno, Poseidon and even Zeus come into question. It would be feasible to search for analogs to this story, much as Laura Slatkin does with Thetis in her excellent book, *The Power of Thetis*, where she supposes the goddess's strange role in the *Iliad* to suggest a larger, unstated body of myths to be informing her presence in the epic. Thetis is one of only two non-Olympian gods who receives such attention in *The Iliad*; and the other is Skamandros. Thus, as with Thetis, the tension between the authority of minor and major deities comes into play. For Thetis, the paradox is that she has the authority to sway Zeus in some matters, but not enough to save her son; Skamandros, on the other hand, has the authority to protect his river, but *not* to kill Achilles as he wants. Destiny is bigger than both of these gods' wills, but for precisely the opposite reason: Thetis cannot save Achilles as she desperately wishes, and Skamandros cannot kill Achilles as he angrily desires. Unfortunately, supporting the premise of a traditional template for the Achilles-Skamandros encounter is beyond the scope of the present project; we must work with the actual text of the *Iliad*

to understand its use of river god providence, since there is no clear-cut evidence that I am aware of concerning how Homer is using it to respond to a pre-existing tradition.

There is plenty within the text itself to talk about, however, as demonstrated by “A Great Wave Against the Stream,” an essay by Jonathan Fenno, already mentioned above. He does provide a plausible premise of a pre-existing mythology concerning a primeval rivalry between ocean gods and river gods: “an ancient antithesis between saltwater and freshwater lends the *Iliad* a sense of unity in setting and plot and endows heroic action with greater cosmic and theological significance” (Fenno 475). He notes how “various similes elaborately develop a system of hydro polemic imagery,” specifically to observe that “sea divinities support the Greeks in the *Iliad* but their mortal descendants fight exclusively on the Greek side,” whereas “the offspring of freshwater nymphs and river gods are prominently affiliated with Trojans” (480). Though he does explore analogs for such a discourse as Slatkin does in *The Power of Thetis* by discussing a primeval tension between Oceanus and Tethys, his essay is not nearly so exhaustive and does not provide concrete evidence that the Skamandros scene is part of a tradition of a paradigmatic heroic encounter of the sort I am proposing. Even so, he points out that “the most important mortal descended from a sea divinity in the *Iliad* is Achilles, son of the Nereid Thetis,” and it is this saltwater “demigod” who has the audacity to defy Skamandros. Fenno says that “Poseidon’s battle against Hector by the ships will be complemented by Xanthus’ attack on Achilles in the river,” and that the “crucial intervention of Xanthus in Book 21 was clearly signaled at the beginning of the

previous book” (498). Yet, the Olympian gods overrule Skamandros’s desire for vengeance, for “Hephaestus intervenes, boiling the unleashed waters with fire, until Xanthus stops the flow of his stream and capitulates” (502). Much as river god providence could not punish, it cannot save, for in “spite of its rivers, the Trojan city will be burned to the ground.” As Fenno discusses, the conflict of the poem is conceived around “hydrodynamic divinities,” two conflicting versions of water god, one which is universal and one which is local, and Skamandros is made painfully aware of the hierarchy implied therein.

Achilles and Skamandros are counterparts in a few ways. They both attempt a cursory diplomacy towards one another, but are motivated by aggression and resort to violence very easily. Neither truly is victorious in their battle with each other, and neither will be truly victorious on a grander scale, for Achilles will die and Skamandros will not stop the fall of Troy. When Lykaon supplicates Achilles, the Achaean “heard in turn a voice without pity,” even referring to the inexorable nature of the river Skamandros to justify the mercy he will deny the Trojan (21. 420, 421). For Achilles, diplomatic measures are not part of his heroics. As Achilles pollutes the river, “anger was rising in the heart of” Skamandros, so that his initial reaction to the warrior is similarly hostile (l. 136). Even so, his approach to Achilles is not only diplomatic, but almost genuflecting:

O Achilleus, your strength is greater, your acts more violent than
all men’s; since always the very gods are guarding you.

If the son of Kronos has given all Trojans to your destruction,

drive them at least out of me to the plain, and there work your havoc.

For the loveliness of my waters is crammed with corpses, I cannot

find a channel to cast my waters into the bright sea

since I am congested with the dead men you kill so brutally.

Let me alone, then; lord of the people, I am confounded. (21.214-221).

Achilles replies with a seemingly obedient “All this, illustrious Skamandros, shall be as you order,” but he goes on to explain that it will only be after he has killed enough Trojans and fought with Hector that he will actually cease his brutal pollution of the river (223-6). Thus ignoring the providence of Skamandros, “spear-famed Achilles leapt into the middle water with a spring from the bluff,” ready to resume his bloody rampage (21.236). Enraged at the defiance of the warrior, the river god mounts his attack, “rose on him in a darkening edge of water, minded to stop the labour of brilliant Achilles” (21.245-249). We should remember that Achilles does not come upon Skamandros due to tactical considerations, but as a random after-effect of his ruthless, directionless fighting: “As before the blast of fire the locusts escaping/into a river swarm in air, and the fire unwearied/blazes from a sudden start, and the locusts huddle in water;/so before Achilleus the murmuring waters of Xanthos/the deep-whirling were filled with confusion of men and of horses” (21. 12-16). It is Achilles’ unrelenting blood-thirst which drives corpses into the river, a moment of grotesque excess rather than careful battle tactics, much as it is the river’s anger for this invasion into his sovereignty which motivates the god to confront Achilles.

The river god is, furthermore, motivated by his role as a guardian of the

Trojan empire, for the narrator tells us he approaches Achilles to “fend destruction away from the Trojans,” and it is this motivation which contributes to the god’s failed providence (21. 250). Achilles manages to escape temporarily, “since he was given great strength by Athene,” but “Skamandros did not either abate his fury,” and calls upon the Simoeis, a fellow river god, to help him chase after the escaping warrior, boasting that “I say that his strength will not be enough for him nor his beauty/nor his arms in their splendor, which somewhere deep down under the waters/shall lie folded under the mud” (21.300-323). Even so, the providence of both rivers together is not enough, for Hera calls upon Hephaistos, who attacks Skamandros and Simoeis with his fire, preventing their onslaught against Achilles. This violent retribution against Skamandros is so extreme that “the river cried out to Hera,” and pleads, “Now indeed I will leave off, if such is your order,/but let him leave off too, I will swear you a promise/not ever to drive the day of evil away from the Trojans” (21.368-374). Skamandros does not simply promise to leave Achilles alone, but to give up on protecting the empire of Troy. After these words Hera agrees to relent, telling Hephaistos to cease his attack, for “it is not fitting to batter thus an immortal god for the sake of mortals” (21.379-380). Even so, it is striking that the gods send no messenger in the passage to tell Skamandros to stop his fury; their response is so violent that Skamandros pleads for help much like a mortal pleading for divine providence. This does not necessarily mean that Homer holds local gods in little regard. But the failure of Skamandros to seek vengeance as he wants suggests that his providence as a river god ends where the future of his empire ends; Achilles does

escape and Troy does, of course, fall. Further, the passage questions who is grander: the hero with his destiny, or the local god and his providential authority.

Homer makes it clear that the defiance of Achilles to Skamandros is impractical, “since gods are stronger than mortals” (21. 264). He does not, however, explicitly condemn the action, and indeed perhaps vindicates it somewhat when Hephaistos threatens to evaporate Skamandros’ waters. We are reminded during this that Achilles is the “son of Peleus,” the husband of Thetis, subtly hinting at Achilles’ lineage as part of the saltwater energies which oppose the province of Skamandros. And indeed, when Achilles prays for assistance, it is “Poseidon and Athene” who come to his aid, and the first “of them to speak was the shaker of the earth, Poisedon. ‘Do not be afraid, son of Peleus, nor be so anxious . . . Thereby it is not your destiny to be killed by the river, but he shall be presently stopped . . .’” (270-292). For Achilles, his destiny justifies his cruelty, permits his defiance, and necessitates his salvation from Skamandros. He refuses mercy to Lykaon on the grounds that “Yet even I have also my death and my strong destiny,” and “some man in the fighting will take the life from me also” (21. 112, 113). Achilles later invokes the inexorable power of the very river he would battle soon after, comparing it implicitly to the throws of Fate which cannot be resisted, painting destiny as cruel and vindicating his own cruelty. It is this same destiny, though, which gives him the confidence to resist the river-god’s will, for he will not stop until he has found Hector and “he has killed me or I have killed him” (21. l. 226). Achilles laments when it seems as though the river will actually kill him because “my own mother . . . beguiled me with

falsehoods” (21, l. 276). It is ironic that he feels death at the hands of a god is not glorious enough. Yet, it is the death promised by *destiny*, not this arbitrary battle, which compels Achilles. He is assured that “it is not your destiny to be killed by the river,” for the gods intervene to fulfill his prayer (21, l. 291).

As we mentioned, Poseidon is first among the Olympian gods to take the side of Achilles in the scene, a fact which enlarges upon Fanno’s concept that saltwater divinity is associated with Grecian might. Yet, he is only one among several Olympian gods who take part in this infringement upon the providence of the god of Xanthus. The frustration of Skamandros in his attempt at vengeance on Achilles, son of Thetis and beneficiary of Poseidon’s favor, shows a tension between the real authority granted to Skamandros (it is attested to by Hera herself, queen of the gods), and the universal powers which are willing to violently constrain his providence, should it threaten the outcome of destiny. Ultimately, even the awesome violence of the river god must defer to the fate of Achilles, straining Hera’s assertion that “it is not fitting to batter thus an immortal god” after that is exactly what she told Hephaistos to do. Even Skamandros’s promise to allow the Olympian gods to get their way highlights his weakness, for his promise to defer to their will only protects *his* providence; it in no way changes whether destiny will come out on top, since it is the *nature* of destiny to be victorious. Similarly, even though Skamandros is more powerful than Achilles on his own terms, because Skamandros is a god and Achilles is a mortal, it is precisely Achilles’ fated death which prevents Skamandros from exerting his providence. This makes sense, since if Skamandros, and his servant

Simoeis, could overturn the will of the Olympian gods to kill Achilles, they could also change Trojan destiny. Troy would not be set to fall, which would diffuse the various dilemmas driving the core of the *Iliad*'s plot. Troy's status as empire is out of favor with universal providence, reducing the providence of the local river gods in Homer to an outburst of vain fury.

In the *Thebaid*, Statius draws upon this scene to create the poignant battle between Hippomedon and Ismenos. Hippomedon commits a blasphemous irreverence which outstrips that of Achilles far and away. The narrator of the *Thebaid* describes vividly how his slaughtering pollutes the river, until the grandson of Ismenos, Crenaeus, indignantly confronts him for his transgression: "this stream is sacred, wretch, and you will learn/the river you invade has nourished gods!" (9.342-343). Following the example of his literary predecessor, Achilles, Hippomedon proceeds to not only ignore this warning, but to kill Crenaeus, and then stand defiantly against Ismenos, the god of the river himself, in face of yet another furious admonition for polluting the waters and killing his offspring (9.421-445). As Dewar points out, "Hippomedon is destroyed for impiety" (118).

Here Hippomedon is clearly made distinct from Achilles: the gods elect to spare Achilles, in spite of his defiance to Skamandros, because he has a grander death in store. Hippomedon does not have the grander death, and his transgression is worse than Achilles', as Dewar explains: "His sin begins with his defiling the holy waters with holy blood . . . This reaches a climax in the slaughter of the young hero, for though mortal, Crenaeus is protected by the river and shares its sanctity" (Dewar

118). Hippomedon has slaughtered a young, defenseless version of Skamandros without mercy, as Achilles might have had he been able to do so. The nymph Ismenis pleads for Crenaeus's grandfather to seek vengeance, and Ismenos obliges.

Hippomedon lasts long enough against the raging waters of Ismenos to prove himself a greater warrior than Achilles, until he finally must make a "prayer for deliverance from the ignoble death of drowning" (Dewar 144). But even as Ismenos sublimates his natural fury, Hippomedon emerges from the water, and falls "just as an oak tree falls/on Getic Haemon from the north wind's fury" (9.532-536). The fury with which Ismenos slays Hippomedon, a mere mortal, mirrors the fury with which Hippomedon kills Crenaeus, having been motivated into his rage by the death of Tydeus.

Of course, Ismenos' desire for revenge and self-preservation is not unwarranted, but those motivations do not make him a glowing image of the benevolent providence which we will find in Virgil. The hero's encounter with this river god could only be jarring, however, when Thebes is essentially at war with itself. Instead of representing the fall of one nation as another rises to power, the fruitless battle between Hippomedon and Ismenos is an image of civil war. Imperial destiny is, in Statius, an enemy to both Hippomedon and to Ismenos. Unlike Achilles and Skamandros, there is no grander destiny vindicating their losses, and unlike Virgil, there is no grand destiny curbing their losses, for the epic ends in the tragic death of each of the seven against Thebes. Fate is on neither side of the battle: both brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, die in their campaigns against one another. Dewar writes, "Ismenos' main complaints . . . are directed, not at Hippomedon, but at

Jupiter, to whom he appeals as an avenger of evil and also defender of the rights of all the gods” (134). The hostility of fate in this river god encounter prevents us from fully endorsing or vilifying either party of the episode. Hippomedon’s encounter with the river in the first place was caused by Tisiphone, who redirects his rage from Tydeus, causing ultimately his death at the “hands” of Ismenos (Statius 9.154-164). Furthermore, it is his slaying of the demigod Crenaeus, which causes his mother to urge Ismenos against Hippomedon, displacing Ismenos’ agency (9.381-398). His providence is again limited where Ismenos complains that “the dead/constrict me so, I cannot reach the sea” (Statius 9.431-32).

As stated previously, Ismenos is not associated with success or failure of human empire. He does succeed in defending his sovereignty and get revenge, but he still loses his grandson. In a story about civil war, it is no wonder that the river god encounter is one that leaves the reader unhappy for both parties involved. It is almost a grim celebration of the despair of both hero and river god, equally abandoned by imperial destiny, reducing their autonomy to mere violence.

Virgil’s Civilized River God

The encounter between Aeneas and the river god Tiberinus in Book 8 of the *Aeneid* is exactly opposed to the battle between Achilles and Skamandros. Aeneas comes to the riverbank as a very different kind of general. He does not embrace the brutalities of conquest; he is “troubled at heart by ruinous war” (XIII, 29). Revenge and conquest are all that drive Achilles to the banks of Skamandros; Aeneas collapses

beside the Tiber as a result of emotional exhaustion: “His thoughts were darting one way, then another, At every side of his perplexity, Like shivering light reflected from the water In bronze urns, from the sun or shining moon” (8, ll. 20-3). As for Tiberinus, he approaches Aeneas to assuage his worries, to assist the Trojan rather than batter him senseless. At first glance that seems to suggest that Virgil shared Fenno’s reading of *The Iliad*, yet Virgil is not merely continuing a tradition of river god affection for Trojans. He rearticulates the epic hero as gracious to all gods, both Olympian and local, even to Juno, his main aggressor. Tiberinus is benevolent to a pious man worthy of such benevolence. Furthermore, the Tiber’s local benevolence is complemented by the Olympian benevolence of Neptune. Forces which were fundamentally opposed in *The Iliad* come together in *The Aeneid* to ensure the place of Virgil’s hero in destiny. After all, unlike Achilles, Aeneas’ fate is not to die for glory, but to found Rome. Whereas Skamandros was futile in protecting his providence over a doomed city, Tiberinus is, like Aeneas, more favorably positioned with respect to destiny’s whims.

However, Virgil carefully undercuts Tiberinus’ providence in three ways. First, he recalls Skamandros in connection with the Tiber, reminding us subtly of how the gods intervened to preserve Achilles’ destiny. This suggests that the Olympian gods might have done the same violence to Tiberinus, had he chosen to side with Turnus (which, according to the saltwater/fresh water logic of the *Iliad*, would have made sense). Second, what if universal providence were not on Aeneas’ side in such a river battle? This is a question which the river scene in Homer does not answer, but it

is answered by Statius in very clear terms: the river god will execute his sovereignty, quite literally, and Virgil alludes to it through the figure of Neptune. Finally, what if both hero and river god are simply on the wrong side of fate, together? Such a possibility was also entertained by Statius, who may have been making explicit what Virgil only implies. Virgil does illustrate the possibility of both hero and river god being unfavorably placed with destiny, though subtly: Tiberinus's assurance that the wrath of the gods has passed is, in terms of the narrative which follows, actually not quite true. While Virgil has chosen a hero looked upon more favorably by fate, and while he creates reverence for the providence of a river god in tune with more universal forces, he retains a Homeric ambiguity to the question, how much providence does the river god even possess, apart from fate? This ambiguity allows Virgil to simultaneously revere and undercut the status of the Tiber's providence.

There are two main points made by Brooks Otis in *Virgil: A Civilized Poetry* which can be helpful in extracting the meaning of Virgil's river god scene. Virgil, Otis posits, found that "the model epic, Homer's epic, corresponds at every point to the Horatian and Virgilian ideal," that contemporary writers "had caused the decline of epic . . . in departing from Homer's consistency of plot and material" and "had thereby lost the consistency and elevation of his style" (Otis 37). Integrating the innovations of more recent writers "immensely exacerbated" Virgil's task to at once return to Homeric grandeur, while incorporating themes pertinent to his own day (40). This leads Otis to show how Virgil changes Homer: while using Homeric structure, he infuses that structure with a "subjective approach" which is "revealed in this

contrast: his empathetic or sympathetic relation to his characters gives them a certain ambiguity” (51). Otis articulates a Virgil who returns to Homer for the form of epic, yet calls on the subjective techniques of his contemporaries to create “his ‘empathetic and dramatico-psychological method” which blurs the reader’s vision of characters with the poet’s feelings towards them. The contrast is stark:

The Homeric condition merely registers the result of divine intervention; the Virgilian expresses the piety which produced the result. But what is most striking in the whole passage is the completely objective and detached quality of Homer’s narrative. There is a minimum of empathy or of moral judgment. His amoral conception of the gods goes with a cool acceptance of human destiny. (55)

The ambiguity of Homer’s gods comes from the Homeric narrator’s refusal to let us in on his own feelings; the ambiguity of Virgil comes from precisely the opposite technique. Although Otis is aware that Virgil creates a subjective narrator rather than an objective, Homeric narrator, and although he realizes that this alters how Virgil approaches the gods, he does not apply this to the Tiberinus passage when he comes to it. He points out the useful distinction that “Aeneas is now given immediate advice for an immediate crisis,” rather than Anchises’ vision of a distant future, in this regard highlighting the personal nature of the Tiber’s appearance to the Trojan. But Otis does not investigate how deeply this engages Homer or integrates the tension of the Homeric river god scene into Virgil’s poetic vision.

The poet painstakingly represents his hero at variance with Homer's.

Whereas Homer paints his hero as ambiguous, Virgil makes the qualifications of his hero quite explicit. In Book I of the *Aeneid*, Neptune is compared to a politician calming the masses; "But if they see a stern and blameless statesman,/they all fall silent, keen for him to speak./Then he will tame their hearts and guide their passions: Like this,/the roar of the broad sea grew quiet under the lord's gaze" (1. 151-5). Soon after, Aeneas is depicted as a literal politician. But instead of calming his followers, he must first calm his own turmoil: "Sick with colossal burdens, he shammed hope on his face, and buried grief deep in his heart" (1. 208, 209). This battle to control his emotions, to be a Neptune over his own waves of despair, is a microcosmic picture of the Virgilian hero. Obviously, the tension of the Achilles-Skamandros encounter does not exist between Aeneas and Tiberinus. To the contrary, Aeneas' respect for gods is greatly emphasized in this passage. He is "shipping in his conquered gods," and after listening to Tiberinus's instructions sends "fervent words to heaven" (Virgil 8. 11, 70). Interestingly, he prays to the nymphs and to Father Tiber, gods below the rank of his mother, Venus. He even pays his dues to his greatest rival, making a sacrifice to "majestic Juno" (8. 85). One could hardly imagine Achilles so engaged in worship. As with Homer, we cannot assume that Virgil is saying that the local gods are just as important as the Olympians. We know, however, that unlike Homer's hero, Virgil's champion is shown respecting all gods, even his enemy goddess, Juno. Taking the interaction with the river-gods as archetypical for both poets, we get two very different conceptions of the epic hero in relationship to divinity. In Homer there

was no comment on the blasphemous hero as countenanced in Achilles, a chilling poetic silence; in Virgil there is a warm admiration related towards the hero who demonstrates such piety, an effect created by Virgil's subjective style.

Furthermore, Virgil makes a heroic destiny unequivocally positive in this passage, whereas it was precisely the ambiguity of fate which prevented Homer from vilifying Achilles' excessive battlelust. After Tiberinus assures him that "All the fury of the gods has drawn back" and that concerning his destiny "I prophesy the truth," Aeneas responds by praying, "I'll worship you and honour you with gifts" (8.49, 75, 76). The Virgilian hero responds (eventually) to destiny with acceptance, not defiance or rage. Of course, their destinies are quite different; Aeneas has a lot more hope than Achilles. But the fact remains that Achilles chose his destiny; he stayed on the battle-lines, if on the outskirts most of the time, and he sent Patroklos to war. Aeneas was given no such choice, which deepens any sacrifices he made, and yet he submits to destiny. After losing two wives, his father, and others, and being asked to wage a war, a god's command to submit to destiny might not be taken so well. But even so, when the Virgilian hero sees the "marvelous portent" of his fate, he makes a sacrifice, and with his group cheering, speeds along his way (8.81 – 90).

This benevolent, peaceful encounter between Tiberinus and Aeneas would remain in Virgil's subjective state of bliss, were it not for subtle reminders of the potential violence of river god providence. Even as Virgil works to "correlate mythological symbols with psychological events and made possible his marvelous transformation of epic conventions" (Otis 385), Virgil's choice to reintegrate the

Achilles-Skamandros episode recalls the violence of that encounter. At one point, as Neptune makes a promise to Venus, he strengthens his promise to help Aeneas by saying, Heightening this, he tells Venus, “I call to witness Simois/and Xanthus—I have cared for your Aeneas . . . when choked rivers groaned and Xanthus could not find/a path or roll into the sea” (V.1060-1066). His assurance of benevolence is made by referring to the river gods who tried to slaughter Achilles, which makes sense since Achilles was a Greek, but still reminds her, and the readers, of Tiberinus’s dangerous potential. The Sibyl directly conflates the violence of Xanthus and Tiberinus when she tells Aeneas that she sees “wars, horrid wars, the Tiber/foaming with much blood. You shall have your Simois,/your Xanthus” (6.122-24). She then tells Aeneas she cannot help any further until his company has dealt with their unburied companion, Misenus, in an episode which casually reveals the violent caprice of water god providence in general:

And then he [Misenus] fell to madness: happening
to make the waves ring with his hollow shell,
blaring, he challenges the gods to contest:
and jealous Triton—if the tale can be
believed—snatched up Misenus, dashing him
in foaming shoals and breakers. (6.236-41)

Triton, we will recall, was one of the servants Neptune calls upon in the opening scene to help him save the ships of Aeneas (1.203-4). This creates a problem, since

Neptune promised Venus only one Trojan would die for their safe journey. This either means that Neptune lied, that he cannot control his minions, or that he changed his mind because Misenus made a challenge, none of which is terribly flattering for Neptunic providence. Tiber, as a continuation of that providence, therefore retains the same dark subtext as his more prestigious, Olympic counterpart.

Even more so than Tiberinus, “Neptunic” benevolence has an undeniable undercurrent of violence, which is problematic because it suggests that the benevolence of Tiberinus would be in vain if Fate were against his sovereign will to help Aeneas. After all, although Neptune is calming the storm caused by Aeolus, it is a storm which Aeolus started by entering Neptune’s jurisdiction, reminding us that Neptune could have been the one to make the storm, if he had been more like the Poseidon of *The Odyssey*. It happens that in this epic Neptune is on the side of Aeneas’ fate, but what if he had not been? Even his efforts to calm the storm hint at violence: he threatens to Aeolus, “you shall yet atone—another time—/with different penalties for these your crimes,” invoking his “dominion of the sea and my fierce trident” (1.190-196). And as he goes to calm the storm, Neptune “takes up his trident/to lift the galleys,” and his efforts to calm the sea are compared to a “man remarkable for righteousness” calming “the rabble” with “rage in their minds, and firebrands and stones/fly fast—for fury finds its weapons” (200-220). The trident is, of course, a symbol of his authority, but it is also, simply, a weapon, and his authority over a metaphorical crowd capable of such violence hints at a potential for violence just as great, and probably greater, in “the god himself.” However, the darker side of

Neptunic providence comes out directly when Venus begs him to keep the ships of Aeneas safe, and he replies, “I have earned this trust,/for I have often checked the frenzy and/great anger of the sea and sky . . .My mind is still as kind . . . And you will only have to mourn one Trojan/one lost within the eddies of the sea” (V.1055-1077). And, sure enough, the helmsman Palinurus falls asleep and drowns in the seas, and “the fleet/runs safely on its way across the sea—/even as father Neptune promised” (V.1139-41). There appears to be no infringement on Neptune’s providence here; he issues the death of Palinurus simply because that is what he wants for his divine favor, and takes it without any agreement from the mortals involved. Had he taken this poise towards the future of Aeneas, as Poseidon had taken against Troy, it is not clear that Tiberinus would have been able to help the Trojan. In fact, if we can see Neptune as a symbol of destiny since he is acting on the will of Jupiter and Fate in general to help Aeneas, we could assume that he could easily thwart the river god’s intentions to help Aeneas.

We do not need to rely on mere suggested possibilities in the text, as I have done so far, in order to complicate Tiberinus. We can simply recognize the fact that, at face value, important aspects of his prophecy to Aeneas seems to be false, or at least oversimplified. Tiberinus tells Aeneas, “Do not draw back or panic at war’s threats;/the rage and anger of the gods are done” (8.49, 50). But the purpose of calming his waters is to help Aeneas rally troops from Evander, and the war gets bloodier than ever from here. The last image of Aeneas in the epic surely does not resonate with the Tiber’s promise of peace: “And when his eyes drank in this plunder,

this/memorial of brutal grief, Aeneas,/ aflame with rage—his wrath was terrible . . . he sinks his sword into the chest of Turnus” (1262-1269). Furthermore, it is chronologically inconsistent with the actual passage of Juno’s wrath, which does not occur until the final book of the *Aeneid*, where Jupiter at last placates her and convinces her to let destiny take its course (12.1101-1119).

This may, however, speak only to Tiber’s limitations as a river god, localized and with finite sovereignty. After all, if fate were against Aeneas, the Tiber’s efforts to help him would have been somehow thwarted, as the efforts of Xanthus were. But just as the Tiber promises that “I myself/shall guide your galleys straight upstream along/ the banks, so that your oars may overcome/the countercurrent,” just so “the Tiber soothed his swollen/waters and stayed his silent waves, smoothing/his flood until it seemed a gentle pool” (8.72-113). Within his actual providence, the Tiber’s ability to assist in translation of empire holds true, and the slight slippage between his prophecy of larger things could simply remind us of the finite nature of river god providence. It does not seem that Father Tiberinus (who, I must mention, shares the appellation “father” with Neptune, Anchises, *and* Aeneas) is anything but benevolent to Aeneas; yet Virgil subtly reminds us that this benevolence is only able to exert its will because both the hero and the river god are aligned with an empire fated to be successful. Through his subjective narrative, Virgil is able to create a sense of grandeur in Tiberinus, despite his objective shortcomings, while keeping in view the ambiguity of a fate which can potentially subvert river god providence. Tiberinus is given a degree of autonomy, simply because the circumstances are

amenable to his will. This allows Virgil to fuse the dual nature of the river god — benevolent and malevolent — so that the Tiber remains an overtly good and austere figure, with the fortunate favor of fate.

Ovid creates a parody of Tiberinus in the *Metamorphoses* in the river god Achelous. Eleanor S. Rutledge argues that Ovid's *Fasti* does something similar with his own direct portrayal of Tiberinus in "Vergil and Ovid on the Tiber," describing the poet's use of his predecessor's character as "a light-hearted alternative version of an occurrence described by Virgil" (302). Instead of the deep reverence Virgil uses to describe Tiberinus, Ovid simply emphasizes "his age, rather than enhancing his *dignitas*, [and] seems to have turned him into a chatty, likeable, but not too keen character. Ovid's Tiber begins his speech by recalling the old days before he grew famous along with Rome" (302). Rutledge only discusses Achelous in a footnote, however: "The river who has the most to say in the *Metamorphoses* is Achelous who serves as host to Theseus and his companions . . . Achelous regales the guests with various stories, but he is portrayed as a friendly comrade, not as an aloof divinity. In fact, Achelous accentuates his own fallibility when he tells of his defeat by Hercules in the fight for Deianira's hand" (302). Thus, the character of Achelous is actually quite similar to Ovid's characterization of the Tiber, as apparently Achelous's only motive in hosting the heroes in the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses* is so that he can tell stories to Theseus and the other heroes. This is interesting in that themes of personal fate and imperial destiny are completely abandoned in Ovid's tale.

The importance of Theseus' personal destiny is downplayed from the first. In

the previous episode, Theseus had been helping to defeat a wild boar which was ravaging the countryside of Calydon. Theseus is somewhat victorious, except that he is simply one in the list of warriors who are attacking this enemy of Calydon's sovereignty, and it is Atalanta, not Theseus, who kills the creature (8.257-430). What's more, when we are told of Theseus's encounter with Achelous, we are only told, "Meanwhile, the son of Aegus, having done/his share to help the hunt in Calydon,/was heading home to Athens but was blocked/by heavy rains that swelled the Achelous" (8.543-548). There is nothing about his fate to defend or defeat any empire or fulfill any personal quest; he is just going home. What is more, after the tales of Achelous we are simply told that the "river-god was done; and now a nymph/dressed like Diana in a tucked-up tunic,/with long hair flowing over both her shoulders,/came in, to serve us our dessert" (8.85-90). There is not another word about Theseus; Ovid's narrator only goes on to talk more about Hercules, whom we had learned about in the last story of Achelous. The reason for there being no word of personal fate or imperial destiny in connection with river providence is actually revealed in the tales of Achelous.

The first tales concern Achelous' attempts to assert his own sovereignty, interesting since his ostensible realm of authority, the river, is out of his control. Theseus has difficulty getting back to Athens because of "heavy rains that swelled the Achelous:/he could not cross the stream," a natural barrier which hints at the physical violence of Skamandros, yet the supernatural element of Achelous at least presents himself as benevolent:

The river-god,/while warning him against the water's course, told
 Theseus: "Please take shelter in my house,/you famous son of Athens;
 for the course/my current takes is far too ominous:/those roaring,
 rolling waters are quite used to bearing off stout trees an giant rocks . .
 . this—my torrent—often swallows/the bodies of young men in its
 wild whirlpools. Rest here; wait till the waters ebb and find their
 normal channel, and the banks confine/the current.' Aegeus' son,
 convinced, replied:/'I welcome both your house and your advice,/o
 Achelous.' And he went inside. (Ovid 8.543-64)

This is a strange meeting, for the literal river is an obstacle, Homeric in aspect, yet the personified providence of the river casts himself in a positive light. If, like Neptune in the *Aeneid*, Achelous has had his providence infringed by the rains, then unlike Neptune he does not have the authority or power to return his river to peace; unlike Tiberinus, Achelous seems unable to quell "its wild whirlpools." Achelous is kind enough to offer Theseus the shelter of his warm cavern, but gives no explanation as to why he cannot clear the path over the river upon which he ostensibly holds providence. Like Aeneas, however, Theseus happily accepts the river's advice, in spite of his violent domain. Theseus is even so gracious a guest as to ask about features of the river, much as one asks about pictures on a coffee table:

"What is that island there? What is it called?/And is it just one isle?" . .
 . And this was the response: "What you see there is not one isle but

five . . . Those isles were once five Naiads. . . but to that sacred rite,/the nymphs forgot to ask one guest: yes, I was not invited. I swelled up with rage,/ just as my waters swell when they rampage:/my flood was high and horrible . . . my waters swept the nymphs away . . . the isles you see among those waters: the Echinades.” (8.564-87).

As when reading a Robert Browning monologue, one must be aware of ramifications in the river’s narratives which he does not intend to give away, and this passage gives away much. First, it might be rather disconcerting to a guest to explain that you brutally killed five women for not inviting you to a party.

Secondly, it gives away the fact that Achelous does have the ability to exert his will over his river: at least enough to use it as a weapon. A sixth island, however, is given a different explanation: when his love, who he “took away, by force, [her virginity],” Perimele’s father drops her from a cliff to drown her in the waves below (8.587-90, translator’s brackets). Achelous’ providence is here initially negative, for he has raped a woman and thereby caused her death, and to extend benevolence to her he does not use his own power but cries, “O you who were assigned—/by lot—the wandering waves, the kingdom second/to one by heaven; you, who bear the trident,/I pray you, Neptune, now to help this nymph” (8.590-600). Apparently Neptune answers the prayer, for she turns into an island, yet even as Achelous calls upon his superior’s providence, he recalls that Neptune’s domain was allotted to him by chance, and he also recalls the potential violence of Neptune by invoking his symbol of power, the trident. It is also not very much a salvation, one could argue, to be

turned into an island. We find here some ambiguous aspects of Achelous' nature, and yet there remains enough humor in the scenarios to prevent his character from becoming grotesque. The rage of Achelous at being left out of the ritual is, in terms of religion, a justifiable rage, and his remorse at the death of his lover is at least plausible. The relatively lighthearted nature of the episode could not be preserved if grand themes such as personal fate or imperial destiny were central. It seems that Achelous does not tame his own river so that, quite simply, he can keep around someone to talk to.

His motivation for wanting someone to talk to is revealed in the final tale. Achelous laments telling of other people's transformations, for he too can change shape, and then he melodramatically draws attention to his missing horn: "'Though 'horns' by now is not exact;/I had two once, but only one is left:/as you, young men, can see, my forehead lacks/one of my weapons.' Here the river-god/removed his wreath of simple reeds and showed his wounded brow. His words were done. He groaned." (8.875-884). He strikes one here less as a dignified image of providence and is more like an old grandfather, alluding to an old tattoo or battle scar that he wants his grandchildren to be interested enough about to ask more of on their own. He is encouraged much as he wants to be: "And Theseus, hero dear to Neptune, now asked Achelous why he groaned and how his brow had lost a horn. The river-god bound up the wreath of reeds that ringed his head to hide the wound he'd suffered. Then he said . . . (9.1-5). Ovid's narrator is careful to give no value judgments, simply giving Theseus the unassuming, traditional appellation "dear to Neptune,"

ordinarily an unimportant detail except that he is a guest to a river god who himself appeals to Neptune, showing the implicit bias in the relationship of the two characters, a Virgilian bias indeed (in the sense we read in Brooks Otis concerning Virgil's 'subjective style'). After this point, we move into the most Virgilian part of the Achelous episode, where Achelous' subjectivity takes over, though it is the Achilles-like Hercules who is the object of the narrative. Hercules is far more extreme than Achilles, for Achilles did not intentionally approach the river Xanthus. Hercules, however, explicitly pits himself against Achelous for the hand of Deianira, and boastfully proclaims that "my brawn is better than your tongue," a gross irreverence towards the river god's providence. It is one thing for Achilles to defy Xanthus; it is another for Hercules to defy Achelous and then actually beat him in physical combat (impressive when we consider that the group of heros cannot overcome the physical river Achelous). When Hercules defeats Achelous he rips of his horn, which we have been lead by Achelous' overt, rhetorical pause to view sympathetically, we would ordinarily expect Ovid's simple indictment of gods in general. He does not, after all, often depict gods in a positive light, and after half an epic of gods raping, murdering and punishing undeserving mortals this attack on Achelous could easily have been presented as sweet, just deserts. Yet Achelous narrates the tale, with an intention to elicit our sympathy towards his pain. Our sympathy is heightened, in fact, by Theseus' engagement with the river god, who acts as a sort of surrogate reader, having little other role than to listen to stories.

Rather than constituting a facilitator of the translation of empire, as with

Tiberinus, or a guardian of an empire, as with Ismenos or Skamandros, Achelous is simply a friendly digression from Theseus's journey homeward. In a sense, Ovid seems to imply that any attempt to aggrandize victory or defeat by means of fictions about personal fate or imperial destiny are just excuses for our own weakness, something Achelous does not try to hide in his candor. This sad component keeps Ovid's parody from being irreverent; there is a touch of sympathy for the defeated god. Still, river god providence fails in Ovid because questions about fate or empire, much like Achelous' narratives, are merely stories told to make us feel proud if we win, and to make us feel better if we lose. Lucan, it will be seen, chooses to strip these fictions away entirely.

Lucan's Nihilistic Pseudo-River Goddess

Lucan rewrites the Aeneas-Tiberinus scene in Book 8 of *Civil War*, using Pompey and Cornelia in their stead. Ultimately, it will be argued that Lucan uses this Virgilian moment not to proclaim nihilism triumphantly or even confidently, but remorsefully. At the outset of Book Eight of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas has embarked to request assistance from Evander. He has not himself engaged in outright conflict with Turnus, but is going to muster the resources needed to win the oncoming battle. Pompey, on the other hand, has lost a crucial battle against Caesar, and goes not to get allies but, essentially, to sulk and nurse his wounds. He has no hope for victory; he "has fallen from a lofty height," but "he knows the price of his blood is not yet cheap" (5, ll. 8-9). Aeneas at the Tiber and Pompey at the Peneus are, therefore,

drawn together not merely as parallel heroes at their river scenes, but through a pointed inversion of situation. Pompey's defense of his own place in empire fails because fate is merely the chance turns of history, and so Cornelia, a mortal desperately trying to fill the place of a river god, can extend no providence to save him.

This augments, in a minute way, Andreola Rossi's argument set forth in "The *Aeneid* Revisited: The Journey of Pompey in Lucan's *Pharsalia*." She argues that in an intentional plotted rewriting of Aeneas' journey, Lucan is using Pompey to unwrite the possibility of a Virgilian Rome: "It moves symmetrically backward, bringing the journey of the *Aeneid* back to its point of departure from the West back to the East, from Rome back to Troy" (Rossi 573). She argues that Lucan's imagery ties Pompey explicitly to Aeneas (583). She argues implicitly that this structure of inverted Virgilian narrative creates Lucan's nihilism, a nihilism which strangely has its counterpart in the text he inverts: "Both end with an antithesis, tragic in its structure, between the greatness of the past and the nothingness to which the two heroes have fallen" (586). Lucan detects that Virgil's narrative of successful empire is contingent upon the potentially hostile forces of the cosmos, and makes this anxiety central to his epic.

I agree with the scope of Rossi's argument, though I feel the Pompey-Cornelia scene complicates this brilliant reading, as I will discuss later. First, I wish to show more clearly textual kinship between the Aeneas-Tiberinus and Pompey-Cornelia pairings. The inverted relationship of the heroes has been covered; more specifically,

their mental states are described in almost identical terms. Virgil tells us of Aeneas that “Meanwhile, great waves of worries tossed the hero,/The son of Troy, at everything he saw,/His thoughts were darting one way, then another. . .” (Virgil II. 18-30). In a similar state of disarray and distress, in book eight of the *Pharsalia* we are told that “Magnus jumbles in uncertainty the traces of his flight/and intertwines his path by wandering. He panics at the noise of forests moving in the winds, and any of his comrades who rejoins him from behind alarms him . . . He reached the shore where the river Peneus . . . passed out into the sea” (8.4-34). The denouement of both epics unfold from these scenes, for they signal a shift in the final outcome of the story. In both cases, the hero’s mental anguish is juxtaposed to a physical river, and they both are approached by a sort of benefactor. Lucan has, of course, no river-god here, no Father Peneus. Instead, he gives us Cornelia. She is tied to Tiberinus in three ways. One is in her narrative position, which simply makes her the ‘river-god’ of river god providence by appearing in the context. Another is the narrator’s apostrophe to Cornelia:

. . . and when the darkness is removed,/you run on to the rocks of a precipitous cliff, to/the sea-shores’/edge; and looking out across the waves you are always first/to see the/sails of an approaching vessel nodding far away/and yet you dare not ask at all about your husband’s fate. (Lucan II. 45-9)

This passage appoints her a guardian of the waves, in the sense that she is vigilantly watching them for her husband's approach. Finally, her own words of desperation parallel the actions of Tiberinus. She tells Pompey she would die for him if it would "make the waters gentler for you" (l. 98). This is precisely what Tiberinus does for Aeneas. So, Cornelia is Lucan's 'river-god,' yet she has no divine power to save him or alter the outcome of the battle with Caesar.

R. Sklenar discusses Lucan's use of Stoicism in the essay, "Nihilistic Cosmology and Catonian Ethics in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*." He notes that presiding scholarly opinion was "that the poet is not merely influenced by Stoicism but is himself a committed Stoic, who expounds his doctrines both in his own voice and in the speeches of Cato" (Sklenar 1). He goes on to demonstrate that the principles of Stoicism, that the universe is ruled by a rational divine force and so we must submit to suffering without complaint, is undermined radically by the text: "Lucan deposits Cato into a universe devoid of reason . . . in short, a nihilistic reason, where the cosmological prerequisites for Catonian ethics necessarily fail." According to Sklenar's reading of the text, "Cato himself" has identified the inherent disorder of the universe, yet still promotes Stoic values "because in his view the overarching principle of Stoic conduct-conscious conformity to nature—must be retained even when nature itself violates Stoic principles and drives a wedge between Stoic behavior and the *securitas* that characterizes the proper Stoic frame of mind" (Sklenar 5). In other words, even if our relationship to the universe is not a fundamentally rational one, we must still be Stoics because there is no better way to deal with pain.

Should the universe be chaotic, Cato says, it is no different than if it were rational; we have no power over what happens to us either way. In short, in Cato's discourse, Stoicism and nihilism are conflated to essentially the same thing; that in the face of Fate or Fortune, our required behavior remains Stoic in principle. But Lucan's narrative, Sklenar posits, rejects even this. Pompey's tragic downfall, Caesar's horrific victory, Cato's noble but vain defiance of Fortune point towards the victory of nihilism: "But that vision still remains irremediably contrary to the world in which it takes place, for we are obligated to read this scene in conjunction with Lucan's unrecanted nihilistic cosmology" (Sklenar 7). As Quint points out, however, resorting to a nihilistic cosmology is a strategy of the "loser's epic," because its hero, Pompey, will not gain imperial victory, unlike Aeneas. In key with this, Lucan opens *Civil War* with a brilliant literalizing image of civil war itself: "a mighty people attacking its own guts with victorious sword-hand" (Lucan, 1. 2-3). If we take this concept of physical civil war and apply it to Lucan's discourse of philosophy, we come up with a very similar idea. It may very well be the case that nihilism defeats Stoicism, but this is rather like a man defeating himself, since Stoicism is a philosophy which helps us deal with our problems. If the enemy is consolation, and consolation has been defeated, in what sense can that ever be victorious? In an irrational world where empire can attack itself so horribly, how can one believe in the already tenuous myth of river god providence?

In light of the theme of destiny and its relationship to river god providence, particularly interesting to this discussion is the inconsistency in the Pompey-Cornelia

scene. Lucan alludes to fate as controlling his destiny, and then Fortune, ideas which are in some ways essentially opposed. Filled with apprehension, Pompey “remembered his fate,” and his “famous face does not allow him to conceal his fate in safe hiding-places” (ll. 10-14). Lucan asks darkly, “Is there anyone who dare entrust himself to favourable Fates except with death available?” (31-32) But the narrator also says that “from the unhappy man Fortune takes the penalties of her prolonged support,” and that “former fortune brings disgrace” (ll.20-30). Fortune stands in the center of the action of the passage, the center of Pompey’s fall, and fate is relegated to uncertainty, paradoxically the realm of fortune. We discussed earlier the fallibility of Virgil’s river god providence. If Tiberinus’ prophecy is imperfect, Cornelia’s is entirely empty. She contemplates sacrificing herself (a wicked inversion of Aeneas sacrificing the sow and her babies provided by Tiberinus), to make Pompey’s future happier; a gesture which would, of course, accomplish nothing. Her hollow prophecy is merely lamentation. So why does Lucan create this inconsistency between Fate and Fortune? After all, Cornelia’s helplessness could equally be the result of vicious, unstoppable fate, or a pragmatic understanding of fortune’s caprice. We could see Lucan as saying ultimately that the distinction is meaningless, since both are out of our control. In “The Narrator’s Voice: A Narratological Reappraisal of Apostrophe in Virgil’s *Aeneid*,” Francesca D’Alessandro Behr masterfully complicates the issue of the Virgilian apostrophe, and states that “A narratological approach to this topic might facilitate the task of assessing the *Aeneid*’s degree of polyphony” (Behr 190). His argument, as I read it, is that Virgil uses apostrophe in some instances to express

a degree of sympathy for a point of view which he does not entirely show as his, but in other instances as a way to artificially remind us of his subjectivity so as to create a distance between himself and the object of his poetic discourse. In other words, Virgil's apostrophe can paradoxically both give credence to a voice, but also remove the poet from any personal connection with that voice, creating two apostrophic narrators: "it seems to me that, in the economy of the narrative, apostrophe linked to the all-knowing narrator is employed more systematically and with more success than the short and sporadic apostrophes associated with the ignorant narrator" (Behr 213).

This does not create, therefore, a pure polyphony, but only a partial one where voices are brought into a text by the poet, but then muted by the method in which apostrophe is employed: "In these apostrophes, the polyphony created by the empathic rendering of each character's point of view is quickly corrected . . ." (Behr 216) Convenient to my purpose here, Behr concludes by explicitly comparing Virgil's use of apostrophe to Lucan's: "Lucan will profit from this kind of apostrophe, and he will use it as a vehicle of negative criticism or, rather, as a tool to recover a space for independence and skepticism towards the tyranny of the epic plot and the ideological corollaries of the genre" (Behr 215-216). This relates explicitly to our discussion of Cornelia, because as I noted above, Lucan directs an extended apostrophe to her, stating that "you dare not ask at all about your husband's fate" (Lucan 8, 49). This brings into one place Lucan's use of apostrophe, his dark vision of nihilism, and his contradictory use of fate, so that he uses the two modes of Virgilian apostrophe, one which expresses sympathy and one which creates distance, in a single place. On one

side, Lucan distances himself from Cornelia because, as a nihilist, he cannot find the kind of comfort in Cornelia offered by a Father Tiberinus, or even a stern reprimand in the form of Skamandros. But on the other, Lucan sympathizes with Cornelia's lamentation, so that even if he cannot allow her presence to vindicate a Stoic vision of destiny, he can, through her, mourn the loss of divine comfort.

If we imagine the paternalistic river god, who so compassionately cares for Aeneas, in a world as out of control as Lucan's, we could only imagine him responding with lamentation comparable to Cornelia's. As already mentioned, her pain over Pompey's nihilistic, failed Stoic place in life is not to celebrate in Caesar's ghastly fashion, but to go so far as to contemplate suicide if it would only make things better for her husband. She does not invoke complaints in her response to the truth of nihilism the way Caesar's embracing of it does, but instead "Hard Magnus' heart relents and Lesbos blurred the eyes left dry at Thessaly" (ll. 107-108). This presents for us the notion that Lucan is not in Virgil's camp, nor is he in Ovid's. Unlike Ovid, he does not celebrate Fortune's random metamorphoses; nor does he, in any Virgilian sense, have a grim faith in enduring cosmic order and its interest in imperial success. And Lucan possesses none of Statius' dark satisfaction in the meaningless violence of the world. Instead, he presents nihilism as defeating Stoicism in a brutal, ideological civil war, a defeat which is to be mourned after the fashion of Cornelia. A victory against Stoicism, Lucan seems to say, is hardly a victory. It is to defeat a hope, if indeed a grim one, for humanity, so even if nihilism wins, it does so at a grave cost. It is as much a horrible civil war as that fought

between Caesar and Pompey, and should nihilism win, this should break our hearts the way Cornelia's is broken when she recognizes her husband's downfall. Lucan's river god providence is no providence, but only a lamentation for a man who will fall with his dreams of imperial destiny.

Chapter 2: River Providence in English Medieval Literature

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, there is a combination of influence from both chronicles and romances, from both English and French. It would be impossible to study French romances in the context of this project, but an understanding of classical impact on French romance can be appreciated in F.M. Warren's review, "Latin Influences on Medieval French Romances," which looks at Edmond Faral's comparative studies of the French versions of the *Aeneid* and *Thebaid* (168-173). Ovid was especially important: "Ovid would have given *Eneas* its conception of love, also, its notions of sorcery, in short nearly all its additions to Virgil's themes" (170). Francis Ingledew impresses on the reader even more strongly just how powerful Virgil was in influencing the growth of a conception in translation of empire:

While this new textual production of Troy must bear the marks of the Christian cultural history that succeeded the pagan Roman Empire, it represents in an effectual manner a return of Virgil: in it reappear several defining features of the Virgilian philosophy of history, namely, the genealogical, the prophetic, and the erotic. These conceptual instruments combine to construct temporality itself. They allow Virgil to define the grounds of Rome's imperial status not through a local myth but through a comprehensive appropriation of time . . . When the medieval Book of Troy quite distinctively reawakens the issues of genealogy, prophecy and eros. . . it does so

according to a broadly Virgilian scheme, even when it does not resolve those issues in a Virgilian manner. (Ingledeu 667)

Since it is my goal to demonstrate how Chaucer and Malory differently respond to the medieval British usage of river providence, I will first examine the influence of the Virgilian conception of translation of empire, and argue that the chronicle writers Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon vindicate their departures from history through river providence. Moving into Middle English romances, specifically the Gawain romances, they hyperbolize the chronicler's tendency to depart from history. Medieval romance is less concerned with imperial destiny than the quest of the individual. This quest aims to find a numinous truth for which empire (Arthur's court) becomes merely a metaphor for the society to which the hero, if successful, returns to in order to reveal the truth he has ascertained (not so different in kind to the Philosopher returning to the cave). According to the language of romance developed by Lenz in *The Promised End*, the romancer endeavors to create "a transcendent frame of mind or world view made apprehensible by the narrative events and scenes" (ix) for the hero, which he must attempt to share with his people. In the romances to be looked at, these transcendent moments will find themselves at the riverside.

While the autonomy of the river gods had been the focus of the classical epic, providential rivers in the medieval tradition are generally less anthropomorphic, which means their autonomy is no longer so central. They continue to be associated with imperial destiny in the chronicles, and with the martial success or failure of knights in both the chronicles and romances. Rivers and their association with empire

are still present in these texts, but is now Camelot, rather than Troy or Rome. Instead, the romances are generally more concerned with virtue, and the virtue which concerns the specific romance is either put under pressure or is somehow revealed to Gawain (or the Pearl poet) in conjunction with a river or a tarn. Since the benevolent will of God is assumed, classical angst over the belligerent nature of fate no longer pervades these medieval scenes of river providence. Instead, because there are no gods to be autonomous, in question is the will of the knight who encounters the river providence. There are cases, of course, where river providence is personified, but its role usually is simply to inform the hero of his task. Medieval texts with blissful parsimony remove the very feature of river providence which had agonized classical writers.

It would be useful to include in this study numinous experiences of river in pre-Christian, Welsh and Germanic literature, but this study does not admit such space, unfortunately. However, because of the Christian nature of these writers, the pagan nature of river providence does provide a certain amount of tension, although this is seldom explicitly tied to religious differences (with perhaps the exception of a moment or two in the chronicles and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). This potential for conflict between a Christian writer and his non-Christian material, manifested in the tradition of river providence, will become far more explicit in the final chapter on Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Malory. Prior to them, however, river providence has, with Christianity as its religion and Virgil as its literary model, become mostly stable. Even so, angst remains on the part of the postlapsarian,

imperfect humans who encounter river providence.

Chronicles of River Providence

In the two chronicles I will examine, rivers engage the narrative in the widespread discourse on translation of empire. By translation of empire, of course, I am referring to the inheritance (or perceived inheritance) of an imperial tradition from one political force to another (such as from Troy to Rome). *The Aeneid*, therefore, is the prime model, though certainly not the only one, for translation of empire. Battles are fought, important people die, and kingdoms are designated by rivers in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon with unsurprising frequency. After all, modeling themselves as chroniclers, the two writers would have to use rivers, since rivers really are strategically important, and since they are also historically important for shifts of power, including for many battles in the chronicle which actually did happen. However, it is my hope to demonstrate that while both Geoffrey and Layamon are chroniclers of history, the element of river providence can be usefully analyzed as artistically employed. I accept Michael Faetra's position in his introduction to *The History* that it is "reasonable to try to evaluate his work by standards different from those of modern historians" (16). Even by twelfth century standards, Geoffrey's historicity sometimes came under fire: "Twelfth-century man of letters Gerald of Wales joked that readers of the book would summon demons to their obviously erroneous souls, while William of Newburgh, a contemporary historian, deemed Geoffrey's book an insidious collection of lies and damned lies, especially those parts of it that dealt with the spurious King Arthur" (8). Others sometimes used Geoffrey's

History “as a historical source on several different occasions,” but it is enough that learned medieval men doubted the literal truth of his chronicle to plausibly conclude that Geoffrey knew he was composing outside of the historian’s scrupulous sphere.

As a medieval chronicler, he fused artistry and historicity:

. . . it seems more likely that he was instead writing history not as could be reliably reconstructed from the documentary evidence (as William and Henry attempt to do) but history as he believes it should have been: vast in scope, high in drama, grand in vision—history, as we might put it today, as literature. (30)

Further evidence for this is Geoffrey’s Merlin, both in the *History* and the *Life of Merlin*, whom Geoffrey apparently creates out of two semi-historical figures, Myrddin and Ambrosius, from Welsh legend (23-24). Similarly, J.S.P. Tatlock demonstrates the Welsh traditions Geoffrey drew on to create an original portrayal of Merlin’s insanity in “Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlin*” demonstrates his willingness to stretch historicity (Tatlock 270). Unlike his sources in Bede, Gildas, or Pseudo-Nennius (Faletra 16), these sources are clearly not historical, even by medieval standards. Further, Juliette Wood discusses the tradition of historical poets who are later turned by writers into magicians and prophets in “Virgil and Taliesen,” a tradition which Merlin, as Wood demonstrates, is clearly a part of (94-96).

Geoffrey’s motivation for “fictionalizing” his chronicle, whether consciously or not, is adequately supplied in Francis Ingledew’s essay, “The Book of Troy and the Genealogical Construction of History: The Case of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*

regum Britanniae”:

. . . it represents in an effectual manner a return to Virgil: in it reappear several defining features of the Virgilian philosophy of history, namely, the genealogical, the prophetic, and the erotic. These conceptual instruments combine to construct temporality itself. They allow Virgil to define the grounds of Rome’s imperial status . . . When the medieval book of Troy quite distinctively reawakens the issues of genealogy, prophecy, and eros, it thus opens up the question of history, and it does so according to a broadly Virgilian scheme, even when it does not resolve those issues in a Virgilian manner. (666-7)

In other words, what Geoffrey inherits from the Virgilian tradition is the way in which he articulates translation of empire. This allows us to read the dedicatory epistle of the *History*, I believe, in a richer way, for his opening, “Tossing around a great many ideas,” recalls the literal tossing of Aeneas in the opening of the *Aeneid* and the emotional tossing of Aeneas at the beginning of Book 8. Even his assertion that Walter gave him “a certain very ancient book,” which Faletra demonstrates to be a fabricated misdirection not unlike Chaucer’s Lollius, and his plea to Stephen to “accept my little book,” indicate, if faintly, touches of artistry beyond a literalist historian’s. As Arthur argues that he shall wage war on Rome, beginning a scene most deviant from Geoffrey’s sources, Hoel supports the king’s imperial aggression with the words “If each and every one of us thought these matters through and spent time *tossing* them over in his mind, I do not think he would find any better plan . . .”

(179). Tossing over plans of war had been precisely the activity of Aeneas as he had lain at the Tiber's riverbank. This subtle Virgilian resonance becomes more explicit when Arthur has a troubling dream out at sea which no one seems to interpret satisfactorily: "Then he made his way with the army to Southampton, where he set out across the sea amid stormy winds. . . while the king's ship sailed . . . as they plowed the waves with good wind and high spirits, a portentous dream befell the king" (182). The troublesome nature of the dream is literally portentous, for the ending of the *History* is tragic rather than triumphant, just as Arthur's dream foretells. The episode recalls the Neptune scene in book I of the *Aeneid*. Arthur has set out here not to found his kingdom, as Aeneas has, but to defend it from Romans, tying it into the themes of destiny and empire which accompany Virgil's water god episodes. A. Kent Hiatt puts his finger on the "political and cultural imperialism" of Geoffrey of Monmouth, arguing that he articulates translation of empire in Arthur, who "achieved his greatest exploit by decisively destroying the entire force of the Roman Lucius in France in the sixth century, long before Charlemagne" (173-4). While other elements of river providence appear (most strongly with Merlin) in Geoffrey, the strongest element is that of imperial translation.

By invoking real rivers where historical events have really happened, Geoffrey of Monmouth lays the foundation for the suspension of disbelief necessary to his imperial, Arthurian fantasy. Drawing the opening passage (as with many others) from Bede, he insists that Britain is the "best of isles," and supports his assertion with a scenic snapshot, telling us that Britain "also possesses the greenest

fields . . . in which sparkling waters flow by in sweetly murmuring streams, promising sweet slumbers on their banks . . . Three noble rivers—the Thames, the Severn, and the Humber—extend like three arms, bringing in the commerce of the sea from all countries” (43). He then backtracks and begins chronicling from the time of Troy, careful to mention that Ascanius “built Alba Longa on an island in the Tiber,” and latter mentioning the drowning of Greeks in a river, preparing the reader for belief in Britain’s pseudo-Trojan lineage through river providence on the first pages of his historical account (43-6). In a similar way, his predecessor Gildas invokes the rivers of Britain, but it is the Jordan, not the Tiber, which Gildas relates to the Thames, keeping his discourse Christian even in his choice of rivers (Gildas 220). Two rivers in the *History*, the Humber and the Severn, are given their names according to people drowned in their waters (59-61). Many castles are located via a river, such as Leir’s: “Leir built a city on the banks of the Soar which derives its name from him in the British tongue as Kaer Leir and in the Saxon tongue as Leichester” (63), and Belinus, who “establiushed a city on the River Usk near the Severn Sea” (78). He reminds us by these kinds of resonances that literal places, such as rivers, can carry historical meaning not so different from literature: “Moreover, the seats of the three *archflamens* had been in the three noblest cities: London, York, and the City of Legions, whose ancient walls and buildings testify that it was situated in Glamorgan on the River Usk,” implying that once pagan “parishes” retain their shape in the Christianized world because of Britain’s rivers (97). But when Venedotians decapitate Romans beside a stream which would be called Nantgall, and when

Aurelius attacks the tyrant Vortigern “in the land of Erging on the River Wye atop a great hill called Cloartius,” (101, 144), the rivers do not simply give reference points: they become locations of shifting imperial power.

It would be tedious to list every important battle which happens on the riverside in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, but a sampling of just a few will suffice to show that Geoffrey uses them as sites where the translation of empire is underway. One such important battle is between Caesar and Cassibelaunus on the River Thames. Prepared for an assault, the British king “heard of Caesar’s approach,” and “fortified all the cities, rebuilt the crumbling walls,” and “also set up thick rows of stakes made of lead and human thigh bones just below the water line in the bed of the River Thanos” (87). His efforts are successful, and Caesar retreats in defeat. Later on, scared of Gaulish conquest, Dionotus and Conan send their women down the river Thames, a disaster which results in the sinking of many of the ships (110). It is an attempt to forestall translation of empire by preventing conquest of their women, but it is clearly a failure. In the case of Vortimer, who “fought four great battles against them [the Britons], and was victorious at every turn,” three of which are beside bodies of water:

The first battle occurred at the River Derwend, and the second at the ford at Eppingford, where Hora fought against Katigern, Vortigern’s other son, and they slew each other in the fray. The third battle took place on the shore of the sea, where the pagan ships fled in a most unmanly fashion, taking refuge on the Isle of Thanet. (124)

Recalling that Geoffrey's *History* ends with an admonition towards the Britons, it is little wonder that they lose so completely to Vortimer at these confrontations. If rivers signal historical destiny in the *History*, then a lost battle at a riverbank will never bode well for the other side. This is even true for Arthur, whose father loses his life by drinking from a poisoned well: "there was a fountain of the purest water near the king's hall from which the king preferred to drink, since he detested all other liquids because of his sickness. Those wicked men approached that fountain and sprinkled poison throughout the waters there so that it was all corrupted. When the king drank from it, he succumbed to a swift death" (162). It is this death which allows for Arthur's unique ascension to the throne, whose golden reign is prophesied by Merlin (154). It is interesting that Merlin's prophecy simply skips over Uther's reign, moving right into the glorious nature of Arthur's righteousness; it does not foretell Uther's death or the manner of it, but through pointed exclusion implies the mitigation of his role to his son's.

The two most important battles of Arthur in *The History* are both tied to riverbanks. His major battle with the forces of the Roman Lucius occur on the River Aube, whereas his final fight is on the Camlann against the treacherous Mordred (185, 198). In the first battle, Arthur wins a conquest which is simply not historical; Britain never conquers Rome. Geoffrey corrects this historical deviation by having Arthur die when he returns to stop his usurping nephew, a battle during which Mordred also falls (199). Again, the villainous and the virtuous kings of Britain both die, reinforcing Geoffrey's apparent lesson that failure of imperial translation is a

result of Welsh sin. Because Arthur is such a noble king, Geoffrey allows a hint of the quasi-Messianic Arthurian legend: “He was carried away to be healed of his wounds on the isle of Avalon,” a hint undercut by the words, “May his soul rest in peace” (199). If the British expect a king such as Arthur to ever appear again, Geoffrey seems to suggest that the inherited “habitual barbarity” of the Britons must be replaced by the “peace and concord” put in place by the Saxons, a truly Virgilian moral to his story (216).

The supernatural aspect of rivers in Geoffrey cannot be ignored, since providential rivers are not ordinary. Up until now those discussed are given no direct, literal supernatural nature; there is simply a faint, if intentional, connection between them and Virgil’s use of the Tiber as a Roman symbol of imperial grandeur. Both prophecy and magic are associated with rivers in the *History*. Chased by Arthur and his warriors, the Picts “took comfort in the natural protection of the lake,” in a land where an apparently prophetic group of eagles “used to gather together and, in a single lofty voice, foretell all the prodigious events that would happen in the kingdom” (168). The rivers do not succeed in protecting their people, and after the battle is concluded Hoel notices an almost magical pond which was “twenty feet wide and just about as long, and five feet deep. No one knew whether it had been shaped into a square by nature or by craft of men. It nourished four different kinds of fish in its four corners, and fish from one corner neer mingled with the fish from others” (169). Another strange pool, Linliguam, is described as a whirlpool which, when full, would not spill, but when the tide went out it would somehow make more water

than before (169-70). The chronicler's decision to digress and talk about these pools makes little sense unless we consider that the reverent awe with which they are treated is intentionally juxtaposed to Arthur's successful conquest over the Picts.

The full import of these rivers, however, cannot be understood without looking at Merlin and his prophecies. Merlin's fabled entrance into Arthurian legend occurs when King Vortigern seeks to mix his blood with the mountain, following his advisors' instructions, but Merlin tells him differently: "My lord king, call your workers and tell them to dig down into the earth and you will find a underground pool. That is what is preventing the tower from standing . . . Have the pool drained . . . and at the bottom you will find two hollow stones and within the stones two sleeping dragons" (129). Although Geoffrey is drawing on previously existing Welsh myth, he brings it into *The History of the Kings of Britain* with an originality which would change Merlin forever, and which, in the Virgilian scheme of the *History*, serves to subtly conflate Merlin with river providence. During Merlin's prophecies are nearly as many references to rivers as occur in the rest of the *History*:

Woe to the Red Dragon, for its death hastens!. . . the rivers of the valleys will flow with blood . . . The white-haired old man upon the snow-white horse will divert the flow of the River Periron, and he will measure out a mill with his white staff. . . Then . . . the rivers will flow with blood. . . . The source of the River Amnis will turn to blood and two kings will fight a duel on account of the Lioness of Stafford . . . A Boar of Commerce shall then arrive who will recall the scattered

flocks to their former pasture . . . From his mouth there will issue rivers that will water men's parched gullets . . . The Severn Sea will flow through seven months, and the River Usk overflow for seven months. Its fish will die from the heat and serpents will be born from them. The hot springs of bath will freeze and their normally healthy waters will breed death . . . the Thames will be changed to blood . . . Three fountains shall burst forth in the city of Winchester whose streams will divide the island into three parts . . . (131-142)

It would be impossible to include every river reference in the prophecy. Nonetheless, their pervasiveness is clear from the long excerpt. The passage is somewhat reminiscent of the speech of Pythagoras in the *Metamorphoses*, where he discusses countless magical streams. Indeed, many of these streams are enchanted, but since they are part of Merlin's prophecy, a genre obviously given to metaphor, it is hard to know whether this is to be taken literally. Prior to Merlin's appearance in the *History*, a sea monster devours the wicked king Morvidus (80), but since Merlin seems to be speaking of politics, his rivers and the monsters in and around them take on a symbolic, perhaps even allegorical nature. Some of the rivers he mentions are real, such as the Usk and the Severn, and some of the seemingly supernatural occurrences, such as rivers turning to blood, could perhaps be a metaphor for bloodshed at the riverside, certainly something which happens plenty enough in his chronicle. It is also, however, something which happens in Homer and Statius. Geoffrey does not put in his chronicle the classical river gods, yet it is impossible to

miss the connection of imperial destiny with river providence in Merlin's prophecies. Like many of the demigods in classical literature, Merlin is said to be born under very strange circumstances, with a mortal mother and a father who is at least supernatural, and perhaps even demonic.

Also, in *The Life of Merlin*, the strange wizard is connected to rivers: "There was a spring on the summit of a certain hill, surrounded on all sides by hazel trees and thick patches of briars. It was here that Merlin had established himself" (245). One of his prophecies, where he foretells that a man will fall from a cliff into a tree which is over a river (in spite of his hosts' attempts at trickery), proves tragically accurate (251). Even if Merlin seems to have an affinity for rivers, however, they clearly do not all fall under his providence, for in running from his sister Gwendolena he finds himself blocked by the "rushing currents" of a swollen river (253). The unreliability of life is compared by Ganieda, as she laments to Merlin's pupil Taliesin, that anything "that is helpful passes away like so much running water" (258). Merlin's insanity is healed by a spring that had mysteriously appeared from beneath a mountain, which he drinks from and is thereby cured. This prompts Merlin to again lapse into a treatise on the magical nature of certain rivers, yet his speech does not escape its ambiguities: "In Rome there flows the swift *Tiber*, whose salubrious waters are said to cure wounds through their proven medicinal properties. . . The *River Styx* flows out of a rock, and it kills those who drink from it" (269). Merlin gives an overtly Christian explanation of these rivers by explaining that "God endowed flowing water with these and other powers" (270), but that is disturbing when one

keeps in mind the dark nature of some of the enchanted pools he discusses. Furthermore, it is somewhat contradicted by a detail about King Arthur's passing which would not be appropriate in the chronicles: after being wounded, he comes "to the hall of the nymphs," water spirits or goddesses. He solidifies an Ovidian relationship of the text by declaring his triumph at the end of the *Life of Merlin*: "he is yours indeed, for he has sung of your battles and of your leaders, and he wrote a book that is now called *The Deeds of the Britons* and is famous throughout the world" (276). Geoffrey calls no direct attention to the Christian dilemma of using pagan traditions of river providence, whether classical or otherwise, to vindicate the translation of empire. Indeed, his use of it through Merlin to aggrandize Arthur is largely positive. Yet in both *The History* and *The Life of Merlin* he notes the dual nature of river providence: grand rivers are a source of imperial vindication, but also sites for war, suicide and betrayal, and the supernatural nature of those rivers is not always positive. If *The History* is Virgilian, then perhaps the Ovidian nature of *The Life of Merlin*, with its apparent lack of imperial destiny or careful narrative continuity, serves to introduce a bit of ambiguity into river providence. However, since Merlin and Arthur are the beneficiaries of that providence in both tales, and since they are cast as largely positive figures, it is reasonable to see river providence as a force for good in Geoffrey's account of British imperial destiny.

Layamon's use of rivers in the *Brut* are not very different in kind from Geoffrey's. In general, like Geoffrey and his other source, Wace, Layamon allows his "chronicle" to take a somewhat free relationship to history, though this freeness is

generally in adding details rather than adding plot points to the narrative: “Repeatedly and constantly, the English *Brut* loses touch with the French text, sometimes for hundreds of lines, yet without introducing anything markedly alien or inappropriate to the context of the original” (S.C. Weinburg xlii). Unlike in Geoffrey, Layamon is more inclined to add mythic elements, especially from Germanic sources: “the narrative sequence, the thematic sweep, the sense of historical conviction derive from Geoffrey; but Layamon has coloured the whole with the spirit, the atmosphere, some of the expressive means of Old English epic” (xxxvi). More specifically, Layamon allows elements of the supernatural to creep in, including “gift-giving fays” and “supernatural smiths” (xxxviii-xix). Although Layamon writes in the genre of Geoffrey’s chronicle, this inclusion of the supernatural, among other things, contributes to the sentiment that the *Brut* is, in spirit, a “romance, projecting upon historical reality, grudgingly admitted, a golden age of national triumph” (xxvii). As in Geoffrey, its use of rivers contributes to verisimilitude, yet Layamon introduces a more stark duality to the supernatural aspect of the rivers in the *Brut*. This results from an implicit tension between Christian and pagan concepts, but the tension of river providence does not yet pit Christian and non-Christian traditions against one another in the more explicit manner of Chaucer and Spenser. Instead, the ambivalence of river providence in Layamon serves to support Weinberg’s reading that, as regards translation of empire, “no such national status seems possible, dealing as it does with a defeated and slighted culture in the language of its conquerors” (lxvii).

As with Geoffrey, Layamon's chronicle includes rivers to bolster historicity, such as when Uther Pendragon attacks Cornwall, advancing "across the river called Tamar straight to the castle where they knew Gorlois was" (Layamon 7). Imperial forces clash at the riverside in the *Brut*, such as the battle between the armies of Arthur and Colgrim, at the river "called Douglass – it was the death of warriors!" (41). Arthur's superiority is demonstrated at the river Avon, a moment where a triumphant translation of empire seems possible: "And Arthur pursued him [Childric] like a lion, and drove them all into the river – many met their doom there! There five and twenty hundred sank to the bottom; then the river Avon was all bridged with steel!" (71) Childric finally meets his doom at the hands of Cador, by the river Teign (79-80). Similarly, Arthur's sovereignty is powerfully vindicated during his battle with Frolle, a king of France whom Arthur will (with questionable historicity) defeat beside a river in France: "Arthur marched onward with a vast force until he came right to the city of Paris on the west bank of the river with his great host. Frolle was on the east bank with a large army, ready for the combat in the presence of all his warriors" (135). Interestingly, Arthur kills Frolle in the throes of a retributive rage, reminiscent of the Aeneid: "Arthur was greatly enraged at heart, and swinging his sword Caliburn with force, struck Frolle upon the helmet so that it split right apart . . . Then Frolle fell, stricken to the earth . . ." (139). Arthur's impressive victory here is not explicitly connected to river providence by the narrator, although he tells us that all "night long there was singing by candlelight, clerics solemnly chanting God's holy psalms" in preparation for the battle (133). Arthur, however, explicitly ties the battle

to God's providence both before and after the battle, commanding that "all good men stay awake this night and pray to our Lord who controls all destinies that He protect me from the savage Frolle, and with his right hand shield me from humiliation. And if I may secure this kingdom for my own . . . I will fulfill the will of God Almighty" (133). After his victory, Arthur then bids Gawain to spread the message that the French and Romans must "depart hence in peace; let each man possess his lands and home as God grants him" (139). Arthur assumes a divine will behind his victory, and though there is no manifested deity at the river where he fights Frolle, the providence on this riverbank is that of the Christian God, at least in Arthur's mind. Whether or not Layamon read the *Aeneid*, he knew something of traditional Roman literature, even if only through French romances, and it seems plausible that his key moments where empires are made or fail occur at the waterside because he was, consciously or not, aware of the primacy of rivers in translation of empire.

What is not clearly present in the river battle between Arthur and Frolle is the direct, affirmed presence of the supernatural. Later on, Arthur does encounter the supernatural at a river, although it is not a god. Reminiscent of Beowulf going to fight the water troll Grendel, Arthur commands, "Bedevere, go down quickly from this mountain and cross the deep water in all your armour, and approach that other fire with caution . . . look carefully if you can find any sign of the ogre" (183). Arthur refuses to fight him while he is sleeping, and instead awakens the monster to do battle with him; again *Aeneid*-like, when the monster begs for mercy, Arthur wrathfully commands Bedevere to decapitate him (191-3). On the other hand, as in

Geoffrey's *History*, Layamon includes enchanted waters, including a loch which holds water monsters and elves, again reminiscent of, if not referring directly to, Ovid (83). Layamon refers to this as a "fearsome pool," which is later contrasted with a "certain small lake" which, Arthur proclaims, was dug by elves and has four groups of fish who never leave their corner of it: "No man has been born so excelling in wisdom . . . as to be able to comprehend it, to understand what prevents one species swimming towards another, for there is nothing between them except clear water!" (89) He further tells Hoel of "a very large lake – its waters are evil! And when the sea rises as if in a rage and pours into the lake with great force, there is, nonetheless, no more water in the lake than before" (91). Similar bodies of water were mentioned as appearing in Geoffrey's *History*; the difference is that Layamon appears to explicitly tie them to the supernatural, whereas Geoffrey affects a tone of impartial skepticism. It is interesting that these enchanted waters are discussed before and after a battle with the Scots; it is as though Arthur is pointing out locations of non-Christian, supernatural presences in order to subordinate them through his victories. This would imply a very subtle invective against the river providence of rival empires: their gods are "elves," their providence "evil," whereas the river providence overseeing Arthur is associated with the Christian God.

This reading is troubled by two events later on, however, one in Arthur's dream and another in his famous, wounded retreat to Avalon. After his vision Arthur tells a knight, "The lion came running towards me and seized me by the waist, and made off, moving towards the sea. And I saw the sea-waves surging; and the lion

went with me into the water. Once we two were in the sea the waves parted us; then a fish came swimming by and bore me to the land. I was all wet and weary then, sick with sorry” (241). This state of disarray turns out to be prophetic indeed, for Arthur does lose the battle to Mordred as he thought, and he is taken to the sea (255). His emotional turmoil recalls that of Aeneas as he prepares to go to war, but it is very different in kind, for fate is against Arthur, not for him, although it is courteous enough to be honest. Arthur’s knight attempts to console him, a faint Cornelia figure, insisting, “one should never interpret dreams ominously” (241). Arthur gives a very positive view of the nymphs who come to take him away: “I will go to Avalon, to the loveliest of all women, to the queen Argante, fairest of fairy women; and she shall make well all my wounds, make me all whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will return to my kingdom and dwell with the Britons in great contentment” (255). The presence of pagan creatures, fairies to be specific, creates no problem for the Christian sentiments of Layamon. Instead, we have a rather Homeric association of fate siding with the powers of the sea: “No man ever born of noble lady can tell more of the truth about Arthur. But there was once a seer called Merlin who prophesied – his sayings were true – that an Arthur should come again to aid the people of England” (255). This is a rather strange ending since “the people of England” is a rather ambiguous phrase. Arthur had been the king of the Britons, the enemies of the political infrastructure in Layamon’s day. He could be indicating a miraculous overthrow of the Norman power, or perhaps a more transcendent Arthur who comes for the people of Britain on account of their being people of Britain, regardless of

their precise heritage. River providence retains at times hints of the pagan supernatural; at other times they are “historical” accounts of translation of empire, and at still other times, especially at the river-battle with Frolle, there is a hint that the providence of the Christian God Himself is at work.

The potential for a conflict between Christian and pagan traditions exists in Geoffrey and Layamon, but they gloss over this. Even the possibility of conflict between rivers and small bodies of water with the sea (as in Homer) are not capitalized upon by the chroniclers, for Arthur’s sovereignty is often vindicated at the riverside. Because Geoffrey and Layamon are writing about a defeated people with perhaps a degree of sympathy, they can give no final word on river providence, because its Virgilian role in empire does not succeed, not because it is fallible, but because the objects of it are.. The conflict of pagan versus Christian traditions in literature, however, does not end with Geoffrey and Layamon. The dual nature of rivers, as both good and evil, translation and failure of empire, rise and fall of the hero, all become a part of the Gawain romance, as we will see next.

Providential Rivers and Lakes in the Gawain Romances

The transition from medieval chronicles to medieval romances constitutes a shift, in some ways, towards an Ovidian style of narrative. Even while chroniclers may stretch historicity in favor of an ideal past, they retain a pervasive, narrative continuity, a chronological set of events and, generally, a historical relationship of cause and effect. In other words, when Arthur decides to set up his fortress at the

river Aube, the reasons for doing so are quite explicit and comprehensible. In romance, narrative progression follows a less explicit, more associative path. Why does the green knight want to test Gawain? His revelation that Morgan le Fay was trying to frighten Guenevere is demonstrated in “Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” by Albert B. Friedman, to really give little obvious narrative closure to the Middle English poem. Why do Gawain, Kay and Bedevere make their vows in *The Avowyng of Arthur*? Because their vows are necessary to the plot of the poem, one could very well answer. In Homer, Virgil and other authors of antiquity, river gods have carefully integrated, thematic functions; their role is similarly clear in the chronicles, as shown above. As much a result of the nature of romance, there is another cause for the indistinct role of rivers in the Gawain romances. There is an implicit, perhaps subconscious unrest which exists in the Christian poets of these romances, who employ pagan traditions which superficially have no direct conflict with the dominant religious discourse.

Before I move on to discuss this tension, I first want to lay out some of Joseph Lenz’s premises in *The Promised End: romance closure in the Gawain-Poet, Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare*. He lays out a conception of how the romance functions which will serve to illuminate the romancer’s appropriation of river providence, and in reverse, how river providence helps medieval romance to function. Lenz points out that romance “writers compile episode after episode, comparing, contrasting, alluding to other tales, introducing matter that bears no apparent relation to the story at hand, shifting the ethical values by which the action is judged, even altering the

supposed genre of the work” (29). This more Ovidian, rather than Virgilian, method of writing clearly sets the romance apart from the chronicle. Lenz writes further that the “frame of reference for romance can best be described as magic or otherness” (x). Much as the narrative does not have an explicitly logical progression, a romance allows for specific events to have unnatural or supernatural causes. Because “the romance landscape takes an active role in forming character,” and because the “romance hero customarily comes up against someone or something other than himself that almost always refers back to himself” (x), the space created by river providence is no longer need provide historical veracity. Instead, the river assists in a creation of a “closed, or rather enclosed, often self-referential system” (xi). Crucial are Lenz’s three aspects of the romance: “narrative fulfillment,” the tallness of the story which contributes to “enclosure,” and finally a “revelation” which “breaks the enclosure made to ground the magic, forcing an end to the story and closing off audience experience” (7). Because the romancer must create an imaginative space for the reader to escape history, tallness is necessary for this temporal and spatial disconnect (13). Further, a false sense of anxiety for the “desired outcome” of the story, and a dissolution of the fantasy by the sense of a “generalization,” or more universally accepted “truth,” creates a rupture with the world of the tale which at once distances it and yet allows the romance to operate didactically (20-21). It is this transcendent aspect of the romance, I believe, which allows the Christian romance poet to incorporate pagan traditions, permitting them to use a vehicle of mixed origins which has, at its core, a message of virtue which goes beyond the worry that a

specific tale is not Scriptural in its genesis. At the same time, however, because the transcendent aspect of the narrative is in tension with the vehicle of narrative itself, the romance poet does not tend to eliminate the tension between his Christianity and his non-Christian material (with perhaps one exception). Although Lenz provides a beautiful reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he glosses over an issue which has given some readers pause, the introduction of Morgan le Fay near the end of the poem. More particularly, the significance of the river beside the Green Chapel is not expounded upon by Lenz, a significance which is found in other Gawain romances as well.

More so than the other Gawain romances, translation of empire remains a theme in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As Joseph Lenz points out, the poet uses history to “give his tale a pedigree” (Lenz 34). The Gawain-poet begins by invoking the medieval book of Troy, as it were, starting with Aeneas, then Romulus, Felix Brutus and finally down to King Arthur himself (23, 24). It is very tempting to read the Gawain-poet as directly engaging Virgil, a premise defended by Coolidge Otis Chapman in the essay, “Virgil and the Gawain-poet.” He holds this conclusion based on three premises:

- (1) between the *Aeneid* and the works of the *Gawain*-poet there are notable similarities in the employment of figures and mannerisms; (2) certain lines in the works of the *Gawain*-poet appear to be translations or adaptations of lines in the *Aeneid*; (3) one important problem—the source of the name Felix Brutus (*Gawain* 13)—can be solved by

reference to *Aeneid* VI, 817-823. (Chapman 23)

Although these do form a plausible theory, a stubborn critic could weaken each premise. The similarity of literary devices, his first point, could be simply a result of the poet's familiarity with a vast tradition of romances which have employed such devices. Seeming translations of lines in the *Aeneid* could, likewise, be formulaic constructions which have been passed down in the French tradition (*Eneas* has such moments, for example), and it is not impossible that "Felix Brutus" appears elsewhere in a medieval text which was available to the *Gawain*-poet but not to us. Even so, Chapman's argument at least closely ties the *Gawain*-poet to a literary tradition which was deeply informed by Virgil's poetics, whether or not he had read the *Aeneid* itself (as likely as that may be). The relationship of the poem to its classical influences, as to its other influences, is not entirely clear, but "blends a variety of disparate sources . . . into a marvelously wrought tale" (Lenz 32). He employs the Aeneas/Troy legend exactly: "The poet first places his tale within the historical framework, then steps back from the painting to show that it is but one picture on a wall with many others" (34). Such purposeful non-integration of material similarly occurs with Morgan le Fay, for as Freidrich argues, "we cannot get around the stubbornly solid impression that he fails to convince us that Morgan is organic to the poem. She is not, of course, the only thread imperfectly woven into the narrative" (Friedman 274). Friedman convincingly questions and weakens Baughan's premise that Morgan is carefully integrated into the story (261-3). I agree that Bertilak's explanation has no clear or direct narrative connection to Morgan; the green knight's mentoring aspect towards

Gawain is enough to question the belligerent nature of such a source of providence.

However, Bertilak clearly puts the Green Chapel in the providence of Morgan, and so this must be explained. He tells Gawain that he has been transformed “by the might of Morgan le Fay,” who “by cunning of lore and crafts well learned./The magic arts of Merlin she many hath mastered. . . and Morgan the Goddess/is therefore now her name” (98). We cannot, as Friedman seems to, simply dismiss Morgan as a weak explanation. It is neither that she is not integrated previously, nor that her presence has no justification; Bertilak’s explanation is *supposed* to be surprising, but we are not supposed to reject it. Simply concluding that Morgan le Fay is a weak imperfection, as Friedman does, is too extreme, much as concluding with Baughan that Morgan le Fay’s presence has been implied all along is equally suspect. According to Bertilak, Morgan represents a very simple threat to King Arthur: she hopes to terrify Guinevere when the Green Knight brings Gawain’s severed head into Arthur’s court (99). But then we are left confused about Bertilak’s relationship to Gawain, which in the end seems extremely benevolent: “They clasp and kiss and to the care give each other/of the Prince of Paradise” (99). Far from beheading him, Bertilak blesses Gawain in the name of Christ and even extends hospitality to the knight. Yet his guise as the green knight was created by Morgan le Fay, and Bertilak does not seem to begrudge her power: “None power and pride possess/too high for her to tame . . . She it is that is at home, that ancient lady;/she is indeed thine own aunt, Arthur’s half-sister . . . Therefore I urge thee in earnest, sir, to thine aunt return!” (98, 99) Strange as it may seem, in the name of Morgan, the one who has

supposedly arranged the events of the poem, Bertilak invites Gawain over for another visit.

This contradiction is not an oversight on the poet's part, but a purposeful confusion created by the alliance of Christian and pagan power. And the confrontation of Gawain with Morgan's providence, manifested in the Green Knight, occurs on a barrow at the riverside:

Such on no side he saw, as seemed to him strange,
 Save a mount as it might be near the marge of a green,
 A worn barrow on a brae by the brink of a water,
 Beside falls in a flood that was flowing down;
 The burn bubbled therein, as if boiling it were. (86)

The site of their conflict is beside a waterfall which seems to be burning or boiling. With the tradition of Geoffrey and Layamon in mind, this might indicate to the medieval reader the presence of something supernatural in the water. It is also important that the river is beside a barrow and the Green Chapel, a place of death and of religion. Gawain's reaction is to suppose that the green knight worships Satan here, and then

he heard from the high hill, in a hard rock-wall
 beyond the stream on a steep, a sudden startling noise.
 How it clattered in the cliff, as if to cleave it asunder,
 as if one upon a grindstone were grinding a scythe!
 How it whirred and it rasped as water in a mill-race!

How it rushed, and it rang, rueful to harken! (88)

This simile, describing the sounds of Bertilak's approach, sounds much like the enchanted pools in Layamon, dug by elves, perhaps a holy pagan ground vilified by the Christian onlooker. Evidence for reading it as such is subtly brought in as the Green Knight seeks to cross the waters: "a Danish axe newly dressed the dint to return . . . When he walked to the water, where he wade would not,/he hopped over on his axe and haughtily strode,/fierce and fell on a field where fall all about lay snow" (89). After dwelling on the fearful nature of the water, he then introduces the rival knight who is wielding a "Danish axe," which evidently he uses to cross the water in which he "wade would not." This may imply that he believes the water to be dangerous, vindicating the narrator's hint that the waters seem to be "boiling." Regardless, he is adept at navigating this terrain, doing so without pause whereas both narrator and Gawain had spent time marveling at it. After this impressive entrance begins the famous episode of the poem, where Bertilak makes two false blows and then a third, which merely nicks Gawain's neck. Bertilak then commends Gawain for his faithfulness, with the single fault of having accepted a favor from his wife. We are lead to think that his wife is Morgan le Fay, whom he praises so highly, for he tells Gawain concerning her, "we shall make your friend/who was your bitter foe" (96). Gawain's honor is tested by the knight and his wife; one might say that Gawain has, like Christ, undergone temptations. However, Bertilak and Morgan are both associated with the supernatural, and in Christianity supernatural temptation is not divine; it is "in the Devil's fashion" (88).

Instead of river god providence, we have instead river demon providence here in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Perhaps this answers why Gawain takes his shortcoming more seriously than either Bertilak or Arthur's court, and it also explains why he refuses to visit again, despite Bertilak's hospitable offer (97). The river providence of Bertilak, tied to the pagan supernaturalism of Morgan le Fay, is subtly conflated with the demonic, so that Gawain's wound is a mark of sin, making sense of his assertion that "thence part will it never" (101). If this reading holds, it is then very disturbing that Arthur's court decides to create a tradition of wearing "a band of bright green" to remember Gawain's adventure to the Green Chapel, an honor tied by the Gawain-poet to the Round table and "the best books of romance." Gawain has learned his personal lesson, yet the narrator's final words suggest that the misguided mirth of Arthur's court can only be corrected in the pain of Christ's death: "To His bliss us bring Who bore/the Crown of Thorns on brow!" (101) It is an ending which resembles Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. However, because the narrator allows us to see Bertilak as relatively benevolent, and because Gawain's sober reaction seems overdramatic alongside the reaction of Arthur's court, he allows the reader to also be left wondering what the point of the adventure was at all. Indeed, Gawain has learned something at the Green Chapel, and he has completed his quest well enough to satisfy King Arthur himself, so that any final sentence on the poem must be qualified. More importantly, we do not get a clear understanding of Gawain's personal insight. Arthur's court could serve more simply as the audience of romance, if we suppose that the world's reaction to a romance's transcendent truth is relatively weak. Or, we

might see *Gawain* as the surrogate reader who returns to the real world, convinced by the truth he has found in an otherwise fantastic setting. The tension between readers of Gawain's adventure, the court and Gawain himself, suggests a tension in the moral import one should ascribe to Gawain's encounter at the riverside. Since his encounter is hidden in the realm of the ineffable and the transcendent, Arthur's court can absorb his moral seriousness with mirth and integrate it into their Christian context without dwelling on the pagan source of his personal revelation.

This at best ambiguous use of river providence is transformed into something quite different, either by the Gawain-poet himself, or a very near contemporary, in the poem *Pearl*. It is interesting that Bertilak tells Gawain that he is as "a pearl than white pease is prized more highly" (95), a connection between the poems which is heightened by the tight economy of words in both. Like Gawain, the narrator of *Pearl* walks into the wilderness, but out of grief rather than in search of conflict. He comes by a river, where his "mirth makes mount: my mourning fails,/My care is quelled and cured my pain./Then down a stream that songly sails/I blissful turn with teeming brain" (11). Much like Aeneas, the narrator is soothed by the presence of this river. But then, as he walks along the riverbanks, a "marvel more did my mind amaze:/I saw beyond that border bright . . . A child abode there at its base/ . . . She shone in beauty upon the shore" (14). In the first person, this moment reads more like William Blake seeing angels in a tree than Aeneas encountering the Tiber's god, perhaps anticipating Romantic experience but also truly a moment Lenz would describe as medieval romance "otherness," where a surreal quality of the uncanny

separates the experience of the narrative from the reader's reality. This shining child, "in robes majestic," who "down to the water swiftly paced" is clearly a transcendent figure, most literally the spirit of the lost child but more generally a celestial vision, who in "pearls arrayed that maiden free/Beyond the stream came down that strand" (20). Much like Lady Philosophy, she consoles him on the problem of evil, urging him to "swiftly seek Him as your friend/Your prayer his pity may excite" (30). She invokes baptismal waters for several stanzas, discussing man's need for salvation (53-55), and when the narrator demands that she does not leave him, she denies that she can stay, but gives him instead "a sight thereof by favour rare" (81):

. . . A glimpse of that city, as forth I sped.
 Beyond the river below me spread
 Brighter than the sun with beams it shone
 . . . High God Himself sat on that throne,
 Whence forth a river ran with light
 Outshining both the sun and moon. (82-88)

This recalls verses in Revelation, such as, "And he showed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out from the throne of God and of the lamb" (22:1). But it is important that the *Pearl* poet has associated with the transcendental experience of God the beauty of rivers. Indeed, pained by the loss of that heavenly vision, the narrator considers drowning himself in the river to be with Pearl in heaven, but realizes the foolishness of such an act and instead exhorts the reader to seek after God's love (97-101). The relative absence of pagan imagery in the poem tones down

its relationship to classical river providence, yet its relationship to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggests an interesting relationship between the supernatural and rivers in the mind of the poet, if one writer composed both poems.

In three other Gawain romances, “The Avowyng of Arthur,” “The Awntyrs off Arthur,” and “The Marriage of Sir Gawain,” the tarn Wathelene takes on special significance. In “The Avowyng of Arthur,” Arthur, Gawain, Sir Kay and Baudewyn are each hunting after a boar, who escapes their pursuit. Arthur makes a vow to bring down the boar himself, Kay vows to fight to the death any knight he meets in the forest, and Baudewyn vows to show no jealousy and to be hospitable (97-144). Gawain promises to go to “Tarne Wathelan,/To wake hit all nyghte” (133-4). The logic of these promises is none of them terribly clear; indeed, Arthur’s command to make a vow the way he has implies that they are just making vows for the sake of avowing. The only knight who does not strictly keep his vow is Sir Kay. He meets the knight Sir Menealfe, but when Menealfe proves “the more mighty” (325), Kay pleads, “Sir, ate Tarne Wathelan/Bidus me Sir Gauan,/Is derwurth on dese” (338-9). Thomas Hahn, in his introduction to the tale, points out that “Sir Menealfe of the Mountayn” has “a name (with its *-elf* component) that perhaps connects him to the enchanted realms of fairy” (Hahn 114). Gawain defeats Menealfe twice, unseating him once to release Kay and then again to win Menealfe’s maiden (400-428). Both Kay and Gawain face this faintly supernatural knight in battle, but it is only Gawain, who has associated himself with the tarn, who is victorious. They then leave the lake and the forest, the world of the romance, returning to society with their vows in tact.

Baudewyn's following moral success not only parallels Gawain's; it is the romancer's portrayal of a man living out the values, the medieval "romantic" values, of vow-keeping presented in the poem's first half. This is not terribly different from Gawain's return to Arthur's court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for again it is a more realistic encounter of a social value which had been defended beside lake Tathelene.

It is interesting that the second battle concerns Menealfe's maiden, because the second half of the poem concerns testing Baudewyn's jealousy. Further, in "The Marriage of Gawain," it is nearing "the foresaid Tearne Wadling", where King Arthur encounters a lady who promises to give Arthur the answer to the Baron's demands, to "bring me word what thing it is/That a woman most desire" (l. 12-13). She will do so, however, only on the condition that she can marry Sir Gawain, to which Gawain assents for his king. Both the Baron and the lady are associated with the tarn, and the lady in particular appears to have been bewitched, for when Gawain tells her, "Thou shall have all thy will" (17), she tells him of a witch who forced her to appear "like a feeind of hell" (182). In both of these tales the value of oaths and fealty to the king are values which are associated with Gawain, and these events are closely connected to the setting of the tarn Wathelene. The fight with Menealfe and the challenge of the Baron perhaps represent pagan attacks on Christianity, but the events provide Gawain an opportunity to vindicate Arthurian values. Indeed, in the *Avowying* in particular, Gawain is actually associated with the tarn, suggesting a kinship rather than tension between the Arthurian hero and the lake. As Hahn postulates in the introduction to

Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, it is Gawain's job to conquer the otherness of womanhood in this romance, and through revelation, return it to the real world after having been questioned in the enclosed, enchanted space of the tarn.

In *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, on the other hand, the Wathelene takes on significance more akin to Virgilian river providence. When Gawain and Guinevere encounter the lake, there "come a lowe one the lough – in londe is not to layne – /In the lyknes of Lucyfere, laytheste in Helle,/And glides to Sir Gawayn the gates to gayne,/Yauland and yomerand, with many loude yelle" (83-86). The appearance of this ghost is hellish, yet she is actually a benevolent spirit, in spite of her gruesome look: "Bare was the body and blak to the bone,/Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde./Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman/But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde" (105-107). She reveals that she had once been a queen, and gives a promise rather grim: "With Lucyfer in a lake logh am I light./Thus am I lyke to Lucefere: takis witness by mee!/For al thi fresh foroure,/Muse on my mirror;/For, king and emperor,/Thus dight shul ye be" (164-169). Unlike Tiberinus, the ghost is not coming to soothe the worries of the knight or his lady, but to give them both a warning: they are going to die, and if they break their promises, they will be objects of torment much as she is (190). The ghost foretells the success and failure of Arthur's kingdom: "Yet shal the riche Romans with you be aurronen,/And with the Rounde Table the rentes be reved;/Then shall a Tyber untrue tymber you tene" (280-282). This direct reference to the Tiber is especially unsettling, since the ghost herself is a sort of Tiberinus figure. But she is a ghost, not a goddess, a more fitting

mouthpiece for the grim prophecy: “Gete the, Sir Gawayn:/ Turne the to Tuskayn./For ye shul lese Bretayn/With a knight keene/. . . /Gete the, Sir Gawayn,/In a slake thou shal be slayne,/Sich ferlyes shull falle” (283-299). She is not the comforting figure of Lay Prophecy, nor the celestial image of Pearl. Thomas Hahn provides an adroit reading of her role in the story:

She cautions Gawain and Guenevere, as representatives of the Round Table, that the conduct of knights and ladies must conform to Christian precept, and that the court must narrow the chasm between its excessive consumption and the desperate poverty that besets others in the community: material and spiritual concerns must coincide. Her own visitation typifies this link, in her ghostly intervention into the worldly life of the court, and, perhaps more strikingly, in her requesting Masses for her soul, making clear that those in the flesh may affect the fate of those in the spirit world. (Hahn 169-70)

This is a fascinating inversion of river providence. The ghost is bringing not encouragement but a reprimand, not a surprising shift given the Christian context, and she is herself asking for a sort of benevolence from her audience. It is not clearly a reconciliation between the pagan tradition of river providence and Christianity, because she needs salvation herself and is a demonic, tortured spirit of Hell. On the other hand, it is not exactly a rejection of river providence, because the dead queen is doing the work of God, delivering a prophecy and a warning, attempting to help the

knights of the Round Table. The lake ghost's role transcends her gruesome nature, avoiding the conflict of paganism with the Christian tradition. But if these romances have discovered how to circumvent the problem, they have not solved it.

The typical medieval response is, to use a cliché, to both eat and have their cake. River providence is subtly connected to pagan spirituality (through elves, Morgan le Fay, and magic), to Christian concepts of spiritual evil (ghosts, demons and witches). On the other hand, even if these instances of river providence are problematic, they are not straightforwardly rejected. Bertilak, as a pawn of Morgan's river providence, ends up befriending Gawain, and the tormented queen's spirit has good intentions. The genre of medieval romance especially allows revelation of truth to come through such problematic sources: Gawain does perceive his own flawed nature thanks to Bertilak; he does uphold his vow when he faces Menealfe at the tarn Wathelene; he does faithfully serve Arthur in marrying the bewitched woman. If river providence may not always sit in perfect reconciliation with Christianity in these medieval texts (with the possible exception of *Pearl*), the poets seem to at least concede that secular values can be vindicated, explored and defended in the tradition of river providence.

Again, as with the river providence of the chronicles, if the hero fails to discern the truth of his spiritual encounter at the riverside, this is not a result of failed river providence but, instead, a failure of the hero to engage it properly. Both of these facts are, as said before, Christian in belief and Virgilian in the literary tradition, for Virgil, like a medieval Christian, would consider a failure to benefit from river

providence as both a failure of personal piety and a failure of duty to empire, or, in other terms, to the society of the hero.

Chapter 3: River Providence in Chaucer and Malory

There are three basic elements to the river providence *topos* I have been discussing throughout this thesis. First is the hero's quest, which is either obstructed or facilitated by the river. Second is translation of empire, where the imperial force the hero represents is either affirmed, created or attacked by the river. Finally, river providence is an encounter with the "numinous," with the transcendent nature of providence itself. In Homer, Statius, and some of the Gawain romances, this numinous experience at the river is not always positive. Indeed, the tone of the encounter with transcendental reality at the riverside is almost invariably in step with the tone of the outcome of the hero's quest and the fate of the hero's empire. While Chaucer and Malory creatively utilize this pattern, they do so in very different ways.

Chaucer employs river providence in a very compact moment, its allusion taking up only a few lines. Criseyde swears by the Simois to be faithful, and Troilus is not convinced by this argument. Troilus approaches her with intentions to salvage their relationship; she thwarts his plans and only thinly disguises her desire for the relationship to end. Criseyde's will fails because of her own moral weakness, but that moral weakness is only worsened by the pagan system by means of which she attempts to, apparently, exert her will. Her promise is invested in the providence of a Trojan river, and the reader of the poem is intensely aware that destiny is not on Troy's side. Further, her promise invokes a god who never appears in the poem (much as it could be argued that no pagan god clearly acts throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*), so that the numinous aspect of river providence is hinted at but never

realized in the text. Chaucer's deepest value, I will argue, is "trouthe," and the pagan system Criseyde invokes cannot preserve trouthe. Only Christianity can do this, and so Criseyde's oath becomes Chaucer's indictment of river providence, and of the pagan system which vindicates it.

Malory, however, is more Virgilian, and in a related sense more medieval, in his use of river providence, whether intentionally or not. There are several interesting moments of river providence in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, but three are central to this study: When Galahad pulls the sword from the floating stone, when Arthur is brought the sword by the Lady of the Lake (through Merlin's intervention), and when Galahad encounters a sword in a ship which he refuses to touch. These correspond, respectively, to the quest, empire and transcendent scenes (though not exclusively so), through all of which Malory articulates his value of Christian chivalry, "virtuous love" (Malory 836). Other critics have argued that Malory permits two kinds of virtue, worldly and Christian, and I will argue that his treatment of river providence allows him to preserve both a love for chivalry (and by extension Arthur's empire, for which chivalry is a code of ethics) and a deep faith in Christianity (and by extension, the fate allotted by God's will). A tradition, even non-Christian in kind, can be for Malory a vehicle for learning Christian virtue.

1 – Chaucer's Indictment of River Providence

Nearing the end of Book 4, Criseyde swears by the Symois that she will not be untrue "To Troilus, myn owene herte fre" (Chaucer IV.1548-1554). In Boccaccio's

earlier version, the *Il Filostrato*, no such oath is made; her promise is simply “for on the tenth day I will make my return here without fail” (IV.147-154). Chaucer intensifies Criseyde’s oath with specific reference to the Symois, drawing on his sources of river god providence in a carefully integrated way, which serves to, among other things, enrich the somewhat unsettling ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which rejects the world the poem had so carefully illustrated:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites!
 Lo here, what alle hire goddess may availle!
 Lo here, these wrecched worlds appetites!
 Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille
 Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rasaille!
 Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
 In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche. (Chaucer 5.1849-55)

His rejection of all things pagan is not necessarily a rejection of the *people* of the pagan system; to the contrary, his Christian compassion for their suffering leads Chaucer to indict Greco-Roman religion. Specifically, he rejects the Virgilian myth of river providence as failing the hero on his quest, the survival of empire, and the revelations of God.

In “Chaucer as a Literary Critic,” Whitney Wells writes that “Chaucer gives specific criticism, not only of his own work, but of that of his contemporaries” (Wells 255). In agreement with this assessment, Katherine Lever writes in “Classic Scholars

and Anglo-Classic Poets,” that Chaucer is “testing the truths of the classics,” and ultimately repudiating them (218). This premise of repudiation is on the one hand strengthened by Chaucer’s ending of the *Troilus*, but is also undercut by her admission that Chaucer regarded “the classical world as a mine providing [a] language of value” (216). On the other hand, Phillipa Hardman argues in “Chaucer’s Muses and His ‘Art Poetical’” that Chaucer’s use of classic figures “resists reductive translation” as positive or negative (Hardman 494), and John M. Hill similarly holds in “The Countervailing Aesthetic of Joy in *Troilus and Criseyde*” that Chaucer relies heavily on a Boethian appropriation of pagan ideas (280-3). Chaucer’s position towards the classics can be understood through Hill’s discussion of aesthetics, when he asserts that never “in Chaucer’s Neoplatonic universe do we see Love’s truth whole” (287). He argues that instead Chaucer hints towards that holistic truth only by providing imperfect, sometimes deeply flawed images of Boethian “fullness and beauty.” This “negative” aesthetic is made possible by Chaucer’s use of pagan materials, because by creating a world which does not have Christianity in his poetry, he is more fully able to emphasize the desperate human need for divine benevolence. Chaucer does not simply repudiate the classical writers; he employs their aesthetic beauty to demonstrate that the failings of his characters stem in many ways from the system they inhabit.

In “The Christian Classicist’s Dilemma,” Katherine Lever points out that Chaucer “recognized the conflict between the beauty and brilliance of the classics and their paganism” (356). She surmises that while “Chaucer saw the beauty of the

Aeneid; he believed it false,” and that the tradition of classical literature was, in terms of truth, inferior “by reason of their paganism” (360). Considering the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, this premise is hard to reject out of hand; yet Lever gently undercuts her reading of Chaucer implicitly when she admits that he expresses this rejection “only after having written one of the greatest English poems in classical form about pagan rites and worldly appetites” (361). To what extent the use of Virgil, and by extent his classical descendents, is deemed acceptable by Chaucer is a question raised in the moment of Criseyde’s oath. Returning to John Hill’s essay, “The Countervailing Aesthetic of Joy,” he argues that since the Boethian good cannot be fully realized in the world for Chaucer, the joy of experiencing that good can only be “merely an approximation of joy” (296). If we extend this Boethian agenda of reconciliation to Chaucer’s incorporation of the Virgilian standards of the epic hero, we can now better understand Josephine Bloomfield’s assertion that “Chaucer, unlike Virgil, does not align himself with his hero’s behavior” (304). By creating a “countervailing aesthetic” of the Virgilian hero, we can understand Troilus as necessarily failing in his encounter with the pseudo-river goddess, even as Criseyde necessarily fails in that role.

Chaucer weaves the *Aeneid*, and the background for Criseyde’s oath, into the subtext in the last six lines of the poem Troilus recites, which reads: “Thus possessed to and fro,/al sterelees withinne a boot am I/amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two/that in contrarie stonden evere mo. /Allas, what is this wondre maladie?/For hote of cold, for cold of hote, I dye” (1.415-420). This evokes the image of Aeneas at the opening

of the *Aeneid*, despairing over the storm assailing his ship: As “the hurricane is howling from the north” and “it hammers full against his sails,” Aeneas laments that he could not have died honorably on the field along with fellow warriors such as Sarpedon (Virgil 1.131-146). Like Aeneas, we can see Troilus here failing the model of the Virgilian hero, for his reason has succumbed to sorrow. Though this adversity is temporarily quelled (Criseyde tolerates Troilus’s affections throughout Book III), it returns with even more force when he hears news that she is to be given to Calchas and the Greeks. Hiding in his room, he takes on the appearance of a “ded ymage, pale and wan;/And in his brest the heped wo bygan/Out breste, and he to werken in this wise/In his woodnesse, as I shal yow devyse” (Chaucer IV.235-7). He asks himself, “What shal I don? . . . O wery goost, that errest to and fro,/Why nyltow fleen out of the wofulleste/Body that evere myghte on grounde go?” (IV.295-304). Further enhancing this sense of his mind wandering “to and fro,” he then goes back and forth with Pandarus’s advice, considering it as an option, and rejecting it at least until he can talk to Criseyde. This state of wavering confusion that he is in as he comes to Criseyde resembles the depression of Aeneas as he goes to wage war with the Italians: “and when the Trojan hero has seen this,/he wavers on a giant tide of troubles; his racing mind is split; it shifts here, there, and rushes on to many different plans,/turning to everything” (Virgil 8.25-30). Aeneas lies down on the banks of the Tiber and tries to sleep but cannot; then Father Tiberinus rises out of the waters to give him solace. But for Troilus, his river god is no Tiberinus; Criseyde fills that role, and cannot give him the solace he seeks. As in Lucan, Chaucer’s hero has no

reliable river god.

If Chaucer's hero has no river god, the empire of Troy also has none. Somewhat ironically, the issue of Troy comes "to destruccion" is called by the narrator "a long digression/Fro my matere" (1.141-147). By swearing on "thow, Symois, that as an arwe clere/Thorough Troie rennest downward to the se," Criseyde ties herself to the sort of river providence found in Virgil's Tiberinus. It also recalls Neptune's promise to Venus, who swears to help Aeneas by the Skamandros and the Simois (6.122-24). Tiberinus tells Aeneas that "I myself/shall guide your galleys straight upstream along the banks, so that your oars may overcome the countercurrent" (Virgil VIII.72-5). He gives him a sign of his trustworthiness: "you shall discover/a huge white sow stretched out upon the ground/along the banks beneath the branching ilex" (8.53-5), and indeed that omen is fulfilled, and "the Tiber soothed his swollen waters" (8.95-111). In the context of the whole *Aeneid*, this promise concerns a historical fact (the founding of Rome), and so the grand benevolence of Tiberinus has the weight of a reality that assures both Aeneas and the reader. Whether she means to keep her oath or not, she fails the Virgilian model. When Criseyde swears that she will not be unfaithful unless the Symois runs backwards, the effect is otherwise: the reader knows that Troy is going to fall, that with Tisiphone at the head of the "muses" of *Troilus and Criseyde* this optimistic promise, whether sincere or not, will not be realized, because river providence which cannot save an empire has no chance of preserving an oath. Even Troilus in his resistance to her arguments betrays a lack of trust in her faithfulness, for he begs,

“But for the love of God, if it be may,/So late us stelen priveliche away” (Chaucer 4.1600-1). With characteristic wordplay, Chaucer further weaves the river god discourse into Criseyde’s empty assertions that “my wending out of Troie/Another day shal torne us alle to joie,” further conflating her with the Symois that through “Troie rennest downward to the se” (IV.1630-1). With a mistrust that is not in Aeneas, Troilus “rewfullich his lady gan byholde,/As he that felte dethes cares colde,/ . . . /Withouten more out of the chaumbre he wente” (IV.1691-1701). Just as Criseyde can give no assurance to the success of Troilus’s plans, will not even cooperate with them, the Simois cannot prevent the fall of Troy.

With Virgil as the subtext, we are left with a general sympathy for Troilus and, at best, a disappointment in the figure of Criseyde. However, although this impresses a moral sentence not unlike found in the *Aeneid*, the intertext of Criseyde’s oath seems to suggest a failing that goes beyond the character of Troilus. Without necessarily vilifying her for her broken oath (as there are practical reasons for her choices), clearly Criseyde does break her promise, and so is an expression of the failure of the Tiberinus archetype. Even though the events following the Tiberinus episode do not cleanly match up with the events of the rest of the epic, there is a general reliability to the river god’s claims, unlike Criseyde’s. In “The Character of Criseyde,” Albert S. Cook discusses many of the attitudes towards Criseyde, some of which are sympathetic, others pitying, and others indicting for her weakness, fear, or faithlessness (Cook 531-3). Decades after him, Fradenburg would defend Criseyde as a victim of a chauvinistic discourse where “there is no feminine subject-position

within chivalric ideality from which complaint can be spoken, from which losses can be articulated” (605). In general, I acquiesce with her point that Criseyde is not readily incriminated because her apparent autonomy is an illusion of medieval, gendered discourse on loss. Even so, this does not fully account for Criseyde personally, or for the serious nature of oaths in Chaucer’s day.

In “Chaucer’s Victimized Women,” Richard Ferthe Green discusses at length the serious nature of oaths between men in Chaucer’s culture, and argues that Chaucer used characters such as Dido to defend “his far deeper respect for the fundamental quality of “trouth” in sexual matters” (Green 340). Green shows that Chaucer’s concern lays in the idea that betrayal of an oath between a man and a woman is not taken as seriously as that between two men, for Chaucer recognizes a double standard and “hypocritical assumption that lovers’ vows alone need not conform to the universal convention of the inviolability of oaths” (350-1). By these Chaucerian standards we could easily read Criseyde’s oath as bringing us to a statement made by Gerald Morgan in “The Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*”: that “the falseness of Criseyde is intolerable by human standards as well as divine” (260). But Morgan qualifies this by mentioning that flawed human love must be, for Chaucer, “united to its divine source,” and that “Chaucer sees in the falseness of Criseyde a deeper falseness in the experience of the world, and therefore sets beside the falseness of woman the falseness of man” (266). Josephine Bloomfield’s defense of Criseyde goes beyond even this, or, for that matter, Fradenburg’s, for it is the only reading of those mentioned which directly exculpates *Criseyde*: “Criseyde, on the

other hand, whose name will come to symbolize treachery and inconstancy rather than heroism, never planned to betray her country or her family as Troilus did" (297). Our assessment of Criseyde, therefore, needs to reconcile Chaucer's commitment to "trouthe" (which Criseyde clearly breaks), and the sympathy for her the text seems to make possible. By reading Criseyde as an amalgamation of the river god iterations of Tiberinus, Skamandros, Ismenos and Cornelia, our moral assessment of her is made possible.

The *Thebaid's* influence on Chaucer is especially interesting. In "Chaucer and the 'Thebaid' Scholia," Paul M. Clogan writes that the "various touches of the *Thebaid* in Chaucer's poetry show an intimate acquaintance, familiarity, and fondness" (615). While Chaucer makes allusions to all of the major epic writers he names at the end of the poem in one way or another, the actual story of Statius's *Thebaid* is the only one whose events are substantially, and directly, recounted; and these recounting are invariably connected to Criseeyde. When we first meet her, she is reading from "This romance . . . of Thebes," and stops at the moment where Amphiaraus, a prophet who was spared death at the hands of men, though he could not escape the fate of his death (Chaucer II.100-105). When placed beside Chaucer's invocation of Tisiphone at the start of the poem, the wicked fury who also torments characters in the *Thebaid*, this allusion to fate is especially unsettling for Chaucer's readers. Later on, when Cassandra prepares to tell Troilus of Criseyde's infidelity, she prepares him by telling him about Tydeus, his role as one of the seven against Thebes and his relationship to Diomedes, as his father. With this in mind, I will

argue that Statius's epic, which implicitly also recalls Homer's, provides a subtext which helps us to understand Chaucer's use of the river god theme, specifically with reference to Criseyde's character.

This irreverence for the river god's authority is also present in Criseyde who, like Hippomedon resisting the authority of Crenaeus and Achilles defying the will of Skamandro, resists Troilus's pleas and uses the authority of the Symois to cement her falsehood. Criseyde's irreverent use of river god authority is similar to Hippomedon's, who resists both the authority of Creneaus and Ismenos. Criseyde rejects the sacred nature of oaths, of her relationship with Troilus, and the providence of the river Simois. On the other hand, Criseyde's appeal to divine authority also conflates her with the river gods Hippomedon and Aheilles attack. She begins her oath-making with "every god celestial," and "on ech goddesse," moving from the top of the pantheon down to "every nympe and deite infernal,/On satiry and fawny more and lesse,/That halve goddess ben of wilderness" (Chaucer IV.1541-45). In Statius specifically, it is his slaying of the demigod Crenaeus, a member of the "satiry and fawny more and lesse," which causes his mother to urge Ismenos against Hippomedon (Statius 9.381-398), a destructive intention towards the hero which, in Chaucer, becomes the destructive doom Criseyde imposes, though unwittingly, upon Troilus. In addition to her oath on the Symois, Criseyde asks that the river's flow be interrupted and even reversed; Ismenos complains that "the dead/constrict me so, I cannot reach the sea" (Statius 9.431-32). With Ismenos and Hippomedon as templates for character construction, it is then no surprise that the character of Criseyde have

also been hard to assess, since she is drawn up from such figures of ambiguity.

Criseyde's ability to employ river god providence as rhetoric recalls Achelous' attempts to use story in a similarly manipulative way. Although the Simois is false in its providence, however, it is less endearing than Achelous' providence, and less honest than the despair of Cornelia. Her moral failure under the empty authority of the Simois destroys her ability to enjoy the medieval romance's river god providence, for she cannot reach the transcendence these scenes afford. However, the reverse is equally true: her ability to make an oath of any substance is undermined at the outset by the very falsehood of river providence, a falsehood deeply resonant with Lucan. Breaking her oath, or making it with false intentions, does not make Criseyde admirable, but like Hippomedon she is wise enough to recognize river god benevolence as a farce suggests that she, like Chaucer, is aware of her world's shortcomings. It is ambiguous that she uses this knowledge to deceive Troilus, yet reveals a disconnect in her from the pagan system which Chaucer condemns as well. With Hippomedon and Imsenos informing Criseyde's oath in this way, I do not think ambiguity is escapable with her: the best we can have is a grim admiration for how discerningly she utilizes pagan discourse. Undoubtedly, however, in the tradition of Fradenburg, questioning the morality of Criseyde (and Troilus) leads us to question the morality of the world presented in *Troilus*.

While Fradenburg's use of feminist and psychoanalytical discourse to indict the pagan system of *Troilus and Criseyde* is adroitly executed, she does not do so by employing the explicit framework of the poem. The literary framework of the poem

is not feminist (perhaps an anachronism), but in part is clearly classical, and so it is easier to assume that the moral framework *Troilus and Criseyde* operates within the epic tradition Chaucer himself names. Unlike Virgil and Statius, but like Chaucer, Lucan creates a river god encounter, where no river god is present in the *Pharsalia*, between Pompey and Cordelia. By analyzing this passage with Bloomberg's discussion of predestination, I will show that while Troilus is a failed Aeneas and Criseyde a disappointing Tiberinus, their shortcomings are the product of a world that cannot support such Virgilian aspirations.

In "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*," Morton W.

Bloomfield discusses how Chaucer writes from within a historical framework in order to create a sense of predestination. According to Bloomfield, Chaucer "does not look upon his characters as his creations. His assumed role is primarily descriptive and expository" (465). This does not mean that Chaucer is happy with the destiny of the characters; to the contrary, "he strains against the snare of true events in which he is caught . . . especially where the betrayal of Criseyde is involved, to fight against the truth of the events he is "recording"" (468). This hope for the impossible, that is, Chaucer's hope that the story will not follow history despite the fact that he "must" follow the narrative accurately, is echoed in Criseyde's oath of the impossible, that the Symois would run backwards if she should be proved false. She does prove false and the Symois does not run backwards. As Tatlock says in "Troilus Bound," in "the *Troilus* what *happens* is often at a far remove from what is *said*: the best example is the action of Book III" (458). In other words, bondage to the realities of fate create a

gap between the utterances of the characters and what will really happen, because we (and sometimes Troilus) are aware of the chains which prevent the characters from transcending their situations; thus any utterances which do not match up with fate are rendered false. Whether it is fate or fortune in control hardly matters; both move, it seems, indifferently to the hopes and aspirations of human characters. In “*Sikernessse and Fere in Troilus and Criseyde*,” Timothy O’Brien demonstrates how deeply this theme is woven into the poem: “verbal play, moreover, accumulates to form a deterministic undercurrent as well as a persistent sense of sympathetic knowing in the reader of the poem” (O’Brien 276).

Similarly, although all of the elements of the river-god scenes in the epic are present when Criseyde makes her oath, both directly in the situation and in the intertextual context of the *Thebaid* and *Aeneid*, there is, in fact, *no actual river-god*. Indeed, although Tisiphone, Clio and others are invoked by the narrator and by the characters, the only god who actually appears or acts in the action of the poem is the love god, who strikes Troilus with Criseyde’s “mevyng and hire cheere” (Chaucer I.289). But even the narrator supplies the possibility of explaining away the supernatural presence of this “god”: “For may no man fardon the lawe of kynde,” that is to say, he could very well have fallen in love without any supernatural being’s intervention. It is not enough to say that there is no definite divine presence in the text, however; more importantly, Criseyde is real, and herself is assuming the river-god role, one which assures the hero of his fate and fortune: “Thus maketh vertu of necessite/By pacience, and think that lord is he/Of fortune ay that naught wole of her

wrecche” (Chaucer IV.1586-9). Even as Criseyde’s invocation of fate attempts to provide assurance for Troilus, it instead leads to his further despair and a dark irony for an audience who knows the doom facing both Troilus and Troy.

Like Pompey, Troilus has approached a river goddess who is not a river goddess, and is equally bound to his fate. Unlike Criseyde, Cornelia is forthright in her inability to change Pompey’s future. But there is a similar helplessness in both characters; Cornelia cannot change the outcome of the Roman civil war anymore than Criseyde can change Troy’s decision to send her to Calchas or Troy’s doom in their war with the Greeks. The failing of Troilus to master his passions and the failing of Criseyde to keep her “trouthe” are insignificant shortcomings before the absence of a Father Symois to guarantee a better future. After all, in a world where human actions fail to overcome fate or fortune, a meager oath of a desperate woman whose mortality is carefully underscored can hardly be expected to have much effect. By writing Lucan’s resignation to nihilism into his river god archetype, Chaucer makes the pagan system of morality in *Troilus* incapable of sustaining a Virgilian image of river god providence.

Yet, clearly Chaucer is no nihilist. If we accept Morton Bloomfield’s premise that Chaucer strains against the nihilistic fates of his characters, it is because he believes in something grander; that is to say, “that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode” (Chaucer V.1860). The startling ending which so many modern readers have felt compelled to qualify is really not so surprising: we have been shown, from top to bottom, a system which does not work. Its characters fail to be moral, and its laws,

human and divine, fail to satisfy our search for truth. The study of classics is valuable because it helps us to learn how to write good poetry and to open our eyes to human failure, in a pagan system all the better because it shows us the height of human wisdom: the ambiguous laugh of Troilus's ghost that no number of critics can fully assess.

We have shown sufficiently that Criseyde is an amalgamation of the river god tradition. Like Tiberinus, she makes promises to Chaucer's hero concerning their fate. As with Ismenos and Hippomedon, her actions as part of this tradition are not praiseworthy, but also are not easily condemnable. In the same fashion as Lucan's Cornelia, Criseyde is ultimately helpless to work herself out of her difficult situation in a way which will preserve her honor and Troilus's life in the face of forces larger than the individual human. Criseyde is a sort of patchwork of the history of river god providence, and Criseyde's entire speech to Troilus convincing him to not abduct her is filled with a combination of rhetorical discourse not entirely unlike that employed by Achelous to win over his listeners. Just as her oath on the Symois invokes the epic tradition, she implies a classical attitude towards the powers of Fate and Fortune:

“And this may lengthe of yeres naught fordo/
Ne remuable Fortune deface. But
Juppiter, that of his might may do,
The sorwful to be glad, so yeve us grace”

(Chaucer IV.1681-4). Even in her exhortations to trust in Providence, she uses the name of Jupiter, a part of the same failed “payens corsed olde rites” and “alle hire goddess” of which the river god tradition is likewise apart (V.1849-50). She cannot succeed as an image of providence because her source of authority is from the wrong

place, the correct source being “that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode” (Chaucer 5.1860).

The fragmentation created in Criseyde by intertextual relationship to the classical river gods does not build river god providence— instead, she is able to give Troilus none of the Virgilian satisfaction found in the *Aeneid*'s river god providence, or any of the medieval uses of the river providence tradition. For Chaucer, it is not enough to merely create persons approximately like the savior by calling on classical traditions as is posited in figures like Merlin or Pearl; upon studying river god providence and traditions like it closely, Chaucer's Christianity cannot settle with an easy reconciliation between his religion and paganism, and so, despite all of our sympathies for Criseyde, we cannot explain away her broken oath. Like the chronicles and romances, Chaucer lets us learn from the Greco-Roman tradition, but he emphasizes explicitly what they do not: that Jesus Christ, and not a river god or any river god archetype, is what can free us from our human failings. Criseyde is not simply an imperfect metaphor for Christ, but an alternative Chaucer rejects.

2 – Malory's Boethian River Providence

Malory does not weave explicit classical themes throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur* the way Chaucer does throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*. Moreover, any literary allusions in Malory are often suppressed by his use of chronicle-styled narration, seeming to report events only as they occurred. In the chapter “How true love is likened to summer,” however, is a worldview not unlike that set forth in the

romances. The narrator laments that “For in many persons there is no stability,” and “that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded and hasty heat, soon it cooleth” (Malory 836). Like Boethius, Malory notes the fickle nature of the world and men, especially lovers, of whom Malory says they “love nowadays unto summer and winter; for like as the one is hot and other other cold, so fareth love nowadays” (837). But man whose heart is “first unto God, and next unto the joy of them that he promised his faith unto,” or faith to one’s lover, Malory calls “virtuous love” (836). This fusion of principle with emotion is not as grand or subtly argued as in Boethius, for example, but it is different more in degree, rather than type, of the principled, Providential love which is seen in *The Consolation*, and is clearly similar to the implicit search for virtue of medieval romance. Aware of it or not, Malory was guided not by a Chaucerian, dual worldview which carefully distinguishes pagan and Christian traditions, but instead, as he drew on French romance, allowed Christian and pagan traditions to mingle much in the fashion they were in his source material. More importantly, because it is in the style of the chronicle, the supernatural in *Le Morte D’Arthur* is as much a part of narrative fact as knights and horses.

Malory’s narrative style, contrary to Chaucer’s, is to generally write himself out, making authorial intrusions all the more intriguing. Dhira Mahoney writes aptly of Malory in “Narrative Treatment of Name in Malory’s Morte D’ Arthur” that he “is a chronicler, though, not a historian, in either the medieval or modern sense. . . The modern historian sees facts in their own light, but his work demands emotional detachment from his material, and Malory is anything but detached from his” (647).

It is Malory's style as a supposed chronicler of history which infuses his narrative creating, as P.J.C. Field points out, "moments of some moral as well as emotional significance" with "startling force" (Field 485). A. Kent Heatt rightfully positions Malory in a tradition of "political and cultural imperialism," but the simultaneous moral triumph and tragic downfall of Galahad prevents Malory from simply being another voice of frustration over translation of empire, as Geoffrey and Layamon were. More like the romancer than the chronicler in focus if not in style, Malory is envisioned by R.T. Davies to be more concerned with the reconciliation of virtues of piety and love than translation of empire, as he argues in "Malory's 'Vertuous Love'": "In his own unsystematic way, impulsive and not reasoning, he elaborates his very simple reconciliation between romantic love and Christianity" (461). For Davies, this chronicler's poise creates a "candor" and "unaffected reverence," "an honest-to-goodness plainness that convinces the reader" (468). It would be easy to get into a debate over just how original Malory was or was not; that debate is not our focus, but we must allow for some autonomy on the part of Thomas Malory, whose story is, according to P.J.C. Field, "is very much the story of his source at an increased tempo" (Field 477), and according to Peter R. Schroeder capable of creating his characters "plausible, individual, and inconsistent in the way 'real' people are" (375). Furthermore, in favor of Malory's creativity the originality of the tale of Sir Urry as discovered by Stephen Atkinson in "Malory's 'Healing of Sir Urry,'" and places where Donaldson has shown Malory to alter his sources in the essay "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*." Even if we see Malory as merely a compiler of

tales (a position I think too reductive to be tenable), his very choice to translate the stories he did and to make what emendations or alterations he did still suggest something about Malory's values as someone who was once a living human being and not only a dead author, at the risk of believing, with Schroeder, "that literature has something to do with human beings" (376). Malory's belief is simply that ideas from the past, whether Christian or not, are valuable as more than mere negative exemplum of what God alone can give us.

Malory engages the questing hero's encounter with river providence through Galahad, where the knight encounters the sword floating in the river. There are two aspects of Malory's worldview which have to be underscored to assess the meaning of this scene. First, we must recognize that rather than splitting the world into Christian and pagan, Malory instead emphasizes virtuous versus vicious, as R.T. Davies argues convincingly in "Launcelot and the Noble Way of the World":

Launcelot lived as nobly as can a man who frankly accepts and does not renounce his disposition to sin. . . Far on one side of him is Mark, a sinful man of the world, but not a *trew lover* and not a good knight. Far on the other is Galahad, who is not a sinful man at all, but a pure knight of the Grail. (Davies 357).

Malory makes a hero out of Launcelot by emphasizing his failure, making him a grand figure in a way that Chaucer does not do with Troilus in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Galahad is more Chaucer's knight than Malory's, and it is no coincidence that the

action of *Le Morte D'Arthur* ends with Sir Ector seeking Sir Lancelot (936), for that is where Malory's sympathies most strongly lie. There comes in the river scene "riding down the river a lady on a white palfrey toward them," who greets Launcelot, and admonishes him, "for ye were this day the best knight of the world, but who should say now, he should be a liar, for there is now one better than ye" (662). It is interesting that this damosel, a sort of river goddess, says this "all with weeping," for it was Lancelot, not Galahad, whom she wanted to draw the sword. Like Lucan's Cornelia, her autonomy is limited, but unlike Cornelia the Damosel has, or is associated with, effective providence. As a Christian, Malory knows he cannot allow Lancelot to be the hero of the Grail, so instead Malory gives that to Lancelot's son, Galahad. The damosel's disappointment over Lancelot's refusing of the sword suggests that Lancelot du Lake could very well have become the transcendent hero of *Le Morte D'Arthur*; yet Lancelot knew better than to try: "I know well I was never the best. Yes, said the damosel, that were ye, and are yet, of any sinful man of the world" (662). This suggestion of a duality of virtues, worldly virtues versus spiritual, would be picked up upon and greatly enlarged by Edmond Spenser, as we will discuss in the conclusion.

A less esoteric duality exists in Malory, one we have discussed all along: the double sided nature of river providence, a dynamic which plays out in the narrative's treatment of translation of empire. Although Galahad is the godliest knight of the Round Table and receives the highest favor of river providence, both good and evil river providence exist in the world of *Le Morte D'Arthur*. The primary personas of

river god providence are Merlin and Nimue; the primary persona of river god malevolence is Morgan. Merlin is tied, as with the Merlin of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, to both translation of empire and to the theological or spiritual concerns of the narrative. It is Merlin who brings Arthur to the Lady of the Lake to retrieve Excalibur (44), and who sends Balin's sword downriver on a "marble stone standing upright as a great mill stone," so that "Launcelot or else Galahad his son" will wield the blade (77). Merlin's supernatural nature is not always trusted, such as one knight who says warily, "Beware . . . of Merlin, for he knoweth all things by the devil's craft" (99). Merlin, however, as advisor to King Arthur and friend of the Round Table, is not a villain. Various "ladies" of the Lake also assist or advise knights throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur*, although the only one who is explicitly named is Nimue, who helps Arthur escape death at the hands of Accolon (117), and helps Sir Pelleas after he is betrayed by Gawain and Ettard (138-140). Another "Damosel of the Lake" warns Arthur "put not on you this mantle till ye have seen more," saving the king's life, for the mantle is indeed enchanted to burn and kill whoever wears it (126-127). Nimue, however, is not a simplistic character. After showing Pelleas that his wife is cheating with Gawain, she proceeds to become the knight's lover, suggesting hidden motives in her apparently good deed. One damosel, who may be Nimue or another lady of the lake, "by her subtle workings she made Merlin to go under that stone . . . but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin" (103). Of course, her motivation for this treachery was that "she was afeard of him because he was a

devil's son," which contradicts the fact that she travels with him extensively beforehand (102-3). On the other hand, there is Morgan le Fay, a "great clerk of necromancy" (4) who arranges for her minion to bring Excalibur to Accolon "by a deep well-side," to fight Arthur "without any Mercy" (113). Angry and upset over the preceding death of Accolon at Arthur's hands, after the lady of the Lake helped Arthur to overcome him, Morgan steals Arthur's enchanted scabbard and throws it into "the deepest of the water so it sank, for it was heavy of gold and precious stones" (124). Even though Morgan is generally the antagonist of Arthur's court, she saves a knight who is to be drowned, who tells her, "Nay truly, madam, he saith not right on me . . . I am of the court of King Arthur, and my name is Manassen, cousin unto Accolon of Gaul" (125). Morgan delivers him from the other knight, and tells him, "Tell him [Arthur] that I rescued thee, not for the love of him but for the love of Accolon." That Morgan is loyal to Manessen, a knight of the Round Table, because of his kinship with Accolon suggests a loyalty and benevolence which complicates her usually vilified character. Malory is willing to show the honor of even enemies of Arthur's court, and also the vices of knights he favors. However, in Malory the translation of empire is subordinated to his concern over the preservation of chivalrous virtue.

Theology is similarly utilized to promote his views of honor; it is true that Malory provides an undeniably Christian context, but the champion of Christianity, Galahad, is not the hero of *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Lancelot, whose moral failings in a great part causes the tragedy of the narrative, is Malory's champion of virtuous love.

The narrator tells us that “Merlin made the Round Table in tokening of roundness of the world, for by the Round Table is the world signified by right, for all the world, Christian and heathen, repair unto the Round Table,” being associated with this fellowship makes knights “more blessed . . . than if they had gotten half the world” (691). Merlin tells the knights that “by them which should be fellows of the Round Table the truth of the Sangreal should be well known” (692). The virtue of all knights, whether Christian or pagan, is fit for celebration at the Round Table, and all there can benefit from the revelation of the Holy Grail. This is a somewhat unusual statement, since the Sangreal is specifically a Christian talisman, and only Galahad is successful in the quest for it. Galahad, indeed, is so holy that he is taken straight to heaven: “And therewith he kneeled down to-fore the table and made his prayers, and then suddenly his soul departed to Jesu Christ” (782). Almost a medieval, knightly version of Evangeline St. Claire from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it is as though Galahad is simply too righteous for this world. Gawain and Arthur are both taken by ladies of the lake to their place in the afterlife, but only after their death; Guenevere and Lancelot end their days in the monastic life. The narrative progresses from worldly virtue to spiritual, suggesting that Malory does begrudgingly admit that chivalry alone will not bring one salvation.

Malory’s river providence, however, provides a window for non-Christian traditions to be a vehicle for Christian truth. As Arthur’s knights come to the river, “they found there a stone fleeting, as it were, of red marble, and therein stuck a fair rich sword, and in the pommel thereof were precious stones wrought with subtle

letters of gold,” and the sword reads, “Never shall man take me hence, but . . . he shall be the best knight of the world” (658). When Galahad moves to take the sword, he “lightly drew it out of the stone,” proving his right to wield it (661). The voice of the river’s transcendent reality, the damosel, may lament Lancelot’s failure, but she does not reprove Galahad, and the sword had written on it that the knight who held it would be “the best knight of the world,” not of heaven. Galahad may end his time on earth by rapture, but not by relinquishing his chivalry or his knighthood, which are tied inextricably in this tale to Arthur’s epic. It is further hinted at by Malory that Christian excellence through chivalry has not seen its highest potential in Galahad, even if Galahad is the finest instance of a Christian knight in *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Sir Percivale shows him a ship which holds a “sword” which only one man may hold, to which Galahad responds, “By my faith . . . I would draw this sword out of the sheath, but the offending is so great that I shall not set my hand thereto” (748). Galahad’s quest for the Holy Grail was vindicated by the favor of river providence, but the one who would take this sword, which is in a ship rather than a stone and is out at sea rather than upon a river, foretells a destiny even grander than Galahad’s. In one of the very rare, but very pleasing, flashbacks of the narrative, King Solomon is told of the sword that its wielder will be “a man which shall be a maid, and the last of your blood, and he shall be as good a knight as Duke Josua, thy brother-in-law” (753). This is a hint that the sword at sea, sited in universal rather than a particular, is meant for Jesus, rather than any mortal knight. Galahad’s story is the clearest picture of Christian chivalry in Malory, but the narrator is wise enough to only gesture towards

Galahad's superior, the numinous reality of "virtuous love" himself. Both the Christian and Christ are associated with river providence in Malory, a reconciliation of Christian narrative with pagan traditions that ends, like all great stories, with a tragedy that only glimpses at ultimate triumph:

. . . Galahad went to Percivale and kissed him, and commended him to God . . . and said: Fair lord, salute me to my lord, Sir Launcelot, my father, and . . . bid him remember of this unstable world . . . Also the two fellows saw come from heaven an hand, but they saw not the body [of Galahad]. And then it came right to the vessel, and took it and the spear, and so bare it up to heaven. Sithen was there never man so hardy to say that he had seen the Sangreal. (782)

Conclusion

Having found no critical work which looks at the larger significance of river providence, I have argued that classical literature utilized river god providence to explore the question of autonomy. Further, I have argued that common to all instances of river providence is its role in defining the hero, in obstructing or defending an empire (whether in the process of translation or under attack), and that river providence succeeds or fails depending upon the favor or disfavor of universal providence. In Geoffrey Chaucer and Malory, I have posited that river providence becomes a place where the question can be asked, how do these writers, as Christians, approach the issue of pagan material? For Chaucer I have argued that river providence is rejected as a failure, a powerful statement when set against the esteemed images of Tiberinus as presented by Virgil. For Malory I have argued an opposing position, that the pagan nature of river providence does not prevent it from serving as a vehicle by which Christian virtue can be learned and appreciated. The authority of the Simois backs the oath of Criseyde; the authority of the sword floating on the stone makes Galahad the chosen knight of the grail quest. Criseyde's oath is broken; the knight chosen was not the Damosel's first choice. Why do both writers invoke river providence at such key moments in their text, and render them so ambiguous? Because they are working from a tradition which was ambiguous even in its classical setting, and which can only become more so in the context of Christianity.

In classical epic, I have argued that river god providence is a device used to

explore the tension between localized authority and universal destiny, the impact of Fate on an individual's will and, in connection, on an empire's ability to survive or pass on. The river god in ancient epic is a deified image of the hero, a parallel of the hero's frustration to achieve the ends of his will and the will of his country. Virgil answers this rather positively, positioning Tiberinus favorably with Aeneas and Fate, while Lucan, Statius and Homer provide a far darker picture, suggesting that the providence of a river god is contingent upon the hostility or benevolence of greater powers. River god providence, therefore, is rather tenuous, frustrating and potentially tragic (Lucan and Statius).

Medieval appropriation of this tradition is, I have shown, largely Virgilian in tone, if not without qualification. Medieval chroniclers like Geoffrey and Layamon employ the tradition of river providence to infuse history with a Virgilian conception of translation of empire, but departing from Virgil they impute the failure of British translation of empire to disfavor due to the moral failings of the British, without questioning the benevolence of their Christian god. Medieval romances, on the other hand, employ a Virgilian moral agenda, where the hero's encounter with river providence results in a vindication of social values. In other words, the river providence story of medieval literature is Virgilian, rather than Homeric; if ancient epic doubted the possibility of real river providence, medieval chronicles and romances accept it with little direct argument. Still, the pagan nature of the tradition provides a subtext of unease (demonstrated, if by nothing else, by the general absence of reference to actual river gods, relegating them to other sorts of beings), which

would then be explicitly handled by Chaucer and Malory.

Chaucer, working in a tradition which mostly accepts the river providence narrative, makes this Christian unease more explicit in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Reducing river god providence to mere pagan rhetoric, he indicates that the tradition is just another worldly distraction, ineffectual at best and even dangerously misleading. The Christian writer can use pagan ideas only as an admonishment to show the need for an out from human made ideology. Any attempt to exert will, necessary to the act of making a promise, needs cooperation in the world around you, but the illusory nature of river providence cannot provide such reliability. Malory takes a kinder approach, allowing the champion of river providence to also be the finest Christian knight in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. River providence, and by extension all non-Christian tradition the writer draws upon, can be employed as a vehicle for Christian virtue, and can empower the Christian to make better choices, much as the sword, a product of the providence of Merlin and the Damosel, empowers Galahad. Ultimately, as Christians, Chaucer and Malory will agree that true autonomy can exist only if one is in line with God; they simply differ as to what constitutes that alignment.

The concept of divinized rivers has been used in post-medieval times extensively, where the benevolence or malevolence of these supernatural or numinous rivers have been emphasized as key to transcendence. It is unfortunate that this study could not encompass a larger scope, and here I want to gesture at some ways in which the theme of river providence has survived in the literary tradition. There is no where

better to begin, therefore, than William Wordsworth, the first among poets of transcendental thought. In “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” he turns to one of his “spots of time” to revisit and re-vision his childhood. The ruins of Tintern Abbey, once a place of worship, are a fitting backdrop for his site of transcendental experience. Much scenery, much natural beauty stirs his imagination, but it is first and foremost “These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs/With a sort of inland murmur” that sparks the poet’s profound recollection of his boyhood. He admits that in youth he could not appreciate the impact of the Wye and its surrounding beauty, for like a young deer he “bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams, wherever nature led,” but even in youth “The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion” (ll. 60-77). Returning as an older, wiser “lover of the meadows and the woods,” the narrator has since learned to see these “beauteous forms” in a higher, deeper way. Indeed, although his experience of the transcendent leads Wordsworth to believe in a “spirit . . . that rolls through all things,” it is the accumulated effect of the river Wye and its place in nature, “on the banks of this delightful stream,” where he begins, returns and promises again “a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused” (ll. 89-102). On this river-bank Wordsworth recalls and rediscovers, and foretells for a future audience, nothing less than the pulse of his very God: “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,/O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro’ the woods,/How often has my spirit turned to thee! (Wordsworth 49-57).

Wordsworth was not the only post-medieval poet to draw upon the *topos* of

enchanted rivers. Edmund Spenser has his hero, Redcrosse, fall not in one stream, but two, while he is fighting the great Dragon. Moving many years later, Douglas A. Anderson discusses in *Tales Before Narnia* the influence of the short story “Undine” upon writers such as George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis, a story which possesses a “haunting feeling of Northernness subsumed within its fairy-tale setting, and in its blending of Christian and fairy-tale elements it prefigures the work of Hans Christian Andersen as well as that of C.S. Lewis” (Anderson 63), an analysis not terribly different from our discussion earlier. The tale concerns the water nymph, Undine, and her struggles against her wicked uncle, the angered river god Kuhleborn, who takes early in the tale a disliking for Huldbrand, Undine’s mortal husband. We see here both the negative force of the river god as expressed in *The Iliad*, and the positive in Wordsworth and others. Though the tale begins with a storm as in the *Aeneid*, it ends happily when Kuhleborn’s powers are sealed off through Undine’s ingenuity and Huldbrand’s bravery (de la Motte Fouque 63-128). Another Victorian story, “The King of the Golden River,” by John Ruskin, fuses the potential dual nature of river god providence in this being, who punishes three brothers and rewards the fourth in an unapologetically didactic use of the theme (though no less entertaining for it – one is quite satisfied at the Ovidian fate of the brothers, who are all turned to stone) (Ruskin 3-24).

Even Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, perhaps the most important of twentieth century fairytales, has more than one scene which resonates with this tradition Frodo is saved by the immortal elf Elrond from the Nazgul, who (we are told later) uses his

enchanted ring to flood the river. As the Black Riders encroach and the Elf Glorfindel takes the Hobbit to safety, Frodo cries, “By Elbereth and Luthien the fair . . . you shall have neither the ring nor me!” We are allowed the illusion that Frodo, and not Elrond, has summoned this flood, for as the Nazgul step into the ford in spite of Frodo’s feeble oath, “there came a roaring and a rushing: a noise of loud waters rolling many stones . . . The black horses were filled with madness, and leaping forward in terror they bore their riders into the rushing flood. Their piercing cries were drowned in the roaring of the river as it carried them away” (Tolkien 207-209). Tolkien teases the reader with the sense that something more than nature’s fury is in this flood, for “along its course there came a plumed calvary of waves,” with the appearance of “white flames” flickering “on their crests,” and we are told that Frodo “half fancied” that “white riders upon white horses” surge forth amid those waves (209). Here the supernatural is not quite divine, yet clearly the servants of the dark god Sauron are being ousted by “the power in Rivendell to withstand the might of Mordor,” for as Gandalf tells Frodo concerning the flood, “Elrond made it . . . The river of this valley is under his power, and it will rise in anger when he has great need to bar the Ford” (217-218). River god providence as expressed here is benevolent, but as in most cases sadly limited, for Gandalf makes it clear that Rivendell can stand against Mordor only “for a while” (217). This is very reminiscent, in circumstance if not in form, of Tiberinus, for here we see benevolent river providence which has real authority, but authority limited by dangerous forces outside of its sovereignty.

A disciple of Tolkien and a master of storytelling in his own right, Terry

Brooks has as integral to many of his *Shannara* stories the King of the Silver River. He is a god-like Faerie creature who brings to each protagonist nuggets of wisdom and guidance on the quests for whom something like Fate has chosen, sometimes against their own will, hero after hero. Like the Wye, the King of the Silver River comes when “the fretful stir unprofitable, and the fever of the world, have hung upon the beatings” of their hearts. About to be sent on a fateful quest of his own, the stunned Penderrin Ohmsford tells the river faerie, “I know who you are. The King of the Silver River. My father told me of you—how you came to him . . . You showed him a vision of my aunt . . . You gave him a phoenix stone to help protect him . . .” (Brooks 120). The consistent use of the King of the Silver River in this way speaks of the flood in Tolkien, the King of the Golden River, and again even the benevolence of Tiberinus in book eight of the *Aeneid*. Fortunately or unfortunately, on the inspiration of the character, Brooks writes:

. . .most of what I write is influenced by what I read. One way or the other, even when I don't stop to think about it. Everything influences us in our lives, if only by accumulation. But I couldn't tell you what the influences were this late in the game when I created and began writing about the King of the Silver River. It's just too far in the past. But I don't think it was Tolkien this time. I think it was probably water Gods and Goddesses from the mythologies. (“Ask Terry”)

Of course, an anxious scholar wants firmer footing than this when making claims of influence or engaging tropes for comparative analysis. Yet, there is a kinship in Brooks' statement and Wordsworth's poem, for they admit in a similar way to an influence "by accumulation" that is both conscious and subconscious, and which manifests so impressively in their writing. From these examples alone, we may be able to agree with Ishmael where Melville makes him say, "Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it . . . But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley of the Saco. What is the chief element he employs? . . . yet all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him" (Melville 19).

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