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AN INTERPRETATION OF *SIR ORFEO*

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I

Most critics have praised *Sir Orfeo*.¹ Nevertheless, the source of its "charm" has remained elusive, perhaps because of the immediate appeal of its story and because the unobtrusive skill with which it is told has lulled many readers into a state of euphoric imperceptiveness. This article is an attempt to intensify the hunt for the poem's central meaning, from which much of its attractiveness probably derives. It is suggested that the poem's main concern is the testing of the social bonds of love and loyalty, that the importance of these bonds is indicated by their very selection as fundamental elements of society, and that their strength in this society is evident from the successful outcome.

To some extent this article takes up the pursuit where others have left off. In particular it takes as a starting-point the notion that the poem is unified, that a good deal of thought has gone into its organization. This unity, involving Orfeo's loss of Heurodis and his abandonment of the kingdom followed by his recovery of each in turn, has been demonstrated by J. B. Severs, who also remarks on the use "of suspense . . . to bind all parts of the tale together."² At a rather different level further evidence of the organic coherence of the poem comes from J. B. Friedman, who points to the recurrence of noon (if this be the sense of *under-tide* in its various forms and occurrences) as the time for human contact with the fairy world;³ and it may be added that the returning Orfeo meets the Steward *ozain nonetide* (497). The selection of one particular time for the occurrence of most of the important encounters between the various *personae* suggests deliberate structural planning.

Another unifying factor, not so much commented upon by previous writers, is the motif of the harp. The importance of the harp and the music made with it is suggested by the hospitality extended to harp-players (27-8),⁴ reiterated by the Steward (517-8), and by the care with which Orfeo protects his harp from the elements to which he himself is exposed (267-8). It is by playing the harp that Orfeo consoles himself in the wilderness, and the spell-binding quality of the music he makes with it is illustrated by his capacity to attract and bemuse the animals. Though the power of the harp is inherited from the Orpheus legend, in Orfeo's hands it is more wide-ranging and thoroughgoing in its influence, and the greater power given to it emphasizes its importance. For it is through the exceptional skill with which Orfeo plays

the harp that the rash promise is elicited from the fairy king and that the Steward recognizes Orfeo on his return. Thus the harp plays an important part in Orfeo's recovery of both his wife and his kingdom; it succeeds where a thousand armed men failed and is in fact the key to his success. This factor, together with those mentioned in the preceding paragraph, suggests a carefully wrought poem in which structural patterning and attention to significant detail reveal conscious literary effort.

II

Sir Orfeo is a version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and, at the risk of repeating the familiar, some consideration of the transmission of this story, and the valuable work done on it,⁵ is an essential preliminary to the study of the poem. It is essential because only with an informed knowledge of the version(s) of the Orpheus story available to the author of *Sir Orfeo* can his poem be properly interpreted or assessed. The version of the story in the Middle English poem is the original (Greek) one, the one that lacks the second loss (or death) of Eurydice. This original version evidently survived, as Dronke shows, side by side with the other, modified (and, to us, more familiar) version of Virgil, Ovid, Boethius and their commentators, in which Eurydice is lost a second time when Orpheus breaks the taboo against looking back imposed by the king of the Underworld. In particular, the original version survived in at least four eleventh-century poems, the *Liber quid suum virtutis* by Thierry of Saint-Trond, the poem taken to begin *Carmina leniti tenet Orpheus antra Cocyti* by a certain Gautier, the *Dialogue with Calliope* by Godefroy of Reims, and the anonymous lyric *Parce Continuis*, the first three of which are from France. In view of the probability that "*Sir Orfeo* was translated from an O[ld] F[rench] or A[nglo-]N[orman] narrative lai" "in the second half of the thirteenth century" (Bliss, pp. xli and xxi), the existence of the original version of the story in eleventh-century France shows beyond reasonable doubt that this original version, which the *Sir Orfeo* poet must have used, was indeed available to him, probably in the form of a narrative lay. It is therefore potentially misleading to try to relate the poem to the versions of Virgil, Ovid and Boethius as if these were primary sources of *Sir Orfeo*.⁶ The poem may be compared with the Virgilian versions but in general no closer association between the two is admissible.⁷

The Celtic element in *Sir Orfeo* has long been recognized, and an understanding of the implications of this Celtic infusion is another essential preliminary to the study of *Sir Orfeo*—essential because misunderstanding of this important aspect of the framework of ideas underlying the poem leads to unfounded and even erroneous critical judgments. One of the main reasons why these implications have not always been fully realized is perhaps that readers have found it difficult to put the Virgilian versions out of their minds. In those versions Orpheus and Eurydice are separated as the living are from the dead. In *Sir Orfeo* Heurodis is *taken* (to use the Celtic term whose meaning

is expounded by Mrs Wright) and preserved in a state of arrested mobility.⁸ The world she is *taken* to is known in Irish as *Tír na mBeo*, the Land of the Living. There, according to the fairy king's threat, she is to *liue wiþ ous euer-mo* (168), and there Orfeo catches sight

Of folk þat were þider y-brouzt,
& þouzt dede, & nare nouzt. (389-90)

Despite these clear statements that, however dead they may appear, the personages in the Other World are living, not dead, some critics have persisted in writing about *Sir Orfeo* as if Death were involved. For example, D. Mehl considers that the poem demonstrates "the temporary nature of the power of Death,"⁹ and J. F. Knapp that "the poem is an account of the archetypal hero on a quest to regain what man desires, and his enemy is Death."¹⁰ But confirmation that the poem is not concerned with Death comes from one apparently minor but significant detail. On being told by Orfeo in disguise that Orfeo is dead the Steward faints and those around him quote the proverbial saying

It nis no bot of mannes dep. (552)

If the Other World from which Orfeo has just recovered Heurodis were a dead world the import of this proverb would be contradicted by the action of the poem. In view of the attention to consistency of detail elsewhere in the poem such an absurd contradiction is unlikely.

The only possible support for the notion that the Other World in *Sir Orfeo* is a dead world is contained in lines 391-400,¹¹ from which it would appear that most of the personages described are dead. But the apparent inconsistency with the lines just quoted (168 and 389-90) is so great that B. Mitchell has proposed that lines 391-400 be regarded as an interpolation added, after the author had completed the poem, by someone else,¹² presumably some meddlesome redactor who mistakenly identified the *taken* with the dead. This proposal has the attraction of providing a neat solution to the apparent inconsistency, but can hardly be adopted without more or less conclusive proof of the inappropriateness of lines 391-400.¹³ Unfortunately for those who might wish to adopt this proposal Mrs Wright, whilst admitting probable textual corruption in lines 391-400, shows that "the greater part of [the passage] . . . is still explicable in terms of fairy superstition" (p. 105): that most of the types mentioned, even those who apparently undergo violent or accidental death, were commonly regarded not as dying but as being *taken* by the fairies. Consequently, whether or not lines 391-400 be regarded as an interpolation, it must be conceded that an interpretation of *Sir Orfeo* should not be based on the notion of the Other World as a world of the dead.

III

As a story which has been accorded something of the treatment appropriate to a Breton Lay *Sir Orfeo* combines the usual themes of "romantic

love and the supernatural."¹⁴ But there is more to *Orfeo* than this: for example, such a statement takes no account of the relationship between the king and his people, especially their leading representative, the Steward; and it gives no hint of the importance that must attach to the interplay between the human personages (whose love and loyalty are revealed) and the supernatural ones. In *Sir Orfeo* the bonds of human society are tested, principally by a mysterious, external, supernatural agent. Broadly, the bonds involved are the basic ones. That between a man and a woman is illustrated within a marriage by the mutual love of Orfeo and Heurodis. That between man and man is illustrated in the society of the poem by the loyalty owed to Orfeo by his people, especially the Steward.

The emphasis on, and even idealization of, the mutual love between Orfeo and Heurodis is indeed one of the most striking features of *Sir Orfeo*. Just how strong this love is is conveyed (1) by what they communicate to each other, and (2) by what they do. The poem lacks what has been called "dichotomy of feeling and action": the utterances and actions of the human characters do seem to be a reliable guide to their feelings.

(1) There are two passages in which Orfeo and Heurodis communicate their love. In the first (lines 102-31), where their relationship is thrown into sharp relief because they are under threat of separation, they communicate through speech. Heurodis stresses the harmony that is being disrupted:

Seþþen we first to-gider were
Ones wroþ neuer we nere,
Bot euer ich haue y-loued þe
As mi liif, & so þou me; (121-4)

and in his reply Orfeo says:

Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe,
& whider y go þou schalt wiþ me. (129-30)

These quotations from the couple's speeches suggest a close mimicry of speaking tones which serves to focus attention on the directness of the assertions. Each assertion is an absolute one. There has never been a single cross word between them at any time during their marriage. Each has loved the other as his or her own life. They will never be separated: togetherness is all. This concentration on their absolute devotion to each other is one of the ways in which the relationship is idealized. In the second passage (lines 319-30), where they are now separated, they communicate through looks:

Ȝern he biheld hir, & sche him eke,
Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke.¹⁵ (323-4)

These lines, perhaps the most moving in the poem, illustrate the frustration of natural human emotion resulting from the separation of the married couple caused by Heurodis's removal to the Other World. One of the reasons why these lines stand out in the poem as being so moving is probably that the word *Ȝern*, when construed with *& sche him eke*, contains the only description (as opposed to expression) of emotion on Heurodis's part in the poem.

(2) Otherwise emotion is conveyed mainly by implication from what Orfeo and Heurodis do. Thus Heurodis's distracted mutilation of her body (77-82), because it arises from dreaming about her abduction from Orfeo, implies her love for him. When it is said of Heurodis that

De teres fel out of her eize, (327)

it is evident (though it is not overtly stated) that Heurodis cried because she felt sad at not being able to speak to her husband. Similarly Orfeo's love for Heurodis is implied by his reaction, first to the news that she is to be taken from him (175ff.), and secondly to her actual removal (195ff.). Because he is deprived of her company he decides to become a "drop-out": he gives up his kingdom and goes into the wilderness, where he tries to console himself by playing the harp (201-18). Later, when he recognizes Heurodis in the company of the sixty ladies hawking, he abandons passive endurance and resolves to follow her *Tide wat bitide* (339). Not caring whether he lives or dies (342) he determines to pursue what seems to him to be the overriding positive value—love.

Corresponding to the private love of Orfeo and Heurodis is the public loyalty of the king's subjects, especially, of course, the Steward. All the king's men are prepared to die in order to prevent the queen's abduction (188-90) and beg Orfeo not to abdicate his kingdom (219-25). In the final episode the beggar answers Orfeo's questions truthfully, the Steward is loyal to Orfeo even though he does not recognize him, and all are overjoyed at the king's return (580-83).

IV

It is these human relationships, private love and the public loyalty which is its corollary, which are tested in *Sir Orfeo*, the first by the unmotivated intervention of the king of the fairies,¹⁶ the second also by Orfeo's return to Winchester in unrecognizable guise. Some examination of the interpenetration of the human and fairy worlds is essential. Reached by journeying *In at a roche* (347) the Fairy World is geographically distinct from the Human World. But both worlds share the feature of the *ympe-tre*, under which Heurodis lies down for a siesta in her Winchester orchard and under which she is found in the Other World (70 etc. and 407); and the

castels & tours,
Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours, (159-60)

which the fairy king shows Heurodis in her dream are presumably much the same as the

castels & tours,
Riuier, forest, friþ wiþ flours (245-6)

given up by Orfeo when he leaves his kingdom—the close verbal resemblance of the two passages would suggest as much. The fact that the two separate

worlds are linked by features which they have in common invites some comparison between them.

The Fairy World is described in terms of dazzling artificial beauty (351-76), but behind this attractive facade it is in fact menacing and cruel.¹⁷ This unmotivated hostility is revealed principally in the two main speeches of the fairy king as well as in the action of carrying Heurodis off against her wishes. In the first speech (165-74) its harsh tone and the threat to tear Heurodis to pieces represent a brutal intrusion upon human happiness in an idyllic setting. In the second speech (421-8) Orfeo is received by the fairy king in his palace in about as unfriendly and unwelcoming a way as is possible.

Because of its menace the Fairy World contrasts sharply with the Human World, which, as indicated, is marked by the strong emotional bonds of private reciprocated love and public loyalty. By comparison with the idealized consistency of this love and loyalty the mysterious beauty and danger of the Fairy World are fascinating. But the Fairy World is also rather frightening. Whereas in the Human World the seasons come and go (257-60), the years pass (264) and Orfeo's beard grows (265-6, 507, 585), in the Fairy World the processes of time do not seem to apply.¹⁸ Of the personages seen by Orfeo in the courtyard of the fairy king's palace we are told

Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome,
Wip fairi þider y-come. (403-4)

Seemingly human beings *taken* into the Fairy World are preserved, apparently indefinitely, in the same condition (*þus*) as that in which they were *taken*. In the Fairy World Heurodis is like a clockwork doll, usually left unwound, though occasionally allowed respite from her state of arrested mobility, as when, in a hunting-party, she encounters Orfeo in the wilderness.¹⁹ Because it does not age the Fairy World is frightening. And because it is frightening, as well as fascinating, the ultimate victory of the Human World is a relief. The skilful contrivance of, and interplay between, these various emotional reactions on the part of an audience whilst telling a story involving suspense is one of the major achievements of *Sir Orfeo*.

Understanding the poem is to a large extent dependent on the perception of the role of the fairy visitant as a tester of human relationships. In *Sir Orfeo*, far from being an escapist refuge to which hero and heroine can retire at the end to live happily ever after, the Fairy World is a place from which Heurodis must be rescued. Through the power of the harp (and maybe by the implied support for minstrelsy the author was indulging in a little self-advertisement, as well as carrying on one aspect of the Orpheus tradition) the fairy king is forced to adopt the human virtue of keeping his word (463-8) and to be polite (469-71). Whereas often in Breton Lays the fairy outwits the human, in *Sir Orfeo* the reverse is nearer the truth because fairy power is a foil for testing the bonds of human society.

Since *Sir Orfeo* is a poem involving tests it may be instructive to compare it with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,²⁰ a comparison that should not, however, be carried too far. In *Sir Gawain* the nature of Camelot society (with Gawain

as its acting representative) is tested. Attention is focused not so much on whether Gawain is virtuous as on the degree of his virtue and, through him, on the relative perfection or degeneracy of Camelot society. *Sir Orfeo* is not like this: no questions are asked about the degree of moral virtue of Winchester society, though the very existence of one such virtue is questioned—and confirmed—in the testing of the Steward's loyalty. Gawain's knighthood is subjected to a series of tests: the Beheading Game, the Exchange of Winnings, the Temptation of the Lady. In *Sir Orfeo* there are two tests, that of the relationship between Orfeo and Heurodis, and that of the relationship between Orfeo and his subjects. But these relationships are seen as pivots of society. What is at stake, ultimately, is society's capacity to survive unchanged. Whereas *Sir Gawain* is concerned with relative questions, *Sir Orfeo* is concerned with absolute questions. Hence the differences of outcome. Gawain's success or failure is a matter of ambiguity: Bertilak considers him *On þe faultlest freke þat euer on fote zede* (2363), whereas Gawain views himself as *fawty and falce* (2382). But Orfeo's success is necessarily absolute, since the breakdown of his relationships with his wife and his people would have dealt a scarcely bearable blow to his society as then constituted.

In *Sir Gawain* social values are tested at the instigation of Morgan le Fay (2446–62) but the testing agent is Bertilak, and both of them are external to Camelot society. Only one figure corresponds to them both in *Sir Orfeo*: the fairy king. The other tester in *Sir Orfeo* has no counterpart in *Sir Gawain*. For Orfeo's relationship with the Steward (the principal representative of his people) is tested by an internal agent, by Orfeo himself. Proof of the Steward's loyalty is obtained, but only at the cost of showing the usually *Large & curteys* Orfeo (42) somewhat uncharacteristically suspicious of the man to whom he had delegated his powers. Whereas the bond of love is tested—successfully, from a literary point of view—by an external agent (the fairy king) whose arbitrary and capricious intervention in human affairs needs no explanation for a medieval audience, the bond of loyalty is tested principally by the man to whom loyalty is owed. The lack of trust which Orfeo thus exhibits, though perhaps understandable in human terms as a result of his treatment by the fairy king, is the only jarring note in an otherwise harmonious society. From an evaluative literary point of view this seems to me to constitute a flaw in the poem,²¹ a flaw which results from over-contrivance of the second test-situation. However, since this second test arises out of the first one, in the sense that the circumstances in which it occurs come about only because Orfeo's queen is separated from him by the intervention of the fairy king, the flaw can only be viewed as a minor one. And it is quickly forgotten because, despite Orfeo's misgivings, the Steward is shown to be worthy of the trust placed in him.

V

In conclusion: *Sir Orfeo* is a poem in which situations are contrived for testing the bonds of society. The two essential elements of society in the

poem are private, reciprocal marital love and its corollary, public loyalty. Since these bonds survive against the severest tests, human society is vindicated triumphantly and its stability established. Fragile as this stability may be, it is secured by human talent, skill, will-power and courage when Orfeo finally gets the best of both worlds. One of the reasons why *Sir Orfeo* has been found attractive is probably that it is so very reassuring. Indeed it would hardly be exaggerating to call it a psychological tonic. In this sense at least *þe lay* is *gode* (602).

 NOTES

- ¹ For a useful summary see the beginning of A. M. Kinghorn's "Human Interest in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*," *Neophilologus*, L (1966), 359-69. Citations from the poem refer to the Auchinleck text in A. J. Bliss (ed.), *Sir Orfeo*, Oxford, 1966 edn. I am grateful to Prof. Bliss (Dublin), Prof. Cawley (Leeds), and to my wife, Mrs Angela M. Lucas (Maynooth), for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.
- ² "The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*," in MacE. Leach (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of A. C. Baugh* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 187-207, esp. 199-201.
- ³ "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon," *Speculum*, XLI (1966), 22-29, esp. 27-28, repr. in *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), esp. 186-8.
- ⁴ The relative importance of the whole of this "harper section" (25-38) depends to some extent on the editorial arrangement of the text. Reasons for taking this section before the "king section" (39-46) are given by Bliss in "*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46," *English and Germanic Studies*, V (1953), 7-14. For a different arrangement of the text see K. Sisam, *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (Oxford, 1955 edn.), pp. 14-15.
- ⁵ As well as Friedman's book, noticed in n. 3, see esp. P. Dronke, "The Return of Eurydice," *Classica et Mediaevalia*, XXIII (1962), 198-215, and D. Allen (now Mrs Wright), "Orpheus and Orfeo: the Dead and the Taken," *Medium Ævum*, XXXIII (1964), 102-11; also M. O. Lee, "Orpheus and Eurydice: Myth, Legend, Folklore," *C&M*, XXVI (1965), 402-12.
- ⁶ Critics who fall into this trap include Severs (see above, n. 2) and K. R. R. G. Louis, "The Significance of *Sir Orfeo*'s Self-Exile," *RES*, n.s. XVIII (1967), 245-52. Whilst the possibility that the author of the *Sir Orfeo* story knew only a Virgilian version cannot be proved to be excluded entirely, this possibility is much less likely and much less plausible than the view presented here. Arguments that have been used in the past to show the originality of the author of the *Sir Orfeo* story are more likely to show that the version in the ME poem was based primarily on the original rather than a Virgilian version.
- ⁷ It is of course unlikely that the author of the *Sir Orfeo* story was totally ignorant of the Virgilian versions. He could have known them as independent versions or he could have known a mixed version: for an example of a mixed version (Thierry's) see Dronke, 198-9. The fact that the origin of some details, like Orfeo's rejection of women's company (211), is most plausibly explained by reference to one of the Virgilian versions (Ovid's) is therefore not inconsistent with the more important fact that the poem almost certainly owes its main narrative thread to the original version of the Orpheus story.
- ⁸ See further, p. 6 and n. 19.
- ⁹ *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1969), p. 43.
- ¹⁰ "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," *MLQ*, XXIX (1968), 263-73, quotation from p. 268.
- ¹¹ For some readers this notion may also have been partly induced by the story (often linked with *Sir Orfeo*) of the knight of Brittany, from Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, in which Map "misunderstood an account of the recovery from the *sidhe* of a woman who . . . was not dead, but *taken*" (Mrs Wright, 107).

- ¹² "The Faery World of *Sir Orfeo*," *Neophilologus*, XLVIII (1964), 155-9.
- ¹³ The proposal does however carry sufficient conviction to make lines 391-400 the first passage to be excised in a select text. A. C. Gibbs would have done better to omit this passage than the initial "harper section" (25-38), the only part of the poem which he did not print in *Middle English Romances* (London, York Medieval Texts, 1966), pp. 84-103.
- ¹⁴ Quoted from A. J. Bliss (ed.), *Sir Launfal* (London, 1960), p. 18. Bliss is not there concerned with *Orfeo*.
- ¹⁵ Bliss places a comma after *speke*. For a defence of the punctuation with a full stop see L. J. Owen, "The Recognition Scene in *Sir Orfeo*," *Medium Ævum*, XL (1971), 249-53.
- ¹⁶ Friedman's suggestion that the motive was lust is without foundation in the poem: *Speculum*, XLI, 26ff., and *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 184ff.
- ¹⁷ For a more extreme view of this aspect of the Fairy World see G. Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London, 1951), pp. 80-84.
- ¹⁸ This feature is of course common in Celtic folk-tale stories in which the fairies appear. Another Irish name for *Tír na mBeo* is *Tír na nÓg*, the Land of the Ever-Young. The poem does not, however, exploit any apparent age-gap that might well have developed in their features whilst Heurodis was in the Fairy World and Orfeo in the wilderness. Lines 459-60 merely contrast Orfeo's dirty, unkempt and skinny appearance with Heurodis's flawless beauty. Owen's statement that the lines "explicitly contrast the unmarred loveliness of Heurodis with the age and suffering that disfigure Orfeo" (p. 249) is misleading since "unmarred" and the notion that Orfeo is disfigured with age suggest that the contrast is said (by the fairy king) to be due to the effects of time passing. The lines contain no such suggestion.
- ¹⁹ Descriptions by some earlier writers of Heurodis's condition in the Fairy World are misleading. Mrs Wright states that Heurodis and her companions are "stretched in sleep, or frozen" (p. 104) and Kinghorn interprets this to mean "a state of suspended animation" (p. 359). This description is inaccurate, for, unlike the Sleeping Beauty, Heurodis is able to go riding. Rev. Prof. P. O'Fiannachta (Maynooth) has kindly confirmed to me privately that, whilst persons taken to *Tír na mBeo* have their mobility restricted and do not age, they are not held in suspended animation; they can move about on occasions subject to the control of the fairies.
- ²⁰ Ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev. N. Davis (Oxford, 1967). Some useful general remarks concerning medieval poems about tests are made by J. A. Burrow in *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965), p. 160ff., but he does not mention *Sir Orfeo*.
- ²¹ This suggestion is not inconsistent with Severs's defence of the poem's unity (see p. 1 and n. 2) but it does provide a position of retreat for those (Smyser and Bliss) whom he attacks for alleging the superfluity of the final section; see Severs, pp. 198-9 and 206-7, n. 20.