The Romance of the Minotaur
Reconsidered

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Rarely read and frequently forgotten, the Romance of the Minotaur is one of the true orphan romances of medieval British literature. Neither the Broadview nor the Norton anthologies see fit to include it. The TEAMS Middle English Texts series omitted it from The Middle English Breton Lays and chose not to make it the fifth entry in the popular Four Middle English Romances. Unless one wins a travel grant to Scotland, where the Auchinleck manuscript is held, one must acquire a musty library copy of A.J. Bliss’s 1961 edition of Sir Orfeo that still includes the rare post-publication corrected insert. Bliss apparently meant to edit the Romance of the Minotaur as an appendix to Sir Orfeo, but provides only brief comments on its verb forms and likely end-
ing.\textsuperscript{3} Even Derek Pearsall omits it from his exhaustive landmark article on “The Development of Middle English Romance.”\textsuperscript{4}

The text’s unpopularity is odd, given its thrilling plot and unique spin on the Theseus legend. Like many medieval romances that draw on classical sources (Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} is the likeliest here), the \textit{Romance of the Minotaur} adapts and amends the original, perhaps under the influence of a now-lost Breton lay. In the romance, Theseus is a king who journeys to Canterbury\textsuperscript{5} in search of a wife: “To Canterbury the king must go / In search of a wife to cure his woe” (ll. 9–10).\textsuperscript{6} He there encounters King Minos, who offers him the hand of Ariadne in exchange for Theseus slaying the Minotaur. Theseus agrees, Ariadne weaves him a girdle, and he enters an ornate labyrinth. As he wanders, he unravels the girdle, so that he might find his way back by following its threads. In scenes nearly as graphic as those in the later \textit{Sir Gowther}, Theseus slays the Minotaur. When he brings the head to Minos, he retraces his steps with the aid of the now-destroyed girdle: “The head he bore with carriage proud / Not knowing the peril of what he’d vowed” (ll. 1027–28). When Minos sees the head of the Minotaur, he recognizes it as the head of his long-lost (and heretofore-unmentioned) son, who had been stolen by an evil steward years before.\textsuperscript{7} Minos demands Theseus marry Ariadne so that he might ascend the throne upon Minos’s death in place of the now-dead son. Theseus agrees to do so, and — just as Ariadne is poised to speak, perhaps in agreement or perhaps in rejection — the text cuts off.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{5} There is a glancing mention of the significance of Canterbury (rather than Crete, as in Ovid’s version of the Minotaur story) in Andrea Wearall, “Place Names, The Place,” \textit{Medieval Minutiae: Notes on the Fourteenth Century} 101, no. 17 (Autumn 2007): 19–29.
\bibitem{6} All translations from Middle English are my own, and all citations, unless otherwise noted, are to the Bliss corrected edition.
\bibitem{7} For more on the evil steward trope, see “Sir Orfeo: Introduction” in \textit{The Middle English Breton Lays}.
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The little that has been written on the Romance of the Minotaur focuses, unsurprisingly, on the character of Theseus and his status as a chivalric hero who negotiates the challenges of courtly love while enacting decidedly exhaustive violence. In “James Bond and Dr. Minos: Gawain and Theseus in the Bedroom,” John Shaddeus draws on Cory James Rushton’s formulation of Gawain as the “medieval James Bond” to argue that the now-lost ending to the Romance of the Minotaur would include Theseus, like his Ovidian counterpart, leaving Ariadne behind.⁸ Although the comparison with Gawain is fruitful—I will address it in more detail later—the article deflects notions of loyalty to valorize a “love ’em or leave ’em” ethos that is inimical to medieval concepts of both courtly love and chivalry.

In “Road Rage in the Labyrinth: Theseus’ Exhausted Violence,” Ilan Mitchell-Smith argues that the extraordinary violence Theseus enacts on the Minotaur is linked to the Middle English concept of wode, or unbalanced insanity, created by the exhausting journey through the labyrinth. Mitchell-Smith argues that, since the text itself is nearly inexhaustible at that point—some 50 lines are devoted to descriptions of the labyrinth, another 72 to the killing of the Minotaur—the anonymous author linked the reader’s exhaustion to Theseus’s, and therefore problematized the violence of medieval heroism.⁹

That Theseus’s heroism is problematic is undeniable. But that it is—or ought to be—the focus of scholarship represents a masculinist blind spot in the existing criticism. For that reason, I reconsider the Romance of the Minotaur in order to explore not only its hero but also its heroine: the silent Ariadne, sister to a monster and bargaining chip to her father; and her brother, the

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monster who represents a “category crisis.” I will argue that by examining the portrayals of Ariadne and her brother the Minotaur, as well as her girdle and the labyrinth, we can see the text’s nuanced articulation of the connection between trauma and memory.

To do so, we must begin with the context: the Auchinleck manuscript (NLS Adv MS 19.2.1). Produced in 1330s London, named after an eighteenth-century collector, and now held in the National Library of Scotland, the Auchinleck is an iconic medieval miscellany. Five scribes contributed to the Middle English manuscript, which contains works as dull as The Battle Abbey Rolls (as the title implies, it is a list of names) and as delightful as Sir Orfeo, Le Freine, and King of Tars. Laura Hibbard Loomis argues that Chaucer likely read it, and although that idea has a greater percentage of conjecture than confirmation, the connection with Canterbury (which supplants Crete in the Romance of the Minotaur) is tantalizing.

Scribe I (or α) transcribed, among other texts, the anonymously authored Romance of the Minotaur, Sir Orfeo, and Lay Le Freine. In the Auchinleck, which contains the only extant copy, the Romance of the Minotaur is missing its opening lines and its conclusion (assumed to be approximately 50 lines); Sir Orfeo is missing the first 38 lines; and Le Freine is missing lines 121–33 and 341–408, which are commonly supplied in modern editions by Henry William Weber’s 1810 recreation, based on Marie de France’s twelfth-century “Le Fresne.” The Le Freine prologue ap-

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12 Henry W. Weber, Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, vol. I (Edinburgh: Archibald Constance, 1810), 357–71. Both Margaret Wattie (“The Middle English Lai le Freine,” Smith College Studies in Modern Languages 10, no. 3 [April 1929]: i-xiii and 1–27) and
pears, with emendations and elisions, in two fifteenth-century versions of *Sir Orfeo*: Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61. For that reason, Bliss argues that the Le Freine prologue ought to function as the prologue to both *Sir Orfeo* and the *Romance of the Minotaur*:

It may be argued that where the original text is lost, any genuine medieval version is better than a hypothetical reconstruction by a modern scholar; this may be a valid argument, but it is only partially relevant here, for the ”prologue section” at least occurs on folio 261a of MS. Auchinleck as an introduction to *Lay Le Freine*, and it is written by the same scribe who wrote *Sir Orfeo*, in the same dialect and orthography […] It is sufficient to point out that it is more satisfactory for many reasons to supply the missing lines in a contemporary version which shows the same dialect and the same orthography as the rest of the text of *Sir Orfeo*.13

The three texts do have some similarities. *Sir Orfeo* is loosely based on the classical myth of Orpheus as told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Georgics*, and Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and likely translated from the lost Old French *Lai d’Orphay*. At first blush, *Sir Orfeo* is a straightforward example of *translatio studii et imperii*: the medieval theory of the transmission or movement of knowledge and power from ancient Greece to ancient Rome, and thence to France and England. In that movement, Orpheus the bard becomes Orfeo the poet-king; Thrace becomes Winchester; and Hades becomes a fairy land from which Orfeo successful rescues his wife Heurodis, after which he returns to rule his kingdom. When he and Heurodis die without heirs, the steward takes over the kingdom.

Unlike the inventive *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay Le Freine* is a faithful adaptation of Marie de France’s “Le Fresne” that tells of two women,

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their knightly husbands, and the tragic consequences of sacrificing family to reputation. One woman gives birth to twin boys, prompting the other to declare her an adulteress. When that woman gives birth to twin girls, she faces the consequences of her rumor-mongering and sends one of the girls away to be left at a convent. After numerous reversals, the woman recognizes her abandoned (adult) daughter, and the twin women marry the twin men. A more personal tale than *Sir Orfeo, Le Freine* nonetheless places equal emphasis on parent–child relationships, the significance of recognition scenes, and the importance of continuing the family (or in the case of *Sir Orfeó*, dynastic) line.

As those descriptions indicate, all three texts — *Sir Orfeo, Le Freine*, and the *Romance of the Minotaur* — circle around the same themes, with each romance providing a unique perspective. There is a varying attention to the women: in *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis, like her classical counterpart Eurydice, is more of a quest-object than a character; her most notable quality is being kidnapped by a fairy-king. But *Le Freine*, like its twelfth-century source text, explores the consequences of its titular character, a young girl abandoned at the doorsteps of a nunnery.

In the *Romance of the Minotaur*, Ariadne is both a quest-object (Theseus slays the Minotaur to gain her hand in marriage) and an active participant in the heroic actions. Although she does not speak, Ariadne is present in every scene that takes place outside the labyrinth. “Minos and his daughter” or “Father and daughter” recur 19 times in the romance, as in the first scene after the putative prologue:

King Minos and his daughter sat in the hall,  
Theseus bade them greetings and homage.  
“Welcome, traveler,” King Minos said,  
And his daughter nodded, graceful and staid (57–61).

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In these lines, we see the repetition of “King Minos…and his daughter” twice within four lines, creating the effect of two interlocked beings: throughout the poem, Minos is never without Ariadne. We might read Ariadne’s nod as nothing more than a polite gesture, but we can also consider it a form of speech. Silent, yet communicative, Ariadne does not just acknowledge Theseus but also approves of her father’s greeting.

Ariadne’s silent communication continues throughout the poem, especially in the girdle she sews for Theseus. The passages that describe her needlecraft rival some of the older French chansons de toile (“sewing songs” or “sewing poems”) for the description of both craft and result:  

Ariadne Theseus’s girdle wrought,  
And as she worked, of her mother she thought.  
Green for luck, and the white turned red,  
For Ariande worked until her fingers bled.  

...  
Ariadne wove the girdle into a round,  
Around Theseus it circled and wound.  
Ariadne wove memory within,  
Protection that she wove therein (303–307; 321–325).

The poet here interlaces Ariadne’s sewing with a memory of her mother, which reflects the reality of a young woman’s upbringing (mothers taught daughters to sew), but may also foreshadow some of the work’s later developments. In the Romance of the Minotaur, unlike the classical versions, Minos’s unnamed wife is never described as unfaithful, and therefore the Minotaur’s parentage is never explicitly stated to be illegitimate. For Ariadne to think of her mother, in other words, might mean she is also thinking of her missing brother.

15 For more on portrayals of sewing and clothes—which less common in the British tradition—see E. Jane Burns, Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
The theme of the loss of the mother links the text to both Orfeo’s quest to find his missing wife and Le Freine’s ultimate reunion with her own mother; read together, the three poems speak around, but rarely of, the trauma of loss. In the incomplete ending of the Romance of the Minotaur, Ariadne does not reunite with her mother, whom we might presume to be dead since she is unmentioned. But the poem does link physical trauma (she “worked until her fingers bled”) to the emotional trauma of coming of age without a mother-figure. In the first scene in Ariadne appears without her father, she bleeds while doing the work of a mature woman for the purpose of protecting her potential husband’s safety.

Although the poem lacks an accurate vocabulary for needlework, the thirty lines that describe Ariadne’s sewing constitute ekphrasis: the description of art in narrative. Typically, ekphrasis is an opportunity for the author to demonstrate poetic complexity. From Homer’s lines about Achilles’s shield to Virgil’s description of the frieze that depicts the fall of Troy, ekphrasis in the classical tradition serves the same function as a guitar solo: unnecessary for the melody, yet vital for the song’s emotive and artistic power. In Romance of the Minotaur, the colors (green, red, gold, and white) and materials (silk, soft wool, and even — improbably — lapis lazuli) are meaningful. Green, as we saw above, is for luck (“fortune”), red is Ariadne’s blood, white represents purity, and gold signifies success, which the poem distinguishes from fortune, a term that could mean either good or bad outcomes. The lapis lazuli represents wealth, the silk power, and the wool “a memento of the journey home” (312). The cumulative effect of the ekphrasis is to allow Ariadne the opportunity to communicate.

But with whom? Does Ariadne hope to communicate with Theseus? To craft a protective garment that no one but her would understand? Or to provide a memento, a memory token, to the Minotaur? Following Bliss’s editorial suggestions and implications, we might compare the girdle in the Romance the Minotaur to the objects of recognition in its two manuscript analogues. In Sir Orfeo, the poet-king repeatedly misinterprets...
what he sees, or has to see it twice to understand it. When he finally finds Heurodis, it is only “by her attire he knew ’twas she” (408). In *Le Freine*, the mother only recognizes her long-lost daughter by the objects she’d left with the abandoned baby, a mantle and a ring (375–85). There is precedent for objects to signify identity.

In more ways than one. In “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*” Geraldine Heng posits a contrast between the Gawain’s pentangle (a masculine knot) and Lady Bertilak’s love-lace (the feminine girdle), which encircles — and ultimately shames — Gawain: “Never requiring to be tied, untied, or retied, the pentangle is the ultimate guarantee […] for the existence of fixed and stable identity […] the pentangle as personal emblem for Gawain is subsequently overtaken by an ‘imperfect’ knot,” the girdle.

In the lines quoted above, we saw how “Ariadne wove the girdle into a round / Around Theseus it circled and wound” (321–22). The rhymes and cognates *round, around, circled, wound* enclose Theseus as much as the girdle itself does. Ariadne effectively wraps Theseus in her language, not for the purpose of communicating with him, but to make him, perhaps, a vehicle for communication. Read in light of Heng’s model — in which a girdle represents womanhood itself, an inherent threat to masculine stability — we might consider Ariadné’s silent communication as a feminine response to his proposed actions: she weaves as he wanders and slaughters.

The woven girdle (“Ariadne wove memory within / Protection that she wove therein”) that encircles Theseus also parallels the labyrinth into which he ventures. In “The Poet as Master Builder: Composition and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages,” Mary Carruthers argues that descriptions of architecture, such as the “amphitheater” of Dante’s Hell, correspond to the

17 “Lay Le Freine” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*.
medieval mnemonic technique of a memory palace, in which a student or reader organized information — and, more importantly, connections between bits of information — in a mental architectural structure. The connection with ekphrasis speaks for itself: a description of art or architecture becomes a glimpse into both the memory structures the author may have drawn on and the mnemonic tools he provides the reader.

The fifty lines devoted to describing the labyrinth that contains the Minotaur emphasize both its architectural structure and its artifice. As Seth Lerer said of the fairyland of Sir Orfeo: “A close look at the Auchinleck text reveals a description of fairyland indebted to the technical terms of painting in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England […] a display of human craft which manipulates surfaces for the awe or delectation of the beholder.” The same could be said of the labyrinth of the Romance of the Minotaur:

A hundred towers were raised about 
With cunning wrought, embattled stout; 
With buttress of glass and bronzed gold, 
The walls encircled stones of old. 
By Daedalus these walls were wrought, 
To contain that which might be sought (471–77).

Where the poet lacked the vocabulary of needlecraft, he excelled in the vocabulary of architecture. But the near-parity of the two ekphrases — the thirty lines that describe the girdle, the fifty lines that describe the labyrinth — as well as the focus, in each,  

21 The first two lines of this excerpt are repeated in “Sir Orfeo” (359–60). I have followed Tolkien’s translation.
on colors, crafts, and general bedazzlement links the two artificial, constructed objects with medieval mnemonic techniques. The girdle and the labyrinth evoke both the concept of memory itself, and the personal memories of what has been lost (Ariadne’s mother, the Minotaur’s loss of his family through his own exile to the labyrinth). Similarly, the girdle and the labyrinth are described as “encircling”: the girdle that wraps around Theseus is like the labyrinth that does the same. Or, to extend the parallel, we might argue that the girdle that encircles Theseus is like the labyrinth that encircles the Minotaur.

In most versions of the story, including Ovid’s, the Minotaur lives up to his name: half man, half bull, the illegitimate son of King Minos’s wife. Yet, while he is named as the Minotaur throughout the romance, his physical features are never described. He is “fearsome,” “rough,” and “loath to look upon,” but the poet never delineates the specifics of his hybridity (515, 521, 526). In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that “the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes — as ‘that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis.’”22 The Minotaur, in other words, exists as a wrench in the works: girdle/labyrinth, Theseus/Minotaur, even Ariadne/Theseus — these binary terms are complicated both by the Minotaur’s existence and by his fate. Because the Minotaur does introduce a “crisis”: the revelation of familial trauma. Just before the poem cuts off, Theseus drags the “heavy head” of the Minotaur out of the labyrinth: “The head he carried, full of woe / Red with blood and fraught with dole” (543). The Middle English here is ambiguous: does “full of woe” modify Theseus or the Minotaur’s head? Both, we might presume, are covered with blood, but Theseus, who is victorious should not feel “dole” or pain — he has accomplished his mission.

The mention of blood here also evokes the girdle into which Ariadne wove her blood: “Theseus unwound what Ariadne

wrought / In his quest to find what was sought” (492–94). Following Cohen’s thesis, the Minotaur—like the labyrinth that contains him—creates a “category crisis” in which objects seem to echo and affect each other. Girdle and labyrinth, hero and monster, Ariadne’s communicative needlework and the poem’s own language: all unravel upon Theseus’s exit from the labyrinth.

This returns us to the question of recognition. In Le Freine, the ring and the mantle allow the mother to recognize her long-lost daughter. In Sir Orfeo, his wife’s clothes allow him to realize identity of the woman before him. These objects are mementos that spur the recollection of memory. But in the Romance of the Minotaur, recognition and remembrance become monstrous. Minos does not see the unknown monster that has lived in the labyrinth, but instead recognizes the head of his dead son: “Woe to him, for weal was none / Once he realized what Theseus had done” (557–58). Minos’s convenient forgetting of his son, who is unmentioned until Theseus emerges from the labyrinth, signifies a failure of theory of mind: the awareness that another person exists when they are not in front of us. Minos lost his son to an evil steward, and forgot to remember his existence after that. Like many premodern characters, Minos realizes, recognizes, and remembers only when the plot demands it.23

23 It is worth considering this medieval trope of convenient forgetting in light of Erich Auerbach’s distinction between texts that are “fraught with background” (such as the Old Testament) and those that allow recognition objects to emerge only when convenient (such as Homer’s Odyssey): “Odysseus’s Scar,” in Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. William Trask, new and exp. edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1–23. We might contrast that forgetfulness, of course, with a hypothesis about the Minotaur’s own state of mind before his death: did the Minotaur remember Minos as much as Minos forgot him? Borges hints at an answer in his own story of the labyrinth from the Minotaur’s perspective (See Jorge Luis Borges, “The House of Asterion,” in Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby [London: Penguin, 1964], 170–72). In his retelling, Julio Cortázar emphasizes the Minotaur’s own ability to reflect on how others view him, as in his words to Theseus: “It’s as if you look straight through me. Yet, you don’t see me with your eyes; it’s not with one’s eyes that one faces a myth. Not even your sword is aimed properly. You should strike with a proven method, a spell: with
But Minos’s belated recognition also indicates the deeply pessimistic quality to the romance, especially in light of *Le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*. In those romances, recognition solves the core problem of each: *Le Freine* reunites with her family and marries, Orfeo reunites with his wife and resumes his throne. Yet both contain trauma: *Le Freine* was the unwed lover of the man who later married her, and Heurodis was kidnapped and possibly raped by Hades, the king of fairyland. Those texts overwrite, even ignore, the terror of what comes before the trauma. The *Romance of the Minotaur*, I would argue, does no such thing. Recognition and remembering are realizations but not solutions.

Especially for Ariadne. If Minos is the forgetful king, Theseus the violent but thoughtless hero, and the Minotaur little more than a “rough” monstrous body to slaughter, Ariadne is the keeper of memory. Her girdle, like the labyrinth, contains the past. But unlike the labyrinth, the girdle does not occlude or erase what came before. Ariadne weaves “memory” into the girdle, as visible as the symbolic colorways and prestige textiles. In doing so, she does the work of the “poet as builder” that Carruthers identifies in medieval mnemonic literature. Ariadne builds, or weaves, to remember and to evoke remembrance.

But, like the women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ariadne also weaves to disrupt. In *Sir Gawain*, the girdle is Gawain’s temptation, since it provides protection from the Green Knight’s threat to behead the hero, and his shame, since he takes the girdle but does not fulfill his promise to be open and honest with the Green Knight. The girdle in *Sir Gawain* is a chance for Morgan le Fay (and Lady Bertilak, her proxy) to take their revenge on the Arthurian court. In the *Romance of the Minotaur*, the girdle is a chance for Ariadne to provoke category crisis, to instigate a new tragedy, and to thus recollect — to herself, to her father — the memory of what has been lost.

The focus on the missing, the forgotten, and the hidden is all the more bittersweet given the state of the only extant copy.

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As noted above, the opening lines and the final page of the Romance of the Minotaur are lost. Bliss argues that the prologue to Le Freine (which he also uses as the prologue to Sir Orfeo) ought to introduce the tale. But, perhaps because of his own incomplete edition of the romance, Bliss never states precisely how the Romance of the Minotaur ends. Shaddeus and Mitchell-Smith, like Wearall, take this tacit omission as evidence that the story would likely end with Ariadne giving verbal assent to Theseus’s marriage proposal. The Romance of the Minotaur would end happily. Most medieval romances do, after all.

But, as I said above, all three texts—Sir Orfeo, Le Freine, and the Romance of the Minotaur—circle around the same themes, with each romance providing a unique perspective. In Sir Orfeo, the hero regains his wife but they die without issue. In Le Freine, the trauma of abandonment is occluded by the joy of marriage. We are meant to forget these trauma in favor of the normative stylistics of medieval romance, which are, like the pentangle, an “ultimate guarantee” of “stability” (recalling Heng). But Ariadne’s girdle, like the girdle in Sir Gawain, weaves to disrupt, weaves to recall, and provokes an unraveling category crisis through trauma and recollected memory. Bearing that in mind, we might wonder if Ariadne’s now-lost speech would be as surprising as the identity of the now-dead Minotaur: not an assent to marriage, but a mournful acknowledgement of what has been lost and what has been forgotten.
Bibliography


