An Inquiry into the Origins, Bibliography and Literary Analyses of Sir Orfeo

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AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINS, BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LITERARY ANALYSES OF SIR ORFEO

by

Michael E. Moriarty

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Arts

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
July, 1968
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The study of culture will only thrive where it is not limited to the necessary facts and statistics but leavened by the presence of a gentle and learned person whose knowledge of the culture is commensurate only with his concern for that culture. To such a man, to Doctor John R. Sommerfeldt, whom the culture he so carefully studies would have called doctissimus, I owe the gratitude due to one without whose encouragement, practical suggestions and enduring patience this thesis could never have come to be. Doctor Ruth Falk's carefully considered and incisive criticisms of my method and my text have been fundamental to the form which my faint idea finally took. I owe a debt of gratitude to the administration of La Lumiere School, La Porte, Indiana, whose gracious hospitality allowed me a quiet and a pleasant environment in which to do this work. Such gratitude does not affect my responsibility for this study of one aspect of medieval culture and the conclusions reached; these are my own.

Michael E. Moriarty
MASTER'S THESIS

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ANTECEDENT STORIES

Introduction

Critics and scholars are unstinting in their praise of
the Middle English lay Sir Orfeo and have studied it carefully,
tracing each of the Celtic and classic themes with which it
abounds and, in a few instances, venturing on some literary
analysis of the work. But there is no work in which one may
find all the antecedent stories compiled, all the themes cata-
logued and considered in a systematic way, and a literary analy-
sis offered which considers the story for the independent and
charming piece of craftsmanship that it is acknowledged to be.
It is the goal of this study to fill that void by offering a
review of the work which has been done to trace the components
of this lay and then to turn from the components to a study of
the lay as an independent work of art.

The Orphic Tradition

The tradition of stories about Orpheus is an ancient one
in which Orpheus has assumed a number of complimentary guises.
Among the ancient Greeks Orpheus was not only the famous singer
and harpist who enchanted trees and rocks, but the sailor-harp-
ist who calmed his companions, the Argonauts. He was the patron
of Mystery Rites and was associated with the worship of the
chthonic powers among the ancients. His name, Orpheus, seems to have derived from the Greek orphne (darkness). Only recently new archeological evidence has uncovered a site where Orpheus' famous descent into Hades could have been re-enacted by his mystical followers.¹ He figured prominently in the naive mathematical mysticism which Pythagoras devised for the ethical encouragement of his followers.

Under different circumstances he appeared with differing attributes. He was a seer whose head had been placed in an oracle shrine after his death. He was a mystic and a musician. He was an astrologer and the author of hymns which set forth mystical interpretations of the Dark Powers. He was a traveling philosopher and, in Aristophanes' play The Frogs (1032), he was the great missionary of civilization who, with his music, charmed the wilds and bent them to his will and to that of his father, Apollo.² Orpheus, sometimes believed to be the son of Apollo and always referred to as the son of the nymph Calliope, had one attribute which was regularly consistent: he was the enchanting musician.

Vergil and Ovid both told the story of Orpheus, each in his own way and for his own stylistic purposes. Boethius retold


the story in his *Consolation of Philosophy* as an example to
backsliders on the path of virtue. King Alfred translated the
*Consolation of Philosophy* into Anglo-Saxon with emendations of
his own. The story of Orpheus reappears frequently throughout
the Middle Ages. Ovid and Vergil were both popular authors
throughout this period and it is consequently probable that
those who read Latin knew the story of Orpheus. Praising the
charms of music the monk Froumont wrote in the tenth century
that he would compose amusing songs "just as Orpheus called
Eurydice back by singing."\(^1\) There are two works in Old French
which refer to the story of Orpheus and present his song to
the Lord of the Underworld.\(^2\) None of these can be connected
directly to the lay *Sir Orfeo* since they are primarily trans­
lations of the Latin original of the story and do not refer to
the thorough reconstruction which the story would undergo be­
fore it became the Middle English work of art. There are, how­
ever, at least three references to a *Lai d'Orphey* in Old French
texts which assert the existence of a lay in Old French dealing
with the story of Orpheus and from which the work *Sir Orfeo*
could have been translated. These three references and the
cumulative proofs for a French origin to the lay will be con­
sidered in detail in Chapter Three of this study.

\(^1\)G. L. Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo," *The Journal of American
Philology*, 1886, p. 185. Kittredge refers the reader to Pezii
Thesaur., Anecdt. II, i, 184 for the original citation.

\(^2\)Kittredge, p. 184.
Throughout European literature, wherever there is a reference to Orpheus, there is unanimity on one point. Orpheus was an excellent musician with powers beyond the ordinary. Even the most fleeting references to Orpheus underscore this point. It is no surprise that in the lay Sir Orfeo

Orfeo most of ony thing
Lovede the gle of harping. (9-10)

'Sir Orfeo'

In the Middle English poem Orfeo was descended from King Pluto and King Juno, gods of old. He studied the harp constantly and took no greater delight than in performing for anyone who would listen. Indeed, his harping was so fine that whoever heard it thought he was in Paradise. Orfeo lived in Winchester, a town which had been called Thrace among the ancients. His wife, the "fairest levede for the nones (indeed)" (29), Dame Heurodis, went out one morning in May to sport with her ladies in the orchard. She fell asleep under a grafted tree and slept there until the afternoon. When she awoke she began to scream and tear at her face and clothing.

1Except for the quotations from the Prologue of the lay which are taken from Kenneth Sisam's Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, Oxford: 1921, all quotations from Sir Orfeo in this study are taken from Donald Sands' Middle English Verse Romances, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966, pp. 187-200. Sands' edition is the most readily readable and the most convenient to use for typographical reasons since he has regularized the text graphemically and modernized the typography, primarily by substituting "th" for the thorn and edh.
Her ladies-in-waiting ran to the palace for help. Knights came running, took her in their arms and carried her to her room where she continued to scream until she was completely hysterical.

When Orfeo heard what had happened he hurried to his wife's chamber with his retinue of ten knights. He asked her what was wrong. Heurodis calmed down and finally explained that, much as she loved him, he would have to learn to live without her. "Do thy best, for I mot (must) go!" (102) she said. Orfeo swore that he would not live without her, "Whider thou gost, ichill with thee / And whider I go, thou shalt with me" (105-106). Orfeo pressed her for an explanation when she replied that that could not be.

She told him how, while she was sleeping, two knights came up to her and told her to come visit their king. She refused. The knights rode off to report to their king who then came to see her himself. He was accompanied by a vast retinue of a hundred knights and a hundred ladies, all dressed in milk-white garments. The king's crown shone like the sun. He seized her, forced her to mount a palfrey at his side and took her to his palace. He showed her all his towers and rivers, his forests and his fine horses. Then he returned her to her place under the grafted tree in the orchard and told her that she was going to live with him forever. He would return the next day to get her. She was to wait for him under the grafted tree. No matter what she did, he would have her even if he had to tear
her to pieces and take her that way.

When Orfeo had heard her out he grew disconsolate. He sought help from everyone, but no one was able to suggest any plan to prevent Heurodis' abduction. The next day the time came when the strange king had said he would return to the grafted tree for Heurodis. Orfeo led her there and surrounded the tree with ten hundred knights who formed a wall of shields. They swore to die defending her. Suddenly, by the power of Faerie, she disappeared.

Orfeo, crying, retired to his chamber and fainted onto the stone floor. Finally he called together his barons, earls, and lords, and announced that he was resolved to abandon his kingdom, leaving his steward in charge of the kingdom. He commanded them to call a parliament when they had certain news of his death and elect a new king. They implored him not to abandon the kingdom but he was resolved. Putting off his fine clothes, he donned a pilgrim's hood, took his harp on his back and left the town barefooted.

Orfeo went out into the wilderness to live. He who had been a king became a beggar. He who had dined on fine meats and dainties now lived on wild berries in the summer and scratched roots out of the ground in winter. His bed was moss and heather. Orfeo lived in the wilderness for ten years while his beard grew to his waist. He hid his harp in a hollow tree, only taking it out to play when the weather was pleasant. When he played the wild animals came and sat down to listen to him,
but even they abandoned him when he stopped playing. It often happened, about noon on hot days, that Orfeo saw a fairy hunt taking place, or a fairy army marching through. One afternoon he saw lords and ladies dancing on a green in elegant attire with all sorts of minstrelsy. Another day he saw sixty ladies ride by on horseback. He watched as they sent their falcons after mallards and herons and cormorants and laughed to see their sport. He decided to join them since he too had once enjoyed this sport. As he walked up to them he glanced about and saw Dame Heurodis. Neither spoke, but she began to cry, seeing how wretchedly he was dressed and how poor he looked compared with the great king she had known. The other ladies in the party realized what had happened and led Heurodis away.

Orfeo began to curse his fate once more and to wish that he were dead. Then he resolved to follow the ladies since it did not matter if he were killed. He could at least learn what had become of his wife.

The ladies rode for a long while and then turned in at a rock and rode underground for almost three miles. Orfeo followed them and stood amazed when they rode into an open place and up to a castle. The castle was the finest Orfeo had ever seen. It had red-gold buttresses and a fine moat, a hundred towers and crystal walls. Even when the sun was down it was bright there, for the building itself shone as brilliantly as the sun. Orfeo resolved to enter the castle. He went up to the gate, knocked and claimed entrance because he was a min-
strel. The porter admitted him. As he walked through the castle yard he discovered people laying about as though they were dead, though they were not dead but only seemed so. There were men in armor who had been taken during battles, people who had been caught in fires, people who were drowning when they were brought to the castle, women in childbirth, madmen and madwomen and, under a grafted tree, Orfeo's wife, Heurodis. He walked on across the castle yard and into the hall. There in the hall, under a bright canopy, were the King and Queen of the Otherworld. Orfeo walked up to them, knelt and offered to play for them. The king asked Orfeo how he had dared enter the Otherworld since no living man might do so of his own initiative. Orfeo did not answer but sat down, tuned his harp, and began to play. The king and queen sat very still, listening to Orfeo play. The inhabitants of the castle all came and sat quietly at Orfeo's feet, listening. When Orfeo had finished playing the king spoke. He offered Orfeo whatever he wanted. Orfeo requested the fair lady under the grafted tree in the courtyard. The king refused, explaining that she was far too lovely to be handed over to a ragged minstrel. Orfeo pressed the matter and warned the king that he had made a promise which he could not break if he were to remain a good king. The king acquiesced and Orfeo left the Otherworld with Heurodis.

Rather than enter Winchester immediately with his wife Orfeo stopped at a beggar's cottage just outside the city and asked for news. The beggar told him how the queen had been ab-
ducted by a fairy host and the king, disconsolate, had abandoned his throne and gone to the wilderness to mourn. The next day Orfeo borrowed clothes from the beggar and went into the city about noon to see how the steward had conducted his affairs. As he walked through the town people commented on his ragged appearance. Orfeo saw the steward and went up to him, offering to play the harp at court. The steward welcomed him in the name of Sir Orfeo and invited him to the court to eat. After the meal Orfeo tuned his harp and began to play. The steward recognized the harp and asked the beggar how he had come upon it. Orfeo, still maintaining his disguise, said that he had come upon a man's body, mauled by lions and eaten by wolves, lying in a dale. The harp was next to the body. That, Orfeo said, had happened about ten years before. The steward realized that the dead man would have been his king, Sir Orfeo, and fainted from grief. The barons revived him and tried to make him understand that everyone must die eventually. Orfeo then spoke, saying that if he were Orfeo the King and had suffered in the wilderness and found his wife, rescued her from the Otherworld and returned disguised as a beggar, he would try his steward to see whether he had been faithful or not. If he had not been faithful, he would be destroyed, but if he had been faithful he would succeed the king when the king died. Then everyone realized that this was Sir Orfeo himself. The steward knocked the table out of the way and fell to his knees before the king. All the lords and barons present acclaimed Orfeo and cried out, "Ye beth our lord, sir,
and our king!" (558).

They took him to his chamber, washed and shaved him and dressed him in his royal robes. A procession went out of the town to the beggar's cottage to get the queen whom they led back into the town "with all manner menstracy" (565). Orfeo and Heurodis were solemnly recrowned and lived long afterwards. The steward succeeded Orfeo when he died.

The Classic Antecedents

Vergil's version

Almost fourteen hundred years before an unknown Englishman wrote this version of the Orpheus story Vergil told it in a far briefer version in the fourth book of the Georgics, a lengthy poem in praise of the rural life. Vergil enshrined the story in an account of beekeeping. Aristaeus, a young shepherd, asked his mother, the nymph Cyrene, why all his bees had died. She took him to Proteus for an explanation. Proteus explained that Orpheus was punishing him. Aristaeus had been chasing Eurydice across a field when a snake bit her and she died of the wound. The wood-nymphs who were with her filled the hills with their crying. Her husband, Orpheus, was sick with grief. He took up his harp and sang her name over and over, and then wandered into Hades where even the Shades lis-

tended to him. The Furies paused to listen, the three-headed
dog Cerberus listened, Ixion's wheel stopped turning while
Orpheus played and sang. Orpheus began to lead Eurydice out
of Hades but glanced back to see her, thus violating the pact
he had made with Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, not
to look back until they were completely out of Hades. As Eury-
dice began to vanish she cried out. Her ringing lamentation
closes with the words:

And now farewell. I am carried away and closed
in on by the immense night, stretching to you
my helpless -- oh god! they are no longer yours!
-- hands. (496-497)^

Orpheus grasped at the shadows, trying to hold her, but
it was no use. The ferryman at the River Styx would not allow
him to cross again. He stayed there for several days and then
wandered off, playing his harp. Nothing could distract his
mind from his lost Eurydice. Finally, enraged because he paid
them no attention, a group of Tracian Bacchantes tore him limb
from limb. His head was thrown into the River Hebris where it
floated, crying "Eurydice!" and the banks of the river echoed
back, "Eurydice!"

Aristaeus' bees had been killed by the wood-nymphs in
vengeance for Eurydice. He sacrificed four bulls to them and
on the ninth day, after he had made funeral offering to Orpheus,

^Translation mine. The Latin text: "Iamque vale: feror
ingenti circumdata nocte / invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non
tua, palmas."

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bees miraculously appeared in the entrails of the sacrificial bulls.

Ovid's version

Ovid treated the story somewhat differently. In his book of changes, the Metamorphoses, Ovid presented the entire story of Orpheus in the tenth book.\(^1\) Vergil had used the story as a mythic explanation for the death of a whole hive of bees, a pressing question in a poetic manual on the rural arts. Ovid's purpose was not so immediately practical. In the Metamorphoses Ovid set out to recount the miraculous changes mythology offered and to show how within this tradition of changes, from Chaos to Order and so on to the deification of Julius Caesar, the Res Publica Romana could become the entirely different Imperium Romanum without any essential change in the spirit of the Roman people. Change, Ovid essayed to show, was the condition for remaining the same and gaining immortality. The story of Orpheus was a story of just such a change.

Just after their ill-omened marriage Eurydice was wandering in a grassy field. A snake bit her on the heel and she died at once. Orpheus' prolonged mourning brought him eventually to the Underground where his piteous sighs and lamentations so moved the Shades that they admitted him. He went straight to Pluto,

the King of the Underground, and his wife, Persephone, and began to sing. He protested in his song that he had not come out of idle curiosity but out of profound grief and love. He reminded the King and Queen of the Underground that they must have known love once, if there were any truth to the old legend of Pluto's rape of Persephone. He pointed out to them that theirs was the longest reign over men, once they had died, and that their kingdom was everyone's final home. The closing lines of his song moved even the Shades to tears:

But it is certain that I have come for my wife. If the fates deny this, then I will not return alone. Enjoy two deaths! (38-39)

Ovid remarks in surprise that the Shades were so touched by Orpheus' song that all their activities stopped. Then, as if he were present, Ovid turns and speaks to Sisyphus who had been condemned to push a stone up a hill for all eternity. "And you, Sisyphus, have even sat down on your stone." (44)

Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, granted Eurydice's return to Orpheus on the condition that he not look back at her until they were well out of Hades. Orpheus' self-control was not that great. As soon as he began to glance back Eurydice vanished. In an oblique reference to the long and touching lam-

---

1 Translation mine. The Latin text: "Quod si fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est / nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum."

2 Translation mine. The Latin text: "inque tuo sedisti, Sisyph:ae, saxo."
entation which Vergil put in Eurydice's mouth at this point, Ovid remarked that she disappeared so suddenly that "she could only say a final farewell which scarcely reached his ears." (62-63)

Forbidden readmission to Hades, Orpheus wandered over the earth until he found a remote place where he sat down to sing sad songs about the deaths of lovers of the gods and goddesses. At this point Ovid took advantage of the songs Orpheus sang to tell the stories of Apollo and Hyacinthus, of Venus and Adonis, of Atalanta's race and several other stories about divine lovers.

After he sang for a while the trees moved to the place where he sat to listen to him. Birds and wild animals gathered and listened quietly. Then a mob of Thracian Bacchantes saw him and attacked him. They first killed the birds and wild animals which surrounded him and then tore his body to pieces. His head and his lyre were thrown into the River Hebris where they floated, uttering strange sighs, until Apollo rescued them and put them in an oracle shrine. Orpheus himself, in the meantime, rejoined Eurydice in Hades.

**Boethius' version and King Alfred's translation**

As Boethius tells it the structure of the story remains

---

1 Translation mine. The Latin text: "Supremumque vale, quod iam vix auribus ille / acciperet, dixit."
identical with that of his predecessors. Orpheus mourns his wife, goes to Hades where he recovers and then loses her in the classic manner. But Boethius' version is short and to the point. This is a didactic piece, calculated to show that "whoever is conquered and turns his eyes to the pit of hell, looking into the inferno, loses all the excellence he has gained."

Boethius did not change the structure of the story but he did add new details to the story. When Orpheus mourned his wife and played on his harp "he made the fearful deer lie down bravely with the fierce lions; the rabbit no longer feared the dog quieted by his song." This detail is completely new to the classic story. Neither Vergil nor Ovid were so preoccupied with the details of Orpheus' enchanting powers over animals. Vergil mentioned that animals stopped to listen to him; Ovid had the trees come to listen, but more as a device to provide shade for the singer. Boethius inserted a new element of description which King Alfred exploited when he translated the Consolation of Philosophy into Anglo-Saxon.

Before recounting King Alfred's translation it will be helpful to compare the versions of Vergil, Ovid and Boethius to determine the original story pattern. Vergil began the story


2 Boethius, p. 73.

3 Boethius, p. 74.
with Eurydice's death and Orpheus' intense grief. Ovid, after recounting the inauspicious omens, also began with Eurydice's death and Orpheus immediately plunged into mourning. Boethius too immediately presented Orpheus' mourning song, but he departed from the pattern and described the wildlife that came to listen to the songs at this point, before Orpheus went to Hades to rescue his wife, rather than afterwards in the pattern Vergil and Ovid followed.

King Alfred abandoned this pattern of the antique authors to present the story in a new form, a form adapted to listeners who were less likely to know the story from the classic sources.¹ He first introduced the harper, Orpheus, who lived in Thrace and was widely renowned for his skill on the harp. He then introduced Eurydice, Orpheus' wife, who was widely renowned for her beauty. The opening of Sir Orfeo follows this pattern exactly. First the author of the lay presents Orfeo himself, "a king in Ingland." He describes his skill on the harp and tells Orfeo's ancestry. Heurodis is introduced and her beauty is praised:

The king hadde a Quen of priis (excellence)  
That was y-cleped Dame Herodis, (called)  
That might go on body and bones, (indeed)

---

Ful of love and godenisse,  
Ac no man may telle hir fairnise. (27-32)

Severs feels that this identical pattern is significant and may point to the specific source which the Breton poet used for his version of *Sir Orfeo*.¹

All the classic authors, Vergil, Ovid and Boethius, stress the power which Orpheus exercised over the wild beasts with his music. Of the three, however, Boethius develops the point most fully. In King Alfred's translation the theme is fully developed and stated repeatedly. The wild animals have no fear of each other, they are not afraid of the dogs, they experience the emotion of gladness, and even Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards hell, wags his tail. In Alfred's version the effect of the music on the animals is dominant. In *Sir Orfeo* the effect of the music on the animals is the only feature that is mentioned. The enchanted trees of Ovid's version have disappeared completely.

For joye abouten him they teth. (gather)  
And alle the foules that ther were  
Come and sete on ich a brere  
To here his harping afine,  
So mich melody was therin. (250-254)

The emotion which the animals experienced which Alfred called gladness has become "joye." In the classic versions this emo-

¹Severs, pp. 187-207. Severs' point on the story pattern is on pages 190-192.
tion did not find a place.

In one other particular it is possible that Alfred has opened the story pattern for the changes which Sir Orfeo later effected. In the classic versions Orpheus' wandering over the earth, disconsolate at his wife's loss, comes after his failure to rescue her from Hades. Severs perhaps exaggerated when he said that "there is nothing comparable at this point in the classical versions," because Orpheus does mourn extensively for his wife before his descent to Hades. The point is, however, that Orpheus does not wander about the earth in the classic versions before he descends to Hades. Nonetheless his abandonment of society, his refusal to pay attention to women, his move into the wilderness to live with wild beasts are all present in the classic versions. Alfred's change is simply to have placed this period of exile and isolation before the trip to Hades instead of after it. This does, as Severs points out, affect the structure of the story and open the pattern for the prolonged exile of ten years which Orfeo had to undergo before he found his wife.²

Severs feels, no doubt correctly, that too little critical attention had been focused on the parallel in King Alfred's emended translation of Boethius' version of the Orpheus story.

¹ Severs, p. 191.

² ibid.
On the force of these parallels, perhaps it is not too much to suggest that the classical version which the original Breton poet knew, and which he blended with Celtic myth to create the original Breton lay, was Alfred's translation of Boethius, or some closely related telling of the tale. No classical detail which could have influenced *Sir Orfeo* is present in Ovid and Vergil and Boethius that is not also present in Alfred's translation of Boethius; and in addition the parallels cited above are uniquely present in Alfred.¹

The Celtic Antecedents

Kittredge began the search for Celtic elements in the story of Sir Orfeo with his article "Sir Orfeo" which appeared in the *Journal of American Philology* in 1886. This article has become a watershed of research in the effort to account for the differences between the classic versions of the Orpheus story and the lay *Sir Orfeo*. Kittredge suggested a reconstruction of the path which the story of Orpheus could have taken. This reconstruction is still valid, although further research has suggested that its path may have been even more complex than Kittredge thought. Kittredge's reconstruction will find a more appropriate place in Chapter Three of this study.

Although scholars have not worked out all the details, there is evidence enough to state with Severs that the Celtic influences "are so strong that the dominant mood of the whole

¹ Severs, p. 192.
The research begun by Kittredge after a study of the edition of Sir Orfeo by Zielke in 1880\(^2\) and followed by Schoepperle, Hibbard, Davies, Roger Sherman Loomis, Kane, Smithers and Bliss in his authoritative edition of all the extant texts of Sir Orfeo in 1954\(^3\) and Severs, has shown that there are at least two major Celtic tales which have influenced the outlines of the story of Sir Orfeo and another three which have provided graphically Celtic details. Bliss and Severs give pride of place to a story told by Walter Map in his De Nugis Curialium, The Dead Woman's Sons. Kittredge, Schoepperle, Hibbard and Loomis felt strongly that the most fundamental Celtic story involved in Sir Orfeo is The Wooing of Etain, a story from Ireland which Kittredge studied in great detail. Bliss disputed this but the consensus seems to be that The Wooing of Etain should retain its pre-eminent position as the major source, a position shared with Walter Map's The Dead Woman's

\(^1\)ibid.

\(^2\)Oscar Zielke, Sir Orfeo, ein englisches FeenMärchen aus Mittelalter, Breslau, 1880.

Sons. The three Celtic tales which appear to have provided
detail for the story of Sir Orfeo and which have been most
closely studied are the story of Herla, the story of Tydorel
and Connla the Fair.

Walter Map's 'The Dead Woman's Sons'

Roger Sherman Loomis pointed out the story The Dead Wom­
an's Sons in 1936 in a brief article in Modern Language Notes.
It had escaped attention before that time. Map told the story
twice, once in Distinctio II, cap. 13 and again in Distinctio
IV, cap. 8. He told the story only briefly in the first refer­
ence and then at greater length in the second version which runs
as follows:

There was once a knight of Lesser Britain who,
having lost his wife, and grieved for her a long
time after her death, came upon her by night in a
large company of women, in a valley devoid of in­
habitants. He was seized with astonishment and
fear: seeing her alive again whom he had buried,
he could not believe his eyes, and wondered what
the fairies might be up to. He resolved to carry
her off by force, in order to have the happiness
that her capture would bring him if she were real,
or to avoid the imputation of cowardice in holding
back (if he were being deceived by an illusion).
He accordingly seized and carried her off, and
lived happily with her for many years, as agreeably
and as naturally as before; and she presented him
with sons, of whom there are descendants in great
number at the present time, and who were known as
'the sons borne by the woman who had died.' This
departure from the course of nature would be in­
credible and monstrous, if assured evidences of
its truth were not still in existence.¹

¹Smithers, p. 87. The Latin text is printed in Appendix
One of this study as Item 1.
Loomis and Davies believe that this story is a direct source of the Lai d'Orphey, the original French version of Sir Orfeo.\(^1\) Bliss and Smithers are more inclined to feel that this version is a Celtic tale mingled with classic elements and that it is, therefore, quite likely a brief retelling of the Lai d'Orphey itself.\(^2\) To be sure, many elements in the story do allude to the Orfeo: the company of women, the localization in Brittany, the valley in the wilderness, the dance and the mention of fairies -- all recount material which occurs in Sir Orfeo. Severs pointed out, however, that it is difficult to understand how a feature so important as Orfeo's skill on the harp could have been omitted if Map were in fact recounting the lay. He suggested that it may be "simpler and more likely that the Filii Mortue (sc. The Dead Woman's Sons), mingling, as it does, both classical and Celtic elements, is intermediate between a classical version and the Breton lay."\(^3\) In all, Severs' explanation seems the most likely. The fundamental relationships between the two stories which were listed above do appear to imply that the story The Dead Woman's Sons was known to the author of the Breton lay.

\(^1\) Loomis, p. 30; Davies, p. 355.

\(^2\) Bliss, p. xxxii; Smithers, pp. 87-88.

\(^3\) Severs, note 10, pp. 205-206.
"The Wooing of Etain": an Irish tale

With the major exception of Bliss, researchers are unanimous in attributing much of the action in Sir Orfeo to The Wooing of Etain. Bliss objected that there are only two resemblances in The Wooing of Etain: a preliminary visit of the fairy prince and the ranks of men set to guard the queen from abduction.¹ Laura Hibbard Loomis was correct in pointing out that there are several other themes which Bliss did not mention: the granting of any promise, the company of women in which the lost woman is found and the search for the lost woman in the land of Faërie.² Kittredge found two major relationships between the two stories on somewhat larger grounds than such specific details. He called attention to the similarities between the abduction scenes and the scenes in which the woman is regained.³

Etain was the wife of Eochaid Airem, the supreme king of Ireland. She had been Midir's lover in fairyland until his wife had cast a spell on her and she had been blown out of fairyland and reborn as a mortal. Midir, a fairy chief, assumed the shape of Eochaid's brother when Eochaid was out hunting and his brother was sick. Thus disguised, Midir proclaimed

¹Bliss, p. xxxv.
³Kittredge, p. 191-192.
his love to Etain. She did not recognize him as Midir, her lover in fairyland, and rejected his advances. After this had occurred three times Midir explained what had happened to her and reminded her of her true fairy nature. She agreed to let him put his arm around her, but only if her husband would grant permission for such a liberty.

One day, as Eochaid Airem was walking of the high place Midir appeared to him clothed in a purple tunic. He proposed a game of chess for any stakes the king cared to name. Eochaid, secure in his reputation as the best chess-player in Ireland, played Midir two games and won everything he had from him. Midir proposed a final game in which the stakes, if he won, would be whatever he wished to claim. Eochaid agreed. Midir was successful in the third game and claimed the right to put his arm around Etain's waist. Eochaid Airem demurred, first for a year, and then, when Midir insisted on his rights which the king had promised, delayed for another month. At the end of that month Eochaid had the great hall surrounded by warriors who were resolved to hold off the intruder at any cost. To everyone's surprise Midir appeared in the middle of the room and began to sing an enchanting song describing his palace to Etain. Etain refused to join him without her husband's permission. Eochaid reluctantly granted what he had promised a year and a month before and Etain walked to Midir's embrace. As Midir put his arm about Etain's waist they both disappeared through the smoke hole in the roof. The warriors rushed outside only to see two
swans flying away.

King Eochaid ordered his chief druid to find Etain. After a year's search the druid finally located Midir's fairy palace under a fairy mound. Eochaid went to the site with his men to dig the mound out and reclaim Etain. As they dug closer to Midir's palace, Midir caused fifty women to appear on top of the mound, all of them exactly like Etain. Eochaid could not tell which of them was Etain until she made herself known to him. He then took her back to Tara where they remained safely thereafter.¹

The similarities in the abduction scene are clear. The fairy warrior corresponds to the fairy king of Sir Orfeo. The song which Midir sings to Etain tells of the beauties of his land just as the fairy king had taken Heurodis to see those beauties for herself. The guards with which both aggrieved husbands attempted to defend their wives are similar in intent and in their ultimate futility. In both stories the actual abduction is sudden and mysterious.² The similarities continue in the rescue scene, at least in one particular which is also paralleled in Map's story: the woman is found in a great company of women.³ These and other themes will be developed more fully

¹In addition to Kittredge, loc. cit. and p. 195, The Wooing of Etain is reported by Smithers, p. 85; Bliss, p. xxxiv; and Severs, pp. 194-196.

²Kittredge, p. 192.

³Loomis, L. H., pp. 192-193; Severs, p. 194.
in Chapter Two where they will be studied as independent themes rather than develop them here where the major preoccupation is on the content of the stories which seem to have contributed to Sir Orfeo.

The stories of King Herla, Tydorel and Connla the Fair

The remaining three Celtic stories are of interest because they have either provided sources for some of the details of Sir Orfeo or provide examples of parallel situations in uniquely Celtic environments which demonstrate the Celticism of many of the details of the story.

The story of Herla which Loomis and Bliss both studied is told in Map's De Nugis Curialium, Distinctio I, cap. 9. He tells of a fairy horde like the one Orfeo saw "oft in hot undretides" (mid-mornings). He also mentions an entrance into fairy-land through a rock which leads underground, almost exactly like the entrance to the Otherworld in Sir Orfeo. The belief in a fairy army which Map recorded seems to have been common among the Celts, although Map asserts that the fairy army had not been seen since the coronation of Henry II.

Herla was a British king who met a pygmy and invited him to his wedding. The pygmy came and in turn invited Herla to come to his wedding, one year hence. Herla returned to the

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1R. S. Loomis, "'Sir Orfeo' and Walter Map's 'De Nugis'" Modern Language Notes, LI (1936), 28-29; Bliss, pp. xxxvii-xxxix.
spot where they had met after the year expired and was met by messengers who led him into a cave in a cliff, then deep into the darkness and finally into a brightly lit place where the pygmy's palace was. After the wedding the pygmy gave Herla a small bloodhound and warned him not to dismount until after the bloodhound had leaped from his arms. After they passed out of the cliff and came back into the daylight Herla rode up to a shepherd and asked for news of his wife. The shepherd could hardly understand Herla since he was a Saxon while Herla was a Breton. The only lady of that name of whom the shepherd had heard had died two hundred years before when her husband, King Herla, disappeared into the cliff. Since that time the Saxons had conquered the Bretons and now ruled in that place. At this news one of King Herla's men jumped down from his horse and immediately crumbled into dust. King Herla ordered his men not to dismount until the bloodhound leaped from his arms. He and his men were still riding and the bloodhound had not yet jumped down from Herla's arms when this fairy army was last seen, according to Map, in Henry II's time.

Kittredge and Bliss both felt that the Lay of Tydorel was analogous to Sir Orfeo in at least one incident.\(^1\) It would seem that fairies gain control over people when they are in an unnatural situation. In the Lay of Tydorel as in Sir Orfeo the fairy visitor gained control over a mortal woman while she was

\(^1\) Kittredge, pp. 190-191; Bliss, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.
sleeping under an unnatural thing, a grafted tree. Tydorel, like Heurodis, fell asleep under a grafted tree while she was in the orchard playing with her ladies. When she awoke her attendants were gone. A beautiful fairy knight approached her and invited her to be his lover. He threatened to drag her into the nearby pool where he lived and drown her if she refused. She became his lover and remained so until they were discovered. After the discovery the witness died, but the fairy knight could not remain a mortal's lover after their love had been discovered by any other mortal.

The last of the Celtic tales which scholars have considered to have had a direct influence on Sir Orfeo, or of having an immediately similar theme, is _Connla the Fair_. Cross and Slover suggest that this story may be the source of the idea that the land of the fairies is a land of the living.¹ In _Sir Orfeo_ it is clearly stated that the inhabitants only appear to be dead, but are alive. _Connla the Fair_ is also a story in which fairy power gains control over a mortal man, as in _Sir Orfeo_ fairy power gains control over a mortal woman; and of taking Connla to fairyland in spite of his father's wishes as Heurodis was taken in spite of her husband's wishes.

A fay appeared to Connla and invited him to join her in the Land of the Living, the Pleasant Plain. The power of an

orchard in the hands of the fairies becomes clear again in this story, for Connla's lover gave him a magic apple on which he lived for a month. Finally, he acquiesced and they departed for the Land of the Living in a crystal canoe in spite of his father's insistence that he remain among mortals.¹

The Possible Historical Precedents

The classic versions of the Orpheus story have lent at least the proper names and a recognizable plot to the lay Sir Orfeo.² The numerous Celtic stories seem to have lent an atmosphere of fairy mystery and to have justified the almost ritual aspects of Heurodis' abduction and subsequent recovery as well as to have fleshed out several of the details of the atmosphere and general tone of the Otherworld Orfeo had to enter to regain his wife.³ In addition to these there are four historical precedents which may have influenced the formation of the story.

The abduction of Ela

Davies discussed the abduction of Ela, the young heiress of William Fitzpatrick, in her "Notes on the Sources of 'Sir Orfeo'"

¹Cross and Slover, loc. cit.; Kittredge, p. 196; Bliss, p. xxxv.
²Severs, p. 187.
³Kane, p. 84.
which appeared in *Modern Language Review* in 1936,\(^1\) the same year in which Loomis published his information about Walter Map's story *The Dead Woman's Sons*. Miss Davies also discussed this story before turning to a study of Ela's abduction which includes the disguises of a minstrel and a pilgrim, not unlike Orfeo's. Because Ela was the heiress to great wealth and property she was carried off to Normandy.

and there she was kept safe and sound in a house. At the same time in England there was a knight by the name of William Talbot who put on the habit of a pilgrim and sailed over to Normandy, and there he stayed for two years; wandering here and there, looking for Lady Ela Sarum. When he found her he put off the garments of a pilgrim and disguised himself as a minstrel, and entered the court where she was staying. Since he was an amusing man, extremely skilled in the stories of old, he was warmly welcomed there and treated as an intimate. And when he found a good time he returned to England, taking with him the venerable Lady Ela, the heiress to Sarum, and presented her to King Richard. He received her delightedly and married her to his brother William Longespege by whom she had the following children...\(^2\)

In addition to presenting the abduction and the romantic figure of the knight disguised as a pilgrim and then as a minstrel who entertained the court until he could make off with

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\(^1\)C. Davies, "Notes on the Sources of 'Sir Orfeo,'" *Modern Language Review*, xxl (1936), 356-357.

\(^2\)Davies, p. 356, quoted from Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, VI, part i, quoting the "history of the foundation of Lacock Priory for Nuns." Translation mine. The Latin text is in Appendix One of this study as Item 2.
the lady, the story of Ela has a tentative relationship to Marie de France. Marie de France authored several Breton lays, of which twelve are extant. Although it cannot be demonstrated that Marie de France is the author of the lost Old French version of the Lai d'Orphey, she is known to be the author of the Old French version of Lai le Fresne, translated into Middle English not unlike that of Sir Orfeo. Bliss discusses the possibility that the translator of Lai le Fresne and Sir Orfeo may be the same person. This discussion will be elaborated in Chapter Three. Here it is enough to indicate that there is a tentative relationship between the Lai d'Orphey and Marie de France since if the person who translated the Lai d'Orphey and Lai le Fresne is the same, he may have taken them from the same author. Tenuous as Miss Davies admits the argument is, it may suggest some reason for a relationship between the story of Sir Orfeo and the abduction of Ela.

If Marie de France were the author of the original Lai d'Orphey she may have composed it in such a way as to have included some thread of topical allusion which would have pleased her literary circle and gained their knowing attention. The actual identity of Marie de France is unknown but among several theories proposed for her identification is one which would make her the daughter of Geoffrey of Anjou, Henry II's father. She would then be the sister of King Henry II; and the 'Count William' for whom she translated her Ysopet into Old French would
have been her nephew and Ela's husband. Thus, were this identification of Marie de France correct, she would be Ela's aunt through marriage and would have known the story of her abduction which took place in 1198, a date reasonably close of Marie's probable dates (fl. end of the twelfth century).

It is tempting to evolve a thread of reasoning as complex as this and accept it as correct because of its intricacies. As Miss Davies herself says:

Naturally, one hesitates to make any statement, for the facts are not conclusive, but such as they are, they are at any rate suggestive and offer some ground for thinking that Marie herself might have been the author of a French lai narratif of Orphey that has been preserved for us in its English versions only.¹

Certainly hers appears to be a more rational view of this possibility than the unusually peevish remark which Severs made when he said that "it is hard to believe that such a mundane abduction as that of Ela could have suggested the magical fairy disappearance of Heurodis."² It is hard to believe that such a portmanteau use of the word can leave it with any meaning if a knight disguised as a pilgrim who wanders about Normandy for two years in search of the heiress of Sarum and mysteriously disguises himself as a minstrel at court until he can take her

¹Davies, p. 357.
²Severs, note 13, p. 206.
away and return her to the always glamorous court of King Richard can be described as "mundane."

In one other point Miss Davies' suggestion is as plausible as Smyser's.\(^1\) He suggested that Orfeo need not have borrowed the beggar's clothes before he went into Winchester and that he did so because the author "splices on to it (sc. the story of Orfeo) the enormously popular motif of the return and recognition of an exile."\(^2\) It is no less implausible to go beyond what Miss Davies has suggested and suggest that perhaps Orfeo put on the beggar's clothes as a reminder of the change in disguise which the knight affected after he found Ela's hiding-place. This very gesture could have been the signature of an intimate to the entire event, perhaps of Marie de France herself since there are "similar coincidences between fact and fiction which occur in her Guigemar and Le Purgatoire de Saint-Patrice."\(^3\)

The reference to a parliament

Laura Hibbard Loomis suggested that Orfeo's request that after his men heard of his death they should call a parliament and select a new king implied a date for the composition of the


\(^2\)Smyser, p. 135.

\(^3\)Davies, p. 357.
poem some time after 1327 when Parliament deposed Edward II in favor of Edward III. She is no doubt correct when she suggests that this accords with many other English details which most probably were not present in the original Old French Lai d'Orphéy. However, her suggestion that Orfeo's request that a successor be chosen is "improbable before the revolutionary events of January, 1327" requires closer investigation. The two events are quite dissimilar. Orfeo has not been, nor is there any possibility that he will be, deposed as was Edward II. Orfeo has merely suggested a peaceful way of choosing his successor which is not in disagreement with the practice of the ancient Celts.

Bliss has established by internal evidence that the oldest extant version of the lay in the Auchinleck MS. dates from about the year 1330, a few short years after Edward II's deposition and hardly time enough for an elective procedure to have become so normal that Orfeo could refer to it almost casually as a standard and accepted procedure for choosing a new king.

Mrs. Loomis' suggestion makes the date of composition rather late for the evidence which Bliss produces. "As far as the language is concerned", Bliss says, "Sir Orfeo could have been

1 Loomis, L. H., op. cit., p. 291.

2 Bliss, p. ix.
written at any date in the second half of the thirteenth century."\(^1\) Kittredge too asserted that the poem was composed in the second half of the thirteenth century.\(^2\) It may be true, as Mrs. Loomis asserted, that *Orfeo* could have been written after 1327, "perhaps very shortly before the compilation of the whole anthology"\(^3\) (which occurs in the Auchinleck MS.), but it is improbable that something so revolutionary as the events of January 1327 could have so quickly altered their whole coloring and have become the precedent for the peaceful election of a king in a piece of literature.

If it is necessary to look for a precedent in actual parliamentary procedure for the suggestion *Orfeo* made, it is more likely that Simon de Montfort's Model Parliament of 1265 may have set the peaceful example. It is not unlikely, as will be explained further on, that Edward I's Model Parliament which took place in 1295 may also have played a part in establishing a precedent of peaceful Parliaments which could have, *in extremis*, elected a king as *Orfeo* suggested.

The reference to a re-coronation

The third historical precedent which may have served a purpose in the composition of *Sir Orfeo* has escaped the atten-

\(^1\)Bliss, p. xxi.
\(^2\)Kittredge, p. 176.
\(^3\)L. H. Loomis, p. 291.
tion of scholars heretofore. After most of the action of the story has drawn to a finish Heurodis returned to the town in a "gret processioun" and the people wept for joy. Then, in a final denouement of touching grandeur, in a perhaps unnecessary but nonetheless dramatic gesture to reaffirm Orfeo's return with his queen

King Orfeo newe corouned is
And his Queen, Dame Herodis. (569-570)

This dramatically appropriate gesture finishes off the rejoicing and sets Orfeo firmly on his regained throne. Perhaps this is nothing more than a literary device to give the story a wholly satisfactory conclusion. It is, however, worthy of note that such a re-coronation is not unprecedented in English history, indeed in English royal history at Winchester, the site of Orfeo's re-coronation.¹

In 1194, two years before Ela's abduction from Normandy, King Richard the Lion-Hearted was recrowned after his long absence from his kingdom. He had been captured by the German Emperor on his return from the Crusades and held for ransom for several years while his mother, Eleanore of Aquitaine,

collected the money for his ransom and finally dispatched it to the Emperor. To celebrate her son's return, to reaffirm his rightful position on the throne in spite of her son John Lackland's efforts to secure the throne, and to give her son's return as glamorous a setting as possible, Eleanore arranged for him to be recrowned in Winchester in the new Norman cathedral during the Easter court in 1195.\(^1\) Geoffrey of Monmouth earlier used a similar ceremony, the coronation of King Stephan, as the precedent for his description of Arthur's coronation at Camelot, describing the ceremony in gorgeous detail in his *History of the Kings of Britain*.\(^2\) The role of Winchester as a proto-type of Camelot was not unknown.\(^3\) Edward I later developed this very role more elaborately in his courtly antique policy which will be discussed further on.

Richard the Lion-Hearted's re-coronation at Winchester was a dramatic gesture which Eleanore may have engineered for her own purposes, in order to maintain her son's authority and

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and strengthen her standing with him in spite of her detractors.¹ These practical motives do not, however, affect the fact that the coronation took place with all the splendor similar to that which Geoffrey of Monmouth described. It is probable that such splendid and public events inspired many minstrels and authors besides Geoffrey of Monmouth to heights of song. The adventures of Richard the Lion-Hearted and his ambitious mother have furnished the minstrels and story-tellers with plenty of material for their stories.² Is it not probable that this splendid re-coronation also furnished them with a stock theme to be used in an occasion as appropriate as Orfeo's return from a similar absence from his kingdom? It is tempting to suggest that when the author of the original Old French lay was composing the story he did not overlook the dramatic possibilities of such an event as a re-coronation and incorporated it into his lay as a fitting conclusion to a long exile just as Eleanore of Aquitaine used it as the fitting conclusion to her son's long imprisonment.

The environment provided by Edward I's courtly antique policy

Edward I (1237-1307), whose reign covers the latter half of the thirteenth century to which both Kittredge and Schoep-

¹A. Kelly, Chap. 29.

perle assigned Sir Orfeo, came to the throne after exhaustive wars with the barons of England. He had personally led the battle of Evesham in 1265 where Simon de Montfort was defeated and killed. Internally, his policy was calculated to set up peaceful precedents, working with the barons and the middle class through a Parliament which he strengthened and shaped. Externally, he became entangled in wars with both Scotland and Wales which exhausted the treasury and left his heir, Edward II, in a precarious situation.

Determined to eliminate the abuses of power to which the barons had grown accustomed and to restore the royal authority which the barons had scorned, Edward adopted a two-pronged policy: he fostered a peaceful Parliament which could conduct the business of the kingdom without abuse and he maintained an elaborate court ceremonial calculated to attract the young of the nobility to himself. Edward encouraged deliberate archaism which regarded the conquest of Wales as an adventure

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1 Kittredge, p. 176; Schoepperle, footnote 1, p. 541.
3 Lunt, p. 151.
4 Lunt, p. 190 ff.
5 Lunt, p. 206.
6 Lunt, p. 191.
like those undertaken by Arthur's knights of the Round Table."\(^1\)

In accord with this policy he organized an elaborate tournament which he called a "Round Table" at Snowdon to celebrate the conquest of Wales.\(^2\) It was evidently on this occasion that he produced the forged Round Table which Caxton accepted as evidence that Arthur's Camelot had been at Winchester.\(^3\) The table is still on display in the courtroom of the City Hall in Winchester where it hangs above the judge's bench. The *Annales Monastici* report that Edward subsequently encouraged "Round Tables" throughout the kingdom.\(^4\) Commenting on this and on Edward's determination to restore the royal authority, Stenton said:

Edward realized that knighthood must be tied to the court and the glamour of the court if young men were to be drawn into the knightly order.\(^5\)

The association with Arthur's court which Edward I encouraged by his policy of frequently holding court at Winchester where he kept the Round Table he had produced for the celebration in Wales and the glamor which he constantly attached to courtly procedure helped to strengthen his royal authority.

\(^1\)Stenton, p. 96

\(^2\)ibid.

\(^3\)Caxton, Preface to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*.


\(^5\)Stenton, p. 96.
It is certain that the reign of Edward I would accord with Bliss' suggestion that the lay's language suggests a date of composition sometime after the middle of the thirteenth century.\(^1\) Mrs. Loomis' date, some thirty years after the close of the thirteenth century during a period of immense political upheavals, is perhaps likely to be rather late for the dating Bliss and Kittredge have suggested.\(^2\) The political uncertainty which accompanied the period 1327-1330 may have been a bit too violent for the calm work which must have gone into the careful translating and restructuring which resulted in Sir Orfeo. It is tempting to suggest, though it is impossible to prove, that the fierce pride which fostered the assertion that Winchester was the ancient Thrace was nourished by the courtly antique policy of Edward I who took the court back to the old royal capital of Winchester from London in his effort to renew the old and noble courtly fidelity which Sir Orfeo so well portrays.

\(^1\)Bliss, p. xxi.

\(^2\)L. H. Loomis, p. 292.
CHAPTER TWO

THE THEMES

Introduction

In addition to the obviously thematic quality of the classic and Celtic influences in Sir Orfeo which will be considered in this chapter, there is a third set of influences which will be considered as thematic: the manifestations of the English spirit which have attracted the attention of the Loomises especially, but of other scholars too, in articles and reviews relevant to Sir Orfeo.¹

The Classic Themes

Names

Because the lay is named for the hero of the classic tales which were discussed in Chapter One the first theme which is fruitful for discussion is that of the names themselves. That Orfeo is derived from the form Orpheus is, perhaps, more obvious than the derivation of Heurodis from Eurydice, but no more accurate. Lindner's suggestion that the lay is derived from an Italian rather than a French source because of the peculiar form "Orfeo" was rejected by Kittredge in 1886 as having "very

little in it."¹

**Abduction**

Davies has not overlooked the vague similarity between the classic theme of abduction and the same subject in *Sir Orfeo*.² Although there are no accounts of Eurydice being abducted in the classic sources, the myth of Pluto's abduction of Persephone forms a part of the classic tradition. Pointing to the classic tradition of abduction which has played such a great part in discussions of vegetation deities, Miss Davies discovered that a similar story exists in Celtic lore: the *Vita Gildae* (sc. *Life of Gilda*) in which Gilda is carried off to the Otherworld and rescued by her husband. Miss Davies suggested that this story may be an antecedent of *Sir Orfeo*³, indirectly linking it to the discussion of vegetation deities.⁴

**Mourning**

Orpheus' inconsolable grief at the loss of his wife leads to a very different conclusion to his story from the conclusion

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³Davies, loc. cit., p. 162.

of Orfeo's story. In the classic versions Orpheus' grief triggered his deliberate journey to Hades to find his wife. In Chapter One Severs' point was noted that King Alfred transposed Orpheus' grief into a sojourn in the wilderness which took place before his descent into Hades to regain his wife.1 This development appears to have allowed the major shift in the story pattern to take place so that in Sir Orfeo the period of mourning is prolonged in the wilderness to ten years. One should not fail to note, however, that the long period of sad and tuneful mourning is paralleled in the classic versions, but only after the unhappy attempt to regain Eurydice, not before as in Sir Orfeo.

The Underworld and its inhabitants

In all the classic versions Eurydice really died, of a snake bite according to both Vergil and Ovid. Alfred was more vague: "The harper's wife died, men say, and her soul was taken to hell."2 In Sir Orfeo Heurodis does not die; she has been abducted and is evidently in some sort of hypnotic state when Orfeo first saw her in the Otherworld. The Otherworld or fairy-land is quite different from the land Orpheus visited. Orpheus

1Cf. Chapter One, p. 18.

went to the traditional Underworld Hades, the land of the dead, where Pluto was king. The Shades lived in grim surroundings, with no joy, no lovely scenes, no happy banquets. There was only a continual procession of the unhappy Shades enduring an endless depression, living with whatever evil furies found in their past.

In Orfeo's visit to the Otherworld the impression is quite different. There is a grim side to it all with the bodies of the enchanted strewn about the courtyard, but the place is bright and beautiful; ultimately everyone is alive. This Otherworld which Orfeo visited will be discussed at some length further on when the discussion turns to the Celtic themes.

Lapses in the classical tradition

There are two rather amusing lapses of classic tradition in the lay Sir Orfeo, lapses which serve to indicate the likelihood that the author of the Middle English poem -- or the scribe who first copied the lay -- was rather ignorant of classic detail. In all probability the person responsible for these lapses had not read much of the Latin classics. The ultimate Vergilian and Ovidian sources of the story could not have been well known to the man who wrote of Sir Orfeo's ancestors that

    His fader was comen of King Pluto
And his moder of King Juno,
That sum time were as goes y-hold. (5-7)

This blithe transformation of Jupiter's wife Juno, the Queen of
the gods and patroness of marriage, into an ancient king is a
metamorphosis even Ovid would not have dared!

Such an accommodation apparently came easily to the un-
known bard who further on places the story firmly in England:

For Winchester was cleped tho (called)
Thraciens withouten no. (25-26) (denial)

With those lines the bard tamed the ancient and classic story,
clarified the situation for his listeners and placed the story
within a context which was believable to his contemporaries,
calmly reassuring them that Thrace, the ancient home of so many
of the Greek gods' doings, was really their own royal town, Win-
chester. Orpheus became an Englishman in a procedure which
Sisam feels could only have been the result of insular pride,\(^1\)
though it is possible that insular ignorance of the classic
sources may have played a role in these transformations.

**Orpheus as a musician**

The major attribute which Orpheus retained through all his
mutations was his musical ability. This point was developed
ey early in Chapter One where Orpheus' various attributes among the
ancients were described.\(^2\) There is no appearance of Orpheus in

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which he is not celebrated as a musician. This particular characteristic must have appealed to the minstrels who took a hand in producing the lay and passing it on. Kittredge makes much of this theme of harping. Assuming that the Breton minstrels had a hand in the composition of Sir Orfeo, Kittredge said, "we should expect the harping of Orpheus to be made much of in Sir Orfeo." Kittredge reports that the Welsh laws called for a baron to have three things: his harp, his cloak, and his chessboard. Orpheus met the Celtic expectation of the harp, at least, and gained a kingdom as he was transformed into Orfeo. (One might note in passing that Eochaid in The Wooing of Etain met the requirement of the chessboard, and presumably of the cloak, but he does not appear to have had a harp.) This theme, then, can serve as the transition from the classic to the Celtic themes, for it is appropriate to them both.

The Celtic Themes

Orfeo as a musician

The power which Orpheus exercised over wild beasts is carefully preserved and embellished by the minstrels. In the lay

2Kittredge, p. 186.
3ibid.
4Kittredge, p. 187.
Orfeo regains his wife just as Orpheus had regained, at least temporarily, his. This is as Kittredge expected since the Celts had such a high regard for harping.

The Celts had their own stories of marvelous feats accomplished through minstrelsy. Kittredge tells of one the Irish had in which three men harped at the court of Ailill one day till twelve men died of weeping. In another story Glasgerion, a Breton hero, had the power of attracting wild beasts by whistling -- a feat not unlike Orpheus' own.¹

Ritual elements in the abduction

Whether Heurodis' abduction is based ultimately on Ela's abduction or on some other and more fanciful event, the ritual elements of the theme have clear Celtic precedents. Kittredge and Schoepperle, Hibbard and Roger Sherman Loomis as well as Samuels, Bliss and Allen² are unanimous in their agreement that the abduction of a woman by a fairy normally takes place in a peculiar situation.

Dame Heurodis fell asleep under an "ympe-tree", a grafted tree which grew in an orchard. When she fell asleep there she

¹Ibid.

came under the influence of fairies who could do with her as they wished. Bliss points with Kittredge to the obvious parallel in the *Lay of Tydorel* which was recounted in Chapter One. There again the fairy’s power was contingent upon the mortal’s having fallen asleep under a grafted tree. Connla’s fay gave him a magic apple from which he was able to live for a month and, it seems this apple somehow served as his passport into the Land of the Living. Allen states that as recently as a hundred years ago many Irish and Scots believed that when people were in the last moments of life the fairies could take them. In *Sir Orfeo* the significance of the grafted tree is pointed out indirectly. When Orfeo reached the Otherworld

Ther he seigh his owhen wif, (saw / own)
Dame Herodis, his lef lif,  (dear / life)
Slepe under an ympe-tree. (381-383)

Somehow the "ympe-tree" in Orfeo's orchard has been related to the "ympe-tree" in the Otherworld and Heurodis, by sleeping under the one, had run the risk of being transferred to the other.

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2 Kittredge, p. 196; Bliss, p. xxxv; Allen, p. 104.
3 Allen, p. 104.
4 Bliss, p. xxxv. Davies' suggestion ("Classical Threads in 'Orfeo,'" MLR, lvi (1961), 161-166) that the "ympe-tree" be somehow related to the Elm of Dreams Aeneas saw (Aeneid, VI, 273-286) in the Underworld is rejected by Allen, p. 103, as only vaguely reminiscent of the Otherworld "ympe-tree" Orfeo saw. Aeneas' descent to Hades is unrelated to the Orfeo story.
The protesting mortal is a futile gesture which has assumed the proportions of an element in abductions engineered by fairies.¹ In The Wooing of Etain, Eochaid protests; in Connla the Fair, Connla's father protests; in Sir Orfeo, Orfeo protests. None of them are successful. By the same token and in the same context both Eochaid and Orfeo attempted to prevent the abduction by resorting to armed force.² Eochaid had his palace surrounded by armed men but Midir appeared in the middle of the hall, lured Etain away with his singing, and disappeared. Orfeo was quite as determined as Eochaid to prevent the abduction, and equally unsuccessful. The massing of men, the bearing of arms, the martial oaths form a pathetic parallel to the suddenness with which Heurodis disappeared.

Amorwe the undretide is come (next day / midmorning)
And Orfeo hath his armes y-name (taken)
And wele ten hundred knightes with him,
Ich y-armed stout and grim;
And with the Quen wenten he
Right unto that ympe-tree.
They made sheltrom in ich a side (wall / each side)
And said they wold there abide
And die ther everichon
Er the quen shold fram hem gon
Ac yet amiddles hem full right
The quen was oway y-twight, (taken)
With fairy forth y-name. (152-169)(force / taken)

Thus in spite of Orfeo's efforts and his thousand armed men, Heurodis was abducted "with fairy forth."

¹Bliss, p. xxxvi; Kittredge, p. 196.
²Kittredge, p. 192; Loomises, Medieval Romances, p. 313.
Hibbard and Schoepperle both point out one final element of the theme of abduction which frequently escapes notice. In many of the Celtic tales, including not only those mentioned but in such a prominent one as Tristan, a frequent and popular motif is that of the stolen lady.\(^1\) Such a theme with its accompanying abduction and protesting victims has proved fit material about which to turn a tale and was a consistently popular theme among story tellers, whether Celtic or not.

**Mourning and exile**

Orpheus' despairing grief and mourning in the classic versions of the story has already been noted and need not be further developed. Kittredge points out, however, that Orfeo's mourning is actually far more intense than is Orpheus'. Orpheus was able to control himself and to set out to regain his wife. Orfeo had no such control after Heurodis was abducted.\(^2\) The description has a poignancy all its own.

\begin{quote}
Tho was ther crying, wepe, and wo!
The King into his chaumber is go
And oft swooned opon the ston
And made swiche diol and swiche mon (sorrow)
Ther was non amendement. (171-176)
\end{quote}

After those violent expressions of grief Orfeo continued to even further measures and, in spite of his men's protests,

\(^1\)Hibbard, p. 196; Schoepperle, p. 543.

\(^2\)Kittredge, p. 188.
resolved to give up everything. He abandoned his kingdom, his comfort, his very life if he could. Speaking to his men, Orfeo said:

Never eft I nill no woman see.
Into wilderness ichill te (go)
And live ther ever-more
With wilde bestes in holtes hore. (187-190)(woods / grey)

Orfeo abandoned everything with no trace of the hope of regaining his wife which must have lightened Orpheus' footsteps into Hades.

Smithers, Bliss and Severs suggests that this decision involved the consequently perfectly natural theme of the wild man in the woods, a theme older than the stories of Merlin. Orfeo had become a king in the wilderness, a magnificent person who lived in the most terrible circumstances which heighten the element of grief to a poignancy as great as any in the classic versions of the story. The rather lengthy passage which describes Orfeo's plight by means of a series of contrasts between his former royal estate and his present exiled condition deserves to be quoted in full for its poignant qualities which underline the grief Orfeo suffered:

O way, what ther was wepe and wo,
When he that hadde been king with croun
Went so poverlich out of toun!
Thurch wode and over heth (heath)
Into the wilderness he geth.

1Smithers, "Story Patterns in Some Breton Lays," Medium Aevum, XXII (1953), 85-86; Bliss, p. xxxvii; Severs, p. 197.
Nothing he finst that him is ais (ease)  
Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.
He that hadde y-werd the fowe and gris (grey furs)
And on bed the purper bis, (linen)
Now on hard hethe he lith;
With leves and gresse he him writh.
He that hadde had castels and tours, (full)
River, forest, frith with flours, (although)
Now, they it comency to snewe and frese (moss)
This King mote make his bed in mese.
He that had y-had knightes of pris (snakes)
Bifor him kneland and levedis,
Now seth he nothing that him liketh, (snakes)
Bot wilde wormes by him striketh.
He that had y-had plenté (dig / grub)
Of mete and drink, of ich deynté, (root)
Now may he all day digge and wrote,
Er he finde his fille of rote. (except / bark)
In somer he liveth by wild frut (of little worth)
And berien bot gode lite;
In winter may he nothing finde
Bot rote, grasses, and the rinde. (except / bark)
All his body was oway dwine (dwindled)
For missais, and all to-chine. (hardship / chapped)
Lord! who may telle the sore
This King sufferd ten yere and more!
His here of his berd, black and rowe, (rough)
To his girdel-stede was growe. (210-242) (waist)

The stories of Merlin Silvestris evidently exercised an influence on the description of Orfeo's grief and his subsequent ten years in the wilderness. Bliss points to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlinis (Life of Merlin) where Merlin's expressions of grief over the death of his men closely parallel Orfeo's expressions:

He cried over his men and did not stop pouring out his tears. He threw cinders in his hair and tore his clothes. He threw himself on the
ground and tossed back and forth.¹

Merlin's diet in the forest is like Orfeo's; Merlin, like Orfeo, was able to charm wild beasts. (One might note in passing that the poignancy of Orfeo's grief is increased by the sparse detail that they stay only so long as he plays. The moment he stops playing they run away and leave him to his grief.) Merlin found shelter in a hollow tree just as Orfeo stored his harp in a similar hollow tree.²

Orfeo's enchanting ability on the harp, the ritual aspects of Heurodis' abduction and Orfeo's ten years of exile and mourning in the woods have furnished three of the five major Celtic themes which serve the mechanism of Sir Orfeo to create what Kane called "the impression of contact with another existence older, colder, and less happy than our own, sinister in the chill of its beauty, and able to 'take', that is to lay its compulsion upon mortals in their unguarded moments."³

It may be helpful to review the first three themes and to explain briefly their role in the story. Harping carried over from the classic tradition and, because it corresponded with

¹Ibid. Bliss cites this passage from T. J. Parry, The Vita Merlini, 1925. Translation mine. The Latin text: "Deplangitque uiros nec cessat fundere fletus, / Pulueribus crines sprasit, uestesque rescidit, / Et prostratus humi nunc hac illaque uolutat."


³Kane, Middle English Literature, London, 1951, p. 81.
the Celtic idea of kingliness, was preserved and became Orfeo's major attribute. The Abduction may have derived from any number of previous stories or events but the ritual gestures which accompany the abduction and put Heurodis in the power of the fairies follow the precedents of Celtic stories from The Wooing of Etain to Connlia the Fair.\textsuperscript{1} The Mourning and Exile which Orfeo endured grew naturally from King Alfred's shift in the story pattern and developed into the perfectly natural situation of a king in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{2} Many of the details of Orfeo's behavior seem to have been modeled on Merlin Silvestris' behavior.\textsuperscript{3} The remaining two themes will be discussed in the paragraphs that follow: first, the Land of Faërie; and second, the Rash Promise.

The land of Faërie

Evidently the Land of Faërie was an unnatural place to which access was somehow related to an unnatural situation.\textsuperscript{4} The fairies were most likely to capture someone who was in an abnormal or extremely unusual position.\textsuperscript{5} After Orfeo entered the castle he came upon the chilling sight of those whom the

\textsuperscript{1}Kittredge, p. 201; et al.
\textsuperscript{2}Severs, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{3}Bliss, p. xxxvii.
\textsuperscript{4}Kane, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.; Bliss, p. xxxv-xxxviii.
fairies had abducted. They had all been taken in some extraordinary situation:

Sum stode whouten hede  
And sum non armes nade, (367-368)  

.....................  
And sum were in water adreint, (drowned)  
And sum were with fire all forshreint.  
Wives ther lay on child-bedde.... (373-375)
and so on. None of the situations described above, or the remaining ones which were not quoted, qualify as anything but unusual positions (except, perhaps, "child-bedde") in which the fairies could exercise their power.

The mechanism which brought Heurodis into contact with the fairy king in the first place may be brought forward as an example. She had fallen asleep under a grafted tree. The role of the grafted tree or some part of an orchard, such as the magic apple of Connla, seems to exercise an influence in coming into contact with the Land of Faërie. Bliss asserts that the traditional home of the fays, the Island of Avalon, was glossed by William of Malmesbury as "insula avalonis, id est, insula pomorum" (sc. "the Island of Avalon, that is, the island of apples"). This is further evidence that such orchards and grafted trees did play a direct part in conjuring the presence of the fairies and providing a mechanism for entrance into the land of Faërie.

1Allen, pp. 104-105.

2Bliss, p. lvi.
In *Sir Orfeo* another mechanism is mentioned indirectly. Orfeo experienced a series of visions or views of fairy activities which serve as a near catalog of fairy visions, each of which can be paralleled in another and demonstrably Celtic story. The entire passage will be cited here and each vision discussed individually further on. Here the concern is with the mechanism by which these visions took place. After the scene in the wilderness where Orfeo harped and sang to console himself while the wild animals gathered around to listen and then flee when he finished, the author took up a new theme. He introduced this new theme, which will become the catalog of fairy visions already mentioned, with the phrase "oft in hot undretides" (mid-mornings) (258). It would seem that in addition to the mechanisms involved in unnatural or unusual positions as a means of coming into contact with Faerie, there remains the weather.¹ On a hot mid-morning when, no doubt, a person would be somewhat uncomfortable and inclined to relax his senses somewhat, visions of Faerie could occur.

Orfeo had just such an experience while he was in the wilderness, an experience which evidently happened more than once.

He might see him bisides
Oft in hot undretides
The King o fairy with his rout
Com to hunt him all about (near)

¹Kane, p. 82.
With dim dri and bloweing,
And houndes also with him berking.
Ac no best they no nome, (took)
No never he nist wheder they bicone.
And otherwhile he might him see
As a gret ost by him te (go)-
Wele atourned ten hundred knightes,
Ich y-armed to his rightes,
Of cuntenaunce stout and fers
With many desplaid banners,
And ich his swerd y-drawe hold;
Ac never he nist whider they wold.
And otherwhile he seighe other thing;
Knightes and levedis com dauncing
In quaint atire, gisely, (elegant / elegantly)
Quaint pas and softly. (step)
Tabours and trumpees yede hem by (went)
And all maner menstracy. (257-278)

Into this relatively brief passage the author has packed
Orfeo's experiences of fairy visions over a ten year period.
"Oft" he saw one thing, and "otherwhile" he saw another thing
or yet a third. He never knew what became of them after they
passed or where they had come from. In itself the mechanism
seems sufficiently mysterious to qualify this passage as a
vision of Faërie, but the three visions are all verified in
other sources as Celtic themes of the Land of Faërie.

Orfeo first saw "the King o fairy with his rout." Loomis,
Samuels, Bliss and Kittredge all agree that this phantom army
of the King of the Otherworld out hunting is a common Celtic
theme, related to the story of king Herla but somewhat distinct
from it. Orfeo saw the king out hunting with all the accoutements of the hunt as he would have known them, with the distant cries and the blowing horns, the hounds barking in the familiar late thirteenth or early fourteenth century way. The curious
feature of the hunt Orfeo saw, and the feature which clearly labeled it a fairy hunt, is the line "ac no best they no nome (took)" (263). They took no beast because they could exercise no power over it. A fairy hunt can exercise power only under one of the conditions discussed above, such as Heurodis' nap under the grafted tree.

King Herla's wandering troop appears to have provided the model for Orfeo's second vision.¹ In this vision an army marches past, each man properly armed and carrying his sword on his shoulder, unsheathed and ready. The banners were brilliantly displayed in the manner which the author of the lay probably saw as the king's army marched through Winchester or along some adjoining highway. Walter Map's version of the story of King Herla was reported in Chapter One where the stories which have probably influenced Sir Orfeo were reviewed.² Map's story and Loomis' discussion have shown that King Herla's story was well known and could easily have formed the prototype for this vision of Orfeo's.³

Orfeo's third vision is one of the most popular of all fairy motifs, one which survived into the late nineteenth-century fairy tales about diminutive elves who danced on the

¹R. S. Loomis, p. 30; Samuels, p. 57; Bliss, p. xxxiii and xxxvii; Kittredge, p. 190.
²Cf. Chapter 1, p. 25-27.
³R. S. Loomis, p. 30
tops of toadstools.\textsuperscript{1} Bliss is not alone in asserting the age-old popularity of the fairy dance which Orfeo witnessed.\textsuperscript{2} This is a peculiarly Celtic motif which Tolkien discussed. Tolkien's point that fairies were not diminutive beings but normal sized beings finds indirect confirmation in Orfeo's vision.\textsuperscript{3} The wonder of the late nineteenth-century elves who danced on the tops of toadstools does not play a role in the description of knights and ladies dancing fine steps in elegant clothing to the sound of tabors and trumpets.

After Orfeo's three visions of fairies there is a somewhat abrupt shift in the story. Orfeo sees a fourth sight but this time, as Kane is careful to point out, Orfeo does not see fairies but real, living people, a company of ladies out hunting.\textsuperscript{4} The fairy hunt, for all its loud cries and trumpeting, was not able to catch anything. The fairy army marched past silently without harm. The dancing knights and ladies offered no peril. The fairy visions end on that dancing note and suddenly

\begin{quote}
And on a day he seighe him biside
Sexty levedis on hors ride,
Gentil and jolif as brid on ris; (bird / bough)
Nought a man amonges hem ther nis
And ich a faucoun on hond bere
And riden on hauken by o rivere;
Of game they founde well gode haunt
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1}J. R. R. Tolkien, \textit{Tree and Leaf}, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965, p. 5 ff.; Kittredge, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{2}Bliss, p. xxxv.

\textsuperscript{3}Tolkien, loc. cit., p. 7.

\textsuperscript{4}Kane, p. 83.
Of game they founde well gode haunt
Maulardes, hayroun, and coraunt.
The foules of the water ariseth,
The faucouns hem wele deviseth;
Ich faucoun his pray slough. (279-289) (killed)

The last line of this passage deserves to be repeated for the sudden jolt into mortal reality which it appears to imply:
"ich faucoun his pray slough." Suddenly Orfeo is among real people, women out hunting with falcons which, unlike the fairies, are capable of killing their prey and do so.

The abruptness of this return to reality after the visions of fairies will be discussed in Chapter Four with the literary analysis of Sir Orfeo. Here the reality of the women is somewhat beside the more important point that this is a company of women among whom Orfeo discovers his wife.

To a levedy he was y-come,
Bihelf and hath wele undernome (beheld / understood)
And seth by all thing that it is
His owen queen, Dam Herodis. (295-298)

Mrs. Loomis felt that this discovery of the abducted women in a company of women was a characteristically Celtic theme associated with fairy happenings.¹ There is especially strong evidence in The Wooing of Etain where Eochaid finally discovers his wife after Midir causes a troop of fifty ladies to appear above his palace. Smithers finds that this event is not only a fairy event, but a proof that The Wooing of Etain was a posi-

¹L. H. Loomis, p. 291-292; Vd. also: Samuels, p. 57; Smithers, pp. 86; Severs, p. 194.
tive source of the lay Sir Orfeo:

The most significant correspondence of all is the company of women: it seems to me fairly strong evidence that *The Wooing of Etain* is a source, not merely an analogue, of Sir Orfeo.¹

Orfeo was deeply shocked to see his wife whom the other ladies immediately led away. He had had no hope of recovering Heurodis and now that he had seen her alive he decided that whether he lived or died, he would try to rescue her. In attempting her rescue Orfeo went straight into the heart of the Land of Faërie without the permission of the King of Faërie, into a traditionally Celtic realm where everything was determined in accord with the accepted motifs.

Map's story of King Herla is evidently the source for the entrance into the Otherworld.² "In at a roche the lavedis rideth" (323) just as King Herla had ridden into the Otherworld through an opening in a cliff. The entrance through a rock into an uninhabited valley accords with everything Kittredge and Mrs. Loomis have been able to find about the realm of Faërie in descriptions from *The Wooing of Etain* where Midir's palace is under a fairy mound to the legendary Irish Aes Sidhe who lived underground.³ Kittredge tells that in his day a cavern in Shropshire called the Ogo Hole was still pointed out as the

¹Smithers, p. 86
²Bliss, p. xxxvii.
entrance to fairyland. In Suffolk there were the Wolf Pits where little green children were said to live in a land sacred to Saint Martin.¹

Kittredge also enumerates precedents for the charms of the Otherworld. In the *Sickness of Cuchlann* and *The Book of the Dun Cow*, both Irish stories, the Otherworld is described in glowing terms. It is a land where well-armed knights stand about, where ladies sit graciously at table feasting.² In *Sir Orfeo* no praise is too lavish for this "fair cuntray." The passage in which the author describes the Otherworld betrays the probable French influence of the original *Lai d*'*Orphey* by describing a castle which is buttressed in a way in which few English (or, for that matter, Celtic) castles were.³ The whole is decorated after the French manner with gargoyles and strange animals. Perhaps this is further evidence of the penchant of the author to use whatever materials came to hand which would be familiar to his audience in shaping this lay. The passage illustrates the lavish decoration which the author gave to the Otherworld as well as his artistic skill in description.

He com into a fair cuntray,
As bright so sonne on somers day, (as)
Smoothe and plain and all grene,
Hille no dale was ther non y-sene.
Amidde the lond was a castel he sighe, (saw)

¹Kittredge, pp. 194-195.
²Kittredge, p. 197.
³Severs, p. 197.
Riche and real and wonder heighe.
All the utmost wall
Was clere and shine as cristal.
An hundred tours ther were about
Degiselich and batalid stout. (strange / built)
The butras com out of the diche, (buttress)
Of rede gold y-arched riche,
The vousour was avowed all (vaulting / adorned)
Of ich maner divers aumal
Within ther were wide wones (spacious dwellings)
All of precious stones.
The wors piler on to biholde
Was all of burnist gold.
All that lond was ever light.
For when it shuld be therk and night,
The riche stones light gonne
As bright as doth at none the sonne. (327-348)

The French influence in the buttressing and gargoyles has already been mentioned, though they may seem somewhat anomalous intrusions into this Celtic Otherworld. The author's artistry has fused them into the description in such a matter-of-fact way that they cause neither surprise nor a sense of inappropriateness.

The Celtic influences have also been mentioned. Kittredge's general impression of the Celtic qualities of the Otherworld in Sir Orfeo has already been discussed. Schopperle and Hibbard follow Kittredge in their opinion that the general impression of lavish decoration is quite enough to justify the Celtic quality. Bliss, however, has chosen a set of descriptions from the preceding passage for closer scrutiny. There appears, he concludes, to be a consistency with which some of the details recur throughout Celtic literature. In the passage quoted

1Schoeppehrle, p. 428; Hibbard, p. 198; Kittredge, p. 195 ff.
above, for example,

All the utmost wall
Was clere and shine as cristal. (333-334)

This crystal wall is a commonplace of Celtic descriptions according to Bliss who found it occurring in The Voyage of Mael Duin and The Adventure of St. Columba's Clerics, both Irish stories. With an understatement which may serve to heighten the impression of lavish decoration the author of Sir Orfeo states that

The worst piler on to biholde
Was all of burnist gold. (343-344)

Again in The Voyage of Mael Duin and also in The Voyage of Hui Corra pillars, though not of gold but of silver, occur. The rich stones which provided light in the Otherworld when it should otherwise have been dark have an analogue in The Sickbed of Cu Chulainn. The details in Sir Orfeo which describe the surrounding land as "smoothe and plain and all grene" (329) and the precious gems which stud the dwellings inside the castle walls are paralleled in The Adventure of Cian's Son Teigue.1 Bliss' careful research into the details which comprise the Otherworld in Sir Orfeo serves to underscore Kittredge's general observations and to demonstrate most effectively how extensive the borrowings were which went into a description of

1Bliss, p. xxxix.
the Otherworld.

One feature of the Otherworld which has not always seemed to be clear is the quality of the inhabitants of this Otherworld. They are not, as some introductions to editions of *Sir Orfeo* seem to imply, dead. These are not the Shades of Orpheus' Underground who are carrying the burden of timeless suffering. Part of the passage which describes the inhabitants Orfeo saw inside the castle walls was quoted above. There the discussion concerned the way in which fairies could gain power over mortals, especially in dangerous or awkward moments or at times when they were in contact with some unnatural thing such as a grafted tree. The author of the lay was quite emphatic; these people were not dead but in a trance. The author granted that some people would no doubt have thought they were dead but he affirmed that they were not dead: "and thought dede and nare nought" (366).

Smithers has suggested that the fairy king is modeled in part upon Pluto, the Lord of the Underworld in classic mythology. This may be true or it may be, as Kittredge has suggested, that he is modeled on Midir, the fairy king of *The Wooing of Etain*. It is certainly likely that both stories had their influence, but it is perhaps more likely that both stories, along

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2Smithers, p. 88.

3Kittredge, p. 192.
with Sir Orfeo, provided the Otherworld or the Underworld with a king simply because the authors of the stories could not have conceived of a social structure where there was no king.

Neither does the Otherworld appear to be a terrible place. It is difficult to find the terror in the description of the king of the Otherworld and his beautiful wife which would justify Kane's assertion that when Orfeo saw the King of the Otherworld the "open conflict between Orfeo and the evil forces begins."1 Perhaps the description is merely a fitting compliment to the grandeur of the descriptions of the Otherworld which have preceded it. The reader would not find it difficult to accept the description as appropriate to the story and to the kingly aspect he may justly expect of a king. After Orfeo entered the hall he looked about and

Than seighe he ther a seemly sight,  
A tabernacle blissful and bright,  
Therin her maister King sete  
And her Quen fair and swete.  
Her crounes, her clothes shine so bright  
That unnethe bihold he hem might. (387-392)(scarcely)

There may be a sinister quality about people whose clothing is so bright that Orfeo could scarcely look at them but the author felt it was a "seemly sight."

The Rash Promise

Kane also found that Orfeo "emerges victorious" from his

1Kane, p. 83.
struggle with evil "when he rebukes the king for failing to
honor his promise." In the story the king was so deeply touched
by Orfeo's harping that, as Orfeo played, the king "sit full
stille." When Orfeo put his harp aside the king offered him any­
thing he wished. Orfeo requested the woman who was asleep under
the grafted tree in the courtyard. The king refused, evidently
not from malice as Kane suggested, but because

A sorry couple of you it were,
For thou art lene, rowe, and black (rough)
And she is lovesum withouten lack.
A lothlich thing it were forthy (therefore)
To seen hir in thy company. (434-438)

Such a refusal might stem from snobbery, but it appears to be
the result of a desire to see that Heurodis is properly treated,
as befits her great beauty. Such a noble sentiment would fit a
king who could not visualize the lovely Heurodis in the company
of the ill-kept minstrel, Orfeo. In keeping with the pattern
which Schoepperle found in Tristan Orfeo appealed to the king's
sense of nobility and reminded him of his proper role as a
king:

O sir, he said, gentil king,
Yete were it a wele fouler thing
To here a lesing of thy mouthe! (439-441) (lie)

The king could not refuse the appeal to his word for the king
would not lie. He had made his rash promise and had to abide
by it in spite of the distasteful fact that his action would

1ibid.
2Schoepperle, p. 544.
put the lovely Heurodis in the hands of a "lene, rowe, and black" minstrel. That was at least not so foul a thing as to have uttered a lie and thus abandoned his kingly nobility.

The denouement of this event seems to stand in the Celtic tradition. In The Wooing of Etain Eochaid at first demures, then concedes the point when he is reminded that he did make the promise. Samuels joined Kittredge and Schoepperle in asserting that this rash promise to do anything is a part of the Celtic tradition.¹

It should be noted parenthetically that, contrary to the opinion of some editors of the lay, the Rash Promise is not the vow by Orfeo to have nothing further to do with women.² This vow does figure prominently in Ovid's version of the Orpheus story where Orpheus turned to homosexual practices after his wife's second death. Ovid said that Orpheus was the first to introduce this practice among the Thracians and used this preference to motivate the Thracian Bacchantes to kill Orpheus because he ignored them.³ Vergil was more circumspect in motivating the murder, preferring to say simply that they were "flouted by his neglect."⁴

¹Samuels, p. 57; Kittredge, p. 188, Schoepperle, p. 544.


³Ovid, Metamorphoses, XI.

⁴Vergil, Georgics, IV, 519-520.
It is understandable that some editors will have made this assertion since Orpheus did refuse any further contact with women and this led, in the classic versions of the story, to his death. Orfeo made the same vow, if it can be called a vow, as he left his kingdom to mourn his wife in the wilderness. Orfeo's vow, however, does not seem to serve any further purpose in the action of the story as it did in the story of Orpheus. It would probably be more accurate to regard Orfeo's intention to have nothing further to do with women as an effectively dramatic method of heightening the extent of the grief which drove him into the wilderness in despair. It does not appear to motivate any further actions, nor Orfeo's death which does not even occur inside the story except as a brief reference after what was evidently a long and happy life. It would seem to be more correct to agree with the major scholars in the field that the Rash Promise concerns the King of the Otherworld's promise to give Orfeo whatever he wished.

Other Suggested Themes

There remain two themes which are neither classic nor Celtic but which have been discussed: Orfeo's behavior in the Otherworld and the theme of Recognition and Return.

Unlike Orpheus who walked boldly into the Underworld, proclaimed his purpose and requested his wife, Orfeo disguised himself as a minstrel like Sir William Talbot did when he discovered Ela's hiding-place. Orfeo feigned casualness, played
for the king as if he were merely the minstrel he claimed to be and chose the woman without ever naming her but only referring almost casually to her as

That ich levedy, bright on ble, (complexion)
That slepeth under the ympe-tree. (431-432)

Still pretending to be no more than a minstrel, Orfeo thanked the king properly after he received Heurodis' hand

And dede him swithe out of that lond (swift)
And went him out of that thede. (450-451) (land)

The theme of Return and Recognition received little discussion before Bliss published his complete edition of Sir Orfeo. Most critics seem to have accepted the conclusion as a fitting, fairytale-like conclusion, a sort of expanded version of the old formula "they lived happily ever after."

Bliss followed Kane's suggestion that the climax of the story was intensified by adding the happy return of the exile to his home, but went further and suggested that the return home balanced the departure in order to make the rescue the "physical center" as well as the psychological center of the entire story.\(^1\) Objecting to that theory, Smyser suggested the theme of Return and Recognition.\(^2\) The entire discussion will be reviewed in Chapter Four when the literary merits of Sir Orfeo are discussed. Here it is sufficient to have reviewed the dis-

\(^1\) Bliss, p. xliii; Kane, p. 84.

\(^2\) Smyser, p. 135 and pp. 136-137.
discussion briefly to show how Smyser hit upon the suggestion that the final episode of the lay is the result, as Smyser phrases it, of splicing on "the enormously popular motif of the return and recognition of an exile, in this case Orfeo himself."¹

There is no doubt that the happy return did form a part of The Wooing of Etain and The Dead Woman's Sons. Indeed the theme of a "disguised prince returning to his realm" is a "narrative device that is at least as old as the Odyssey (in which Odysseus, to test his wife Penelope, conceals his return to Ithaca)".² Severs notes that the theme is popular and well known from the Odyssey to King Horn, but then he adds that it is "a natural development inherent in the story."³ His case will be discussed at considerable length in Chapter Four where it will find a more appropriate place. Briefly, he feels that regardless of the thematic implications of the return, it developed naturally out of the structure of the story just as Orfeo's long sojourn in the wilderness developed naturally once King Alfred had stretched the original classic story pattern by inserting the period of prolonged mourning before Orpheus' trip to the Underworld instead of after it as Vergil and Ovid had done.⁴

¹Smyser, p. 135.
³Severs, p. 198.
⁴ibid., ff.
Manifestations of the English Spirit

Kittredge said of the French influence in the lay that it was "pervasive rather than particular."¹ The descriptive elements of the Otherworld which do appear to have derived from a French source, the buttressing and the gargoyles, were noted earlier in this chapter. They will be developed, along with other French references, in Chapter Three. Davies repeated Kittredge's phrase in reference to The Wooing of Etain which she felt was not as specific an antecedent as The Dead Woman's Sons or Ela's abduction, both of which she discussed in the same article.² The phrase may be repeated in reference to the evidence of an English spirit in the lay; it too is "pervasive rather than particular."

A number of possible expressions of the English spirit have been mentioned. Sisam felt that the equation of Winchester with Thrace was evidence of the English spirit at work, insularly claiming English roots for an ancient story.³ The reference to calling a parliament to choose a new king has long been recognized as an English touch. Following Kittredge's lead, Mrs. Loomis developed a theory relative to the dating of the lay which revolved around assigning the lay to a period

¹Kittredge, p. 185.
²C. Davies, "Notes of the Sources of 'Sir Orfeo,'" Modern Language Review, XXI (1936), 354.
³Sisam, p. 13.
after 1327 when Parliament deposed Edward II.\(^1\) This theory was discussed in Chapter One where it was shown that the lay might not have required the precedent of deposing Edward II in order to suggest the peaceful election of a new king. Regardless of the date, the presence of Parliament is a clearly English trait in the story. Kittredge suggested that the steward whom Orfeo left in charge of the kingdom during his exile could have been an English touch, though he added that this steward could also have been patterned on the seneschals of the courts in Old French literature.\(^2\)

Laura Hibbard Loomis lists a number of points which give the environment of the poem an English touch. She mentions the place allusions, specifically to Winchester, the winter landscape; and the moral concepts of character.\(^3\) She joins her husband in another place to say that they have little to do with the French concepts of courtly love.\(^4\) She also mentions the vitality of a king's word and the marital and feudal loyalty of the characters in the story. The Loomises wrote:

\[(\text{Orfeo}) \text{ goes from his palace to spend desolate years on a rough English heath; when a hawking party rides by, he sees familiar English birds, mallards, cormorants, herons, fly before the swooping falcons; when he confronts the fairy king, with English bluntness he bids him keep}\]

\(^1\)Kittredge, p. 185-186; L. H. Loomis, p. 291.
\(^2\)Kittredge, p. 186.
\(^3\)L. H. Loomis, p. 291.
\(^4\)R. S. and L. H. Loomis, Medieval Romances, pp. 311-314.
his word. The final recognition scene is filled with English heartiness, with the laughter, the music-making of the feast, the swift, warm welcome given to the ragged old harper for Orfeo's sake, the joy of the steward who knocks the table over in his excitement, the joy of all the shouting lords as they recognize their king. They are true men all.¹

Mrs. Loomis' position may be enhanced by reference to some of the dialogues and action in the story. There is a naturalness of speech and gesture which Mrs. Loomis has pointed out and which may be underscored with examples. After Heurodis explained her plight to Orfeo she closed with the touching yet brutally direct words: "do thy best, for I mot (must) go." Her concern at abandoning the husband she had loved faithfully is reciprocated in Orfeo's words, reminiscent of the Biblical Ruth's (I, 16), "Whider thou gost, ichil with thee, / And whider I go, thou shalt with me." In this simple reference to these Biblical words one may find a spirit of concern and determination which would sit well with the English mentality.² In another passage to which reference has already been made Orfeo was realistically abandoned by the wild beasts as soon as he stopped playing his harp in the wilderness. It may be believable that wild beasts were charmed by the power of his playing, but it appears that the English author found it just as believable that real animals would abandon even the finest

¹Loomises, loc. cit., p. 314.
²Loomises, loc. cit., p. 313.
harper when he had finished. Near the end of the story, after Orfeo explained that he had found the harp which the steward recognized near the body of a dead man, the steward fainted from grief. The scene which follows accords well with Mrs. Loomis' description of the brusk, hearty, frankly realistic attitude of the English:

His barouns toke him up in that stounde (swoon)
And telleth him hou it geth --
It is no bot of manes deth! (526-528) (cure)

It is plausible to suppose that in this scene of brutal realism where the barons have forced the steward to face the fact that there is no remedy for death, the author has expressed a sentiment in a situation more in accord with the English mentality and method of expression than with the elegant and courtly phrases of an Old French poem.¹

Mrs. Loomis overlooked a characteristic of the lay which did not escape the attention of Mr. Brian Stone who translated the lay into modern English for a Penguin edition of Medieval English poems.² Mr. Stone pointed out in his introduction to the poem that "in this romance, for all that the poet, in true English style, is more concerned with telling his tale than in moralizing upon it, all is ceremony according to custom."³ This last remark is a telling one. The ceremonial of the court

¹ibid.
²Stone, p. 213-214.
³loc. cit., p. 214.
appears in a most unconscious and natural way. When Heurodis went to the orchard to spend the morning she so naturally took "two maidens of priis" as her retinue that it does not occur to the reader to be surprised at this bit of court ceremonial. When Orfeo heard the news of his wife's violent fit "he come with knightes tene / to chaumber right befor the Quene" (75-76). Orfeo, a king, should be accompanied by a retinue to accord with the practice of the period, as he indeed is. The surprising aspect, if it be surprising that people act in the way their times demand, is that Orfeo's retinue is mentioned in a matter-of-fact way which suggests that he would never have appeared without his retinue, even in this intimate situation. This assumption is clarified when, to augment the sense of loneliness in Orfeo's self-imposed exile, "no man most with him go" (209). Although the King of Faërie's retinue is rather imposing -- Heurodis reported that he had a hundred knights and a hundred ladies with him -- it is assumed that he will have a retinue. Stone perceptively mentioned this too easily assumed and ignored feature of the lay; "all is ceremony according to custom" in such a way that the natural behavior of the court continues smoothly and the events which trouble it become that much more believable within the story.

Neither Stone nor Mrs. Loomis mention two other aspects of the story which are quite as much a part of the contemporary story and could point to some influence from the procedures of courtly love. As soon as the lords discovered that the ragged
minstrel was their king they led him to his chamber and "bathed him and shaved his beard and tired him as a king apert" (561-562). This hospitable act can be construed in perfect accord with the tradition of courtly love and ceremony which required that a knight be entertained in a ceremonial bath and attired in clothes befitting his rank. The novels of Chrétien de Troyes abound with examples of this courtly behavior. In another scene Heurodis' proper role is not forgotten. After the king was bathed and dressed according to custom and ceremony, with a "gret processioun / They brought the Queen into the town / With all manner menswreacy" (563-564). The people of the town turned out to celebrate her return. She went from the beggar's hut to her home in the palace in a great procession befitting her rank and with the retinue to which she was accustomed, even though the twentieth century might find it more convenient and comfortable to have rushed her to the palace to clean up before undergoing the public acclaim she received.

In details such as these the accepted procedures of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century are captured with such naturalness that it is difficult to dislodge them from the story to examine them for the social implications of a period so different from the twentieth century. These details lend the characters' behavior an atmosphere of naturalness which serves not only Mrs. Loomis' suggestion that they illustrate illustrate the English spirit and mentality which seems to
pervade the lay,\(^1\) but also to provide the reader with a refreshing atmosphere for the fairy happenings which is completely believable.\(^2\)

The courtly antique policy of Edward I which was discussed in Chapter One can serve to enhance the supposition that there is a pervasive English spirit about the lay. Edward I intended to foster fidelity to himself through a restoration of the courtly ceremonies and practices of nobility which had fallen into abuse.\(^3\) The simple directness with which such virtues are assumed and acted out in \textit{Sir Orfeo} would have made the lay an immensely popular one in a court which was carefully structured to foster just such virtues. The fact that Edward I appears to have encouraged an environment of this type which acted these virtues-out as well as praised them may suggest that the translation and restructuring of the lay was encouraged by a court which had a policy so perfectly in accord with the sentiments in \textit{Sir Orfeo}.

\(^1\)\textit{Loomises, Medieval Romances}, pp. 313-314.

\(^2\)\textit{Kane}, p. 81 and p. 84.

\(^3\)\textit{Stenton}, p. 95-96.
CHAPTER THREE

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Texts

Until Bliss published his detailed and critical edition of Sir Orfeo in 1954 there was no edition of the lay which included the texts of all three of the extant manuscripts. Kittredge based his 1886 study of Sir Orfeo on Zielke's edition of 1880, the first major publication of the Orfeo text, although Laing had published it without comment in 1822.1 Zielke, however, did not publish all of the texts but only the text of the Auchinleck manuscript with excerpts from the two other manuscripts. As Smyser said in praise of Bliss' work, quoting the late Samuel Hazzard Cross: "This will not need to be done again."2 In a description of the manuscripts of Sir Orfeo, as well as in a study of the language of the lay, one can do no better, nor can one do otherwise, than to draw heavily from Bliss' definitive study.

The three manuscripts in which the text of Sir Orfeo survive are: the Auchinleck MS. (Advocates' 19. 2. 1.), which is the oldest of the three manuscripts; Harley 3810; and MS.

1D. Laing, Selected Remains of Ancient Popular Poetry In Scotland, 1822.

This author has examined only the third of the manuscripts and that only for the watermarks.

The Auchinleck MS.

The Auchinleck MS. is a stout folio volume which contains 332 velum leaves. The manuscript has been seriously mutilated and several pages are missing. Eight of the missing pages have been discovered, four at the University of Edinburgh and four at the University of St. Andrews. Smithers, whose study of story patterns in Breton lays has been used in this study, discovered two of the missing pages in 1949.

Internal evidence dates the manuscript fairly closely. In an account of the History of England there is a brief prayer inserted after the passage which tells about the troubles in King Edward II's reign. The prayer closes with an invocation "for our young king Edward", clearly Edward III who succeeded his father in accord with the will of Parliament in January, 1327. Bliss suggests that the manuscript should therefore be dated about 1330.

Little is known about the history of the manuscript until it came into the possession of Lord Auchinleck who donated it to the Advocates' Library. Lord Auchinleck recorded his gift to the library at the foot of the first folio with the date 1744.¹ Mrs. Loomis has argued to Bliss' satisfaction that the

¹A. J. Bliss, Sir Orfeo, 1954, pp. ix-x.
manuscript may have been the product of a London bookshop and that it may have been the property of Geoffrey Chaucer.¹ There is little specific evidence to support this theory, but Bliss felt that the linguistic evidence, which will be discussed further on in this chapter, is strong enough to agree that the manuscript was probably produced in London.

As far as one can judge, the Auchinleck MS. is not far removed from the original text. The first thirty-eight lines of the text are missing, but they can be reconstructed since they appear elsewhere in the manuscript as the prologue to *Lay le Freyne*. The importance of this prologue and the possible relationship between *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freyne* will be discussed later in this chapter. The text, including the missing lines, contains 604 lines.

**MS. Harley 3810**

Before Bliss published his edition of the texts of *Sir Orfeo* the MS. Harley 3810 had been printed just once, in 1802. Zielke did, however, publish readings from the manuscript. MS. Harley 3810 contains several unconnected manuscripts which have been bound together. The first manuscript contains thirty-four paper folios written in an angular hand from the beginning of the fifteenth century. *Sir Orfeo* is the first of six articles

in this manuscript; the remaining are religious and moral treatises. The text is considerably abridged, containing only 509 lines. Using the Auchinleck MS. as his standard Bliss has discovered twenty-five places in the text where lines were omitted. Bliss suggested that perhaps the lines were written down from memory by a minstrel. He drew attention to the fact that the largest number of omissions occurs near the end of the lay where, he suggested, the scribe could have become rather tired and forgotten a number of lines.¹

**MS. Ashmole 61**

The MS. Ashmole 61 is a tall and narrow volume with creases across the middle of each page which suggest that it was formerly folded the other way around. The manuscript was written in a number of different inks and slightly different hands which suggests that it may have been written over a number of years. The hands can be dated to the end of the fifteenth century. Three different watermarks occur on several pages of the manuscript. The watermarks have been dated to 1479, 1483 and 1488 respectively. Bliss showed that Sir Orfeo could not have been transcribed into this manuscript until after 1488 since it occurs as the thirty-ninth article of 41, the first article on the gathering which carries the watermark of 1488.

The manuscript Ashmole 61 had been printed 3 times before

¹Bliss, p. xi.
Bliss' publication, twice in the nineteenth century and once in 1902. Although the manuscript contains 603 lines, just one short of the 604 lines of the Auchinleck MS., it is a mixture of accuracy and corruption. Sixteen passages are omitted, 18 are inserted which do not occur in the MS. Auchinleck, and 6 are transposed. Bliss suggested that "this text represents the work of an idiosyncratic scribe freely adapting a sound copy."^2

Language

Other than the three manuscripts which have been described no versions of the lay Sir Orfeo survive. This fact makes it difficult for scholars to study the filiation of the manuscripts since the establishment of objective criteria is rendered questionable by the fact that only two readings are available to suggest an error in the third. In only three instances do two of the texts share a false rhyme which might suggest that the third text was in error. The linguistic evidence is not sufficient to draw any substantial conclusions about the filiation of the manuscripts.^3

It is possible, however, to draw something of a conclusion from the evidence of the entire story and the dates of the manuscripts. Assuming that the Auchinleck MS. is a reasonably

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1Bliss, pp. xi-xiii.
2Bliss, p. xvii.
3Bliss, pp. xiii-xv.
accurate version of the lay, it could be the ancestor of both the Harley and Ashmole MSS. If the MS. Auchinleck is not the ancestor of the other two, which can be neither proved nor disproved, it remains contemporary with their ancestor. The Ashmole MS. cannot have been based on the Harley MS., although the Harley MS. is the older of the two, because the Ashmole MS. corresponds more closely to the Auchinleck MS. than does the Harley MS. In spite of the fact that it is the second oldest of the three manuscripts, the Harley MS. is the most corrupted and incomplete of the three. It is equally impossible that the Harley MS. was based on the Ashmole MS. since it is at least fifty years older than the Ashmole MS.¹

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Harley and Ashmole MSS. must be derived from a common ancestor which may or may not be the Auchinleck MS. If the common ancestor was not the Auchinleck MS. it must have been a descendent of the Auchinleck MS. or coeval with it. In either case Bliss found it impossible to construct a critical text because of the confusion in the manuscripts.² He printed the Auchinleck MS. with the Harley and Ashmole readings in full at the bottom of the page since triple column readings were impossible.

The origin of the MS. Ashmole 61 is unknown. Bliss has been able, however, to isolate five examples of changes in vowel

¹Bliss, pp. xiii-xiv.
²Bliss, p. xv.
articulation which are characteristic of late Middle English. This would correspond with the watermark dating which puts this transcription of the lay after 1488. There are five vowel rhymes in the MS. Ashmole which suggest a very northerly or Scottish origin of the manuscript. Ten features demonstrate a northern or northeast Midland dialect. Bliss concluded that although the dialect is strongly influenced by the standard language, it could have been written in the north.¹

The MS. Harley 3810 has definitely been associated with a Baddesley Clinton who owned the manuscript in the sixteenth century. He lived in Warwickshire where the manuscript was probably transcribed. Only three east Midland features survive in its dialect. There is one characteristic feature of the late Middle English dialect in this text which is otherwise strongly influenced by the standard literary language.²

Bliss feels that the language of the Auchinleck MS. differs little from that of the original Sir Orfeo, though he suggests that it has a less westerly dialect than the original had. There are no characteristic Essex or Kentish features in the text. This would suggest that it was not an extremely easterly dialect.³ Bliss implied that Mrs. Loomis may be correct in her theory of the origin of the Auchinleck MS. in a bookshop in

¹Bliss, pp. xiv-xv and xxv-xxvii
²Bliss, p. xi.
³Bliss, p. xxi.
London for linguistic reasons which suggest a London origin. These reasons will be discussed further on.¹

Samuels stated in his review of Bliss' study that he could not agree with Bliss that the language of Sir Orfeo in the Auchinleck MS. specifically represents the "beginnings of a standard literary dialect"; although he did agree that the general language of the Auchinleck MS. represents such a beginning.² Samuels said that although the scribe who wrote Sir Orfeo "may well have lived and written in London, there are indications, as I hope to show at some future date, that his language represents not a literary standard but the living and consistent dialect of an area somewhat north of London."³

Since Samuels has challenged Bliss' assumption it is not necessary to record all Bliss has said about the dialect in which Sir Orfeo was written. It is interesting to mention, however, that he found sixteen phonological features in Sir Orfeo which agree with the standard literary language Chaucer used.⁴

Bliss also showed that the normal noun inflection for the plural or possessive was -es or -s. In only three instances did the scribe of Sir Orfeo use the plural -en. Ich is a more common first person pronoun than I; the oblique case is always me.

¹Bliss, p. xvii.
³Samuels, p. 89
⁴Bliss, pp. xxii-xxiii.
The second person uses thou and the in the singular, you and ye in the plural. The third person singular uses he and him for the masculine and sche for the feminine (he and bye each occur twice). The third person plural usually uses thai, but once he and once bye; the oblique case is regularly hem. The only demonstrative adjective of interest is ich (each) which the Auchinleck scribe used regularly, even in indisputably Essex texts. It is usually considered a west Midland form.¹

In the early Middle English period there were two dialects in use in London: City-Essex and Westminster-Middlesex. While it is probable that the Auchinleck MS. does represent some form of the Westminster-Middlesex dialect a definite ascription of a text to a London source is extremely tentative on linguistic grounds because of the lack of demonstrably London texts of the same period.²

Bliss has studied the probable form the original dialect of the lay took. This study, he said, can only be based on a study of the rhymes and vocabulary. Five features appear which suggest an Anglian dialect, one of which is the characteristic loss of the final -en in the infinitive which appears with an -e only. Six features point to an origin in the southern part of the Anglian area and four further features indicate the western part of the same area. The general features of the Anglian di-

¹Bliss, pp. xxiii-xxvi.

²Bliss, p. xvii.
alect in which the poem was originally written indicate an origin in the south-west Midlands.\textsuperscript{1} One unusual rhyme points to the south-east Midlands and, according to Bliss, the form of the poem belongs to a "group of popular romances composed in the east Midlands in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries."\textsuperscript{2} He unfortunately omits documentation on this point.

On the basis of this and other evidence as well as a study of the vocabulary which corresponds to the vocabulary of the Trinity Homilies, Bliss concluded that \textit{Sir Orfeo} was probably written in "some variety of the Westminster-Middlesex dialect,"\textsuperscript{3} the dialect which, together with City-Essex, formed the two major London dialects. Although Samuels does not disagree with Bliss in his conclusion, he objected that the Trinity Homilies need not be localized in Middlesex and that the conclusion is correspondingly tentative.\textsuperscript{4}

Bliss was able to discover only one rhyme which is useful in dating \textit{Sir Orfeo}. The rhyme of lines 483 and 485 (Bliss' edition, \textit{narwe: herbarwe}, could only have been used after the middle of the thirteenth century since the \textit{-w-} of \textit{herbarwe} had formerly been the gutteral \textit{-gh-}. The shift had been completed

\textsuperscript{1} Bliss, pp. xvii-xxi.
\textsuperscript{2} Bliss, p. xx.
\textsuperscript{3} ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Samuels, pp. 58-59.
by the middle of the thirteenth century except in Kentish, but there is absolutely no evidence of Kentish linguistic influence in the poem. "As far as the language is concerned," Bliss wrote, "Sir Orfeo might have been written at any date in the second half of the thirteenth century."¹

Evidence of French Influence

There are, as Kittredge has said, pervasive French influences in Sir Orfeo. In Chapter Two of this study the French architectural features of the buttressed and gargoyle-d Otherworld castle were discussed. Severs states that there are a number of Old French rhymes in Sir Orfeo which could point to an Old French original, although such Old French rhymes were not unknown to Chaucer.² They would have been nothing more than the received words in the standard literary language. The Old French titles "sir" and "dame" have been preserved in the lay, although these were common titles in Middle English by the end of the thirteenth century. Bliss feels that the spelling of "Traciens" may indicate an Old French original. There is a complete Old French phrase, "en exile," but Bliss points out that this phrase is not unusual in Middle English. The retention of the Old French "griis" (grey) in order to maintain a rhyme with the word "biis" (linen) (Bliss' edition, lines 492-3) also

¹Bliss, p. xvi.

indicates an Old French source.\(^1\)

Both Severs and Bliss feel that it is reasonable to assume on the strength of this cumulative evidence that the poem was translated out of Old French or, as Bliss offered for an alternative, from Anglo-Norman.\(^2\) The weight of each of the features by itself is not convincing for these arguments, but taken in sum they do offer a realistic possibility.

References to a Breton 'Lai d'Orphey'

Whether the lay Sir Orfeo was translated directly from an Old French source cannot be determined with absolute certainty. It appears to be certain, however, that the story was based on a Breton lay, a Lai d'Orphey which has not survived.\(^3\)

There are three references to this source. The first reference is found in the romance of Floire et Blanceflor which was written in the third quarter of the twelfth century, about the time when Marie de France was composing her translations of Breton lays. While a minstrel in the course of the story, is entertaining,

He took a harp in his hands and harped the Lai d'Orphey. (854-855)\(^4\)

\(^1\)Bliss, pp. xl-xl: Bliss lists and discusses five examples.

\(^2\)Severs, p. 197; Bliss, p. xl.


\(^4\)Bliss, p. xxxi: "Une harpe tint en ses mains, / Et harpe lai d'Orphey." (Translation mine.)
This slight description coincides with what is known of the manner in which a lay was performed. The minstrel took up his harp and played the lay. The manner of performing a lay will be discussed further on. Here it is enough to note that the minstrel performed the very lay under discussion, the **Lai d’Orphey**.

The second reference is in the **Lai de l’Espine** where an Irish minstrel has been entertaining the court. His singing touched everyone. Finally he began to play again and then "he struck up the **lai d’orphei**." Kittredge and Bliss both presented the two quotations above in their research into the origins of the lay **Sir Orfeo**. Bliss offered a third important reference which is in the **Prose Lancelot**:

So the king sat down on a richly decorated faldstool and a harper in front of him struck up the lay **dorfey** which so pleased the king to hear that one did not dare to say a single word.

In this passage there is a curious parallel not merely in the fact that the king is listening to the **Lai d’Orphey** but to the fact that he listened so closely to the lay that he did not presume to speak. His close attention recalls the close

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1ibid.: "Le lai lor sone d’Orphei." (Translation mine.)

2Kittredge, pp. 180-181; Bliss, p. xxxi.

3Bliss, p. xxii: "Si y fu li roys assis en vn faudestoef dyuoire qui moul estoit riches et deuant lui auoit .j. harpeour .qui li notoit le lay dorfay si playsoit tant le roy a escouter quil ni auoit .i. seul qui mot y osast dire." (Translation mine.)
attention the King of the Otherworld gave Orfeo as he played. In that scene "the king herkneth and sit full stille" (419), just as the king in the Prose Lancelot did.

Bliss felt that the "clearest proof of the existence of a Breton lai of Orpheus in the twelfth century™ resides in the story The Dead Woman's Sons which Walter Map told.¹ The story was reviewed in Chapter One of this study where Severs' objection that the most prominent feature of Orfeo's skills, his harping, does not find a place in Map's story was accepted as an indication that Map's story may be pertinent to the story of Sir Orfeo, but it is probably not the same story but an antecedent one. Thus Bliss' assumption that Map's story lends a fourth demonstration to the existence of a Breton lay about Orpheus is less tenable.²

The three references which are pertinent to a discussion of Sir Orfeo appear to demonstrate that the lay was known and was fairly popular. They also demonstrate that these were lays performed by Breton minstrels, something quite different from the Old French lays which were imitations and sometimes translations of the Breton lays.³ The importance of this point will be demonstrated in the discussion of Breton lays which will follow a brief excursus on the role of the prologue to Sir Orfeo in relationship to Lay le Freyne and its author, Marie de France.

¹Bliss, p. xxii.
²Severs, note 10, pp. 205-206.
³Bliss, p. xxxiii.
The excursus will show how Sir Orfeo may be drawn into a discussion of Breton lays.

An Excursus on the Prologue and 'Lay le Freyne'

In the course of the discussion of Miss Davies' theory in Chapter One that the abduction scene in Sir Orfeo may have had a precedent in Ela's abduction mention was made of Marie de France, the author of twelve known Old French versions of Breton lays. Marie de France is known to have been the author of Lai le Fresne which was translated into the Middle English Lay le Freyne and found a place in the Auchinleck MS. where Sir Orfeo appears. The narrative technique in Lai le Fresne and Sir Orfeo is very similar. The technique of suspense in the Lay le Freyne is especially similar to the use of that same technique in Sir Orfeo and it has been suggested that, even if the Old French originals did not have the same author, they may have been translated by the same man. Bliss discussed the possibility and found that although there are slight variations in the dialect, these could be accounted for by a time lapse between the two works.\(^1\) He found a rhyme with an Old English vowel which is especially telling, but he said,

\[\text{important though this difference is, it should not be allowed to outweigh the close similarities...}\]

\(^1\)Bliss, p. xlv-xlv.
which, in conjunction with the stylistic evidence, strongly support the hypothesis of common authorship. Possibly Lay le Freyne was written later than Sir Orfeo, at a time when an unrounded vowel for OE eo was more current in the author's dialect, and could be more freely used when the exigencies of rhyme demanded it.¹

The feature of the two lays which first attracted scholars was the missing prologue to Sir Orfeo. It was discovered attached to Lay le Freyne. Most editions of Sir Orfeo now print the prologue with it in what has been shown to be its original place. The linguistic evidence in the prologue could attribute it to the author of either Sir Orfeo or Lay le Freyne, a further argument for the common authorship of the two lays.² One scholar has attempted to show that the prologue is based on fragments culled from Marie de France's work³ but Bliss remained unconvinced and added:

It seems more probable that the prologue is the original composition of an author who was well read in the French narrative lais and was able to summarize their contents for himself without the assistance of Marie de France.⁴

Breton Lays and 'Sir Orfeo'

The prologue, the most thorough discussion of Breton lays

¹Bliss, p. xlv.
²Bliss, p. xlvii.
³J. Zupitza, "Zum Lay le Freyne," EngSt, x (1887), 42; cited by Bliss, p. xlvi.
⁴Bliss, p. xlvi.

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in Middle English, may serve as an introduction to Breton lays. The author of the prologue gives a fairly complete list of the topics which Breton lays treat:

> Sum ben of wele, and sum of wo,
> And sum of ioy and merthe also;
> Sum of trechery, and sum of gyle, (guile)
> And sum of happes that fallen by whyle; (happenings)
> Sum of bourdys, and sum of rybaudry, (jests)
> And sum ther ben of the feyre.
> Of all thing that men may se,
> Moost o loue forsoth they be. (5-12, Sisam's edition)

Thus the lays could treat of almost any topic, but mostly, as the author of the prologue noted, they treated of love. Orfeo would certainly qualify as a story about love, although it is also "of the feyre," of "wele," of "ioy," of "merthe" and, at least for a while, of "wo." Perhaps the author of the prologue has offered not so much a catalogue of different topics as a sample of the range of emotions which could be developed in the course of a single lay.

The author of the prologue specifically states that these lays were first written in Brittany. Bretons frequently composed lays based on the adventures they had heard:

> When they myght owther heryn (overhear)
> Of adventures that ther weryn,
> They toke her harpys with game, (gladly)
> Maden layes and yaf it name. (17-20, Sisam.) (gave)

It has been infrequently noted that a similar statement closes the lay Sir Orfeo. After the action has been concluded and before the customary closing prayer the author of Sir Orfeo
told how this lay had come to be:

Harpours in Bretaine after than
Herd hou this mervaile bigan
And made herof a lay of gode likeing
And nempened it after the King. (named)
That lay "Orfeo" is y-hote. (called)
God is the lay, swete is the note. (573-578, Sands)

The final line of the above passage may refer to an independant Breton lay which the author of Sir Orfeo is praising, not to the story the author has just told. The word "note" suggests a key to the discussion of the manner in which a Breton lay was performed, evidently as a musical offering. In point of fact, all three passages quoted above to show the existence of a Breton lay about Orfeo may be presented here as a demonstration of the fact that the lays were musical:

In Foire et Blanceflor:

And he harped the 'lai d'Orphey.'

In Lai l'Espine:

then he sounded the 'lai d'orphei.'

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1Bliss, pp. xxvii-xxxix.

2Bliss, p. xxxi: "Et harpe le lai d'Orphey." (Emphasis mine.)

3ibid.: "Le lai lor sone d'Orphei." (Emphasis mine.)
and in the Prose Lancelot:

he **struck up** the 'lay dorfay.'

Each of these examples includes a verb which implies that the performance was musical: "harped," "sounded," and "struck up."

There are several descriptions of Breton minstrels performing their lays which clarify the procedure implied in the three references above. In Horn et Rimenhild, an Anglo-Norman romance, an elaborate description tells of a minstrel named Gudmod who took up his harp and stroked it. He was able to devise all sorts of chords and harmonies. As he played his harmonies one thought of the music of the celestial spheres. After he had played for a while he changed keys and began to sing one of his lays.

A similar description can be found in Gottfried of Strasbourg's Tristan where the minstrel plays for a while, changes keys and begins to sing, and rounds off his performance with a postlude. Bliss concluded from this evidence that:

we may therefore assume that the lai was usually preceded by an instrumental prelude in two keys, and sometimes rounded off with an instrumental postlude as well.

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1 Bliss, p. xxxi: "qui li notoit le lay dorfay." (Emphasis mine.)

2 Bliss, pp. xxix-xxx.

3 Bliss, p. xxx.

4 ibid.
Wace described lays which were completely instrumental. He spoke of lays for the viel, for harps and for several other instruments.\(^1\)

The words which accompanied the lays in some instances were lyrical rather than directly narrative. Bliss found that they were sometimes presented as a song by the hero or heroine, sometimes as a lyric expression of an onlooker and sometimes were based on an accompanying story.\(^2\) These accompanying stories, called "contes" in Old French, are the basis for Marie de France's lays. She explained how she created her translations in Guigemar (19-22):

\[
\text{The true "contes" I know, on which the Bretons based their lays, I will tell you briefly.}^{3} \]

Thus it appears that Sir Orfeo is not a lay in the strict sense of the word but the "conte" (story) of the lay.\(^4\) The lay seems to have been the musical performance which the Breton minstrel would have given, based on the "conte". These stories (contes) found their way into Old French and thence into Middle English.\(^5\) The lay to which the three passages cite above refer

\(^1\) Bliss, p. xxviii.
\(^2\) Bliss, p. xxviii-xxxi.
\(^3\) Bliss, p. xxix. "Les contes ke jo sai verrais, / Dunt li Bretun unt fait les lais, / Vos conterai assez briefment." (Translation mine.)
\(^4\) Bliss, p. xxxv.
\(^5\) Kittredge, p. 200.
must therefore have been a musical performance which used Orfeo's story. It was on this story that the Old French and the subsequent Middle English version considered here appear to have been based.¹

The Possible Path of the Orpheus' Story

Marie de France reported that the Bretons based their lays "on 'aventures' which they heard."² The author of the prologue to Sir Orfeo said substantially the same thing, explaining that they took their harps and composed lays "of adventures that ther weryn." The same observation is repeated in the conclusion to Sir Orfeo which has been referred to in another context:

Harpours in Bretaine after than
Herd hou this mervaile bigan
And made herof a lay of gode likeing. (573-575)

It is clear then that the Breton minstrels did not hesitate to compose their lays about any "conte" or "aventure" which they happened to hear. This fact could help explain how the originally classic story of Orpheus came to be transposed into a Breton lay.

Kittredge asked whether it was possible that the Breton minstrels could have heard the classic version. He answered

¹ibid.; Bliss, p. xxxv and p. xli.
²Bliss, p. xxvii quoting Marie de France's prologue (35): "Des aventures k'ils oirent." (Translation mine.)
affirmatively.¹ A Breton minstrel could indeed have heard the story, "whether in England or in the South of France, where Ovid and Vergil were well known, and where the Breton harpers were also no strangers."² Kittredge did not take note of Alfred's translation of Boethius' version of the classic story which Severs studied and which was reviewed in Chapter One. There it was shown that there is no classic element in Alfred's translation which does not occur in Ovid or Vergil and there are certain structural modifications of the story which are reflected in Sir Orfeo.³ This clarification of the possible source of the classic story does not, however, affect Kittredge's basic reasoning:

Our Breton harper, however, probably got the story by word of mouth, and in no very accurate shape; and, in making it over into a lay, he must inevitably have changed the story still further to make it square with his own beliefs and traditions and those of his auditors. In this process, such parts of the classic myth as were within his circle of ideas were retained with least alteration; such things as he could not understand, were cast aside or forgotten; many points were misunderstood and unwittingly misrepresented. In short, the Ovidian story became a Breton lay in every sense -- short, romantic, Celtic. This the French translator must have rendered without much change, his aim being to tell the tale of a favorite lay, not to restore an antique. And from this French version came our English Orfeo, freely handled, no doubt, but with no essential variation.⁴

¹Kittredge, p. 182.
²Kittredge, p. 184.
³Cf. Chapter One, p. 18.
⁴Kittredge, p. 185.

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Levi has discovered that most of the themes of the lays are Celtic. There are six references in medieval literature to Chevrefoil, five to Guirun, three to Tristan and occasional other references to such Celtic themes as Merlin, Arthur, Branden and Tintagel. All are subject of lays. Levi has also shown that there are a few classic themes which were not unknown to the lays. In addition to references to Thisbe and Dido in lays, there are the three references to the Orpheus themes which were discussed above.\(^1\) The Orpheus story was well known throughout the middle ages and provided the occasion for more than one reference to a skilled musician. Kittredge's hypothetical reconstruction of how a Breton minstrel would have had occasion to hear the "aventure" of the classic Orpheus appears to be credible and acceptable.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)E. Levi, "I Lais Bretonni e la Leggenda di Tristano," Studj Romanzi, xiv (1914), 113-143; cited by Bliss, pp. xxx-xxxi.

\(^2\)Kittredge, loc. cit.
CHAPTER FOUR

LITERARY ANALYSES

Introduction

The former Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, Dr. J. R. R. Tolkien, delivered the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrew in 1938. In discussing his topic, "On Fairy-Stories," he said:

Collections of fairy-stories are, in fact, by nature attics and lumber-rooms, only by temporary and local custom play-rooms. Their contents are disordered, and often battered, a jumble of different dates, purposes, and tastes; but among them may occasionally be found a thing of permanent virtue: an old work of art, not too much damaged, that only stupidity would ever have stuffed away.

The truth of his assertion that fairy-stories are disordered and jumbled collections of different dates and tastes appears to be true of an individual fairy story as well, if the evidence of the preceding pages can be admitted.

Later in the lecture Tolkien took up the question of the value and function of fairy stories. Before suggesting a four-fold approach to the discussion of fairy-stories, which will be studied later in this chapter, he insisted that "if


2Tolkien, pp. 45-46.

3Tolkien, pp. 47-84.
written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms.¹ That statement formed the basis for the inquiry of this chapter which will be directed to a study of the literary analyses of Sir Orfeo which have been attempted in the past and an interpretation of them. If it can be shown that Sir Orfeo was written with a high degree of conscious artistry and does contain the values of other literature, perhaps the conclusion should be that Sir Orfeo deserves to be taken completely out of the "lumber-room" and placed in the canon of literature where it can better display its literary values.

It is useful to find a pair of phrases to refer to the analyses of Sir Orfeo in the past. The work which has been done falls fairly neatly into two groups, each with its own rather different aims. The two groups may be allowed to generate their own labels. Tolkien's reference to collections of fairy-stories as "attics" and "lumber-rooms" suggests a catch phrase to use in reference to the analyses of Schoefield, Ker, Schoepperle, Smithers and Hibbard:² the 'Celtic attic' approach. Kane, Bliss and Severs have written more directly about the

¹Tolkien, p. 47.

Orfeo story. Their work suggests its own term of reference since each in his own way endeavored to uncover the structural artistry of the story.

The plan of this chapter will discuss what has been done in the 'Celtic attic' approach and in the approach to the story through a study of its structural artistry before turning to an independent analysis of the story based on principles derived from Vinaver and Tolkien. A brief consideration of the artistry and literary value of Sir Orfeo will close the chapter.

The 'Celtic Attic' Approach

Schoefield, Ker and Schoepperle

Both Schoefield and Ker presented the story of Sir Orfeo briefly in order to display an example of the narrative art of Middle English romances which they were discussing. In both instances Sir Orfeo is one of several examples which assert that a charming example of folktale has found a retelling of interest. Both authors drew on Zielke's edition of Sir Orfeo and Kittredge's study. Schoepperle found a place for Sir


Orfeo in her two volume study of Tristan in Appendix B where she presented it as an example of the harping motif.¹ The three authors were especially interested in Celtic themes; Sir Orfeo served them well.

Smithers

In 1953 Smithers published his study "Story Patterns in Some Breton Lays", which has been useful in this study. His careful work revealed three major types of story pattern in the Breton lay. Discussing Sir Orfeo, however, he noted that the story does not fulfill any of the three patterns. Nevertheless, Smithers was able to demonstrate that Sir Orfeo is related to Type I in which a fairy appears to a mortal woman in some unusual circumstance in order to contrive amorous meetings in the future. The Type I story pattern ends with the abduction of the lady who is never heard from again. The story of Sir Orfeo was continued, as Smithers shows, by blending themes from The Wooing of Etain, Map's story The Dead Woman's Sons and the other classic and Celtic themes which were analyzed in Chapters One and Two of this study.²

Hibbard

Hibbard's study, thirty years earlier than Smithers's, is

¹Schoepperle, pp. 541-544.

the last of the 'Celtic attic' approaches to be discussed because it can serve as a transition to a review of those critics who have dealt more directly with the story. Before her invocation of the Celtic antecedents which formed so many of the details of *Sir Orfeo* and her close analysis of them, Hibbard commented briefly on the grace and beauty of the lay for which a ballad-like quality has been claimed. She referred to some of the indications of conscious artistry such as the description of the castle in the Otherworld, the pictorial sense reflected in the description of the fairy army on snow-white horses and the contrastive quality of the passage describing Orfeo's life in the wilderness in comparison to his life in the royal hall.¹

The Structural Approach

Kane

Perhaps Hibbard's brief comments about the story itself opened the way for the closer analysis which Kane made in 1951.² Kane especially praised the spell of the world of Faërie which he found quite vital. He mentioned that a number of technical short-comings might have denied the lay success if it had had a less believable spell of Faërie. Unfortunately he did not enumerate these technical short-comings.³ In Kane's opinion the

¹Hibbard, pp. 195-199.
²Kane, pp. 80-84.
³Kane, p. 81.
the success of Sir Orfeo grew from "contact with another existence" which was at the same time older and colder than the modern world.¹ The events heighten into "imaginative tension" because of the struggle and final victory of the "warm world of flesh and blood" which overcomes the chill world of Faërie.² Kane found that the author had built up, over half the length of the lay, the impression of contact with this other world. The first suggestion of contact with this other existence came in the mention of the hot "undretide" (mid-morning) when Heurodis went to the orchard and builds through the long series of events, the abduction, the mourning and the abdication, until Orfeo comes into contact with the fairy hunt and Herla's army and the dancing knights and ladies. The impotent character of these awesome sights becomes clear after Orfeo sees the falconing party whose falcons can kill their prey.³

Orfeo came into contact with the Land of Faërie itself when he followed the ladies into the rock and the sense of imminent danger rises. It is confirmed when the "mask of beauty is stripped from faery when in the courtyard of the palace Orfeo sees a horror, the figures of the taken mortals in the attitudes of their moments of capture."⁴ At this point the story takes on the proportions of a struggle between good, in the

¹Kane, p. 81.
²ibid.
³Kane, pp. 81-83.
⁴Kane, p. 81.
person of Orfeo, and evil, in the person of the fairy king. Orfeo emerges victorious after bidding the evil king to be good and truthful, to honor his commitment and surrender Heurodis.¹

Kane's appealing argument may stagger the imagination and persuade one of the accuracy of his interpretation. The excitement of the argument should be tempered, however, by recalling the comments in Chapter Two under the discussion of the themes involved in the Otherworld and the Rash Promise, concerning the scene where Kane finds the ultimate conflict between good and evil. It was observed that the terror Kane found is difficult to isolate in the text where the King and Queen of the Otherworld are described with words apparently appropriate to their rank and station in Faërie. They sit beneath a "blisseful and bright" canopy, the Queen is "fair and swete," their crowns and clothing shine brightly. Kane's implication that the King of the Otherworld refused Heurodis to Orfeo from some hidden malice belies the King's own statement:

A sorry couple of you it were,
For thou art lene, rowe and black
And she is lovesum withouten lack.
A lothlich thing it were forthy
To seen hir in thy compayny. (434-438)

In Chapter Two it was suggested that perhaps "such a noble sentiment would fit a king who could not visualize the lovely

¹ibid.
Heurodis in the company of the ill-kept minstrel, Orfeo."¹ Although Kittredge found the parallel in *The Wooing of Etain* and Schoepperle found it in *Tristan*, they both insisted that the king's capitulation after he was reminded of his promise was the response of an honest king who was willing to keep his promise and thereby enhance his nobility rather than the crumbling of evil powers before the essential goodness of Truth, as Kane appears to suggest.²

The essential point of the comments in the preceding paragraph is not to reject Kane's findings but to temper them with a closer response to the text itself. The sense of relief and escape which Kane found exists undeniably in the story and they will be discussed in the analysis of the story on the basis of Tolkien's principles. Here it has been necessary to point out that the text itself is liable to further interpretation. Not all the actions of the characters appear to be conveniently divisible into good and evil. The characters appear rather more complex; their actions should be allowed to speak for themselves. The king of the Otherworld does not invoke an atmosphere of terror but of grandeur -- not an inappropriate atmosphere for a king. His reticence about granting the charming Heurodis to a dirty minstrel and his greater concern to maintain his royal authority by respecting his own word, regardless of the conse-

¹Cf. Chapter Two, p. 68.

²Kittredge, p. 191; Schoepperle, p. 544.
quences, can be seen without violence to the text, as the perfectly normal reactions of a personality conscious of his own royal dignity and the worth of those who surround him.

Bliss

Bliss, and Severs after him, offered analyses of the story which attempt to follow the text more closely. Bliss found a three-fold structure in the lay. The fifty-six line prologue has an internal structure of three sections: first it tells what kind of story Sir Orfeo is; then it describes his great ability on the harp; and, finally, it tells about Orfeo's high rank and Heurodis' great beauty. The three major sections of the story which follow are of approximately equal length.

The first main section (lines 57-194 in Bliss' edition) opens with the abduction scene. The peaceful orchard and the stereotyped day in May serve to illustrate how Heurodis came under the fairy power and to contrast with the horror of the events which follow when Heurodis becomes hysterical. The pathetic preparations to prevent the abduction and the lengthy description of the knights involved contrasts with the sudden briefness with which Heurodis disappears. It is all over as quickly for the witnesses as it is for the readers.

1Bliss, pp. xli-xlv; Severs, pp. 199-202.
2Bliss, p. xli.
3Bliss, pp. xli-xlii.
The second section (Bliss', lines 195-476) tells of Orfeo's "long search," and his eventual success. After dispelling the magical atmosphere of Heurodis' abduction somewhat with the practical details of Orfeo's abdication, the author recreates the magical atmosphere as Orfeo harps in the wilderness and charms the wild beasts, sees the fairy hunt, King Herla's army and the dancing to tabors and trumpets. The enchanted atmosphere disappears, as Kane pointed out, when the falconing party actually seizes the birds it attacks, illustrating its mortality in its ability to kill. Orfeo had encountered reality once again. In the remainder of the section Orfeo regains his wife in a straightforward narration with skillful dialogues to increase the sense of credibility.¹

In the third and final section (Bliss', lines 477-604) Orfeo returns to his kingdom and regains the authority he had laid down. Bliss suggested that this section appeared "superfluous" from one point of view since it appears to be a prolonged interpretation of the set phrase "they lived happily ever after," but he justified the final section by noting that it allowed the author "to achieve a notable climax" through the effective use of a suspense which played on the steward while the reader watches in full awareness of Orfeo's true identity under the disguise.² He adds that

¹Bliss, pp. xlii-xliii.
²Bliss, p. xliii.
in fact the addition of the final episode gives the whole story its proper balance by making the scenes of enchantment, already psychologically central, physically central as well....

Evidently Bliss feels with Kane that the enchantment of the world of Faërie is central to the story psychologically. The addition of the final episode allowed the sheer bulk of the story to be such that the episode in the Otherworld is located in the middle of the story and thereby becomes "physically central" in order to correspond to its psychological centrality. 2

Smyser objected that the phrases "psychologically central" and "physically central" were borrowed from the criticism of painting where they have obvious meanings relative to the high visibility of a painting. He felt that Bliss used the phrase to "gloss over a structural defect," the failure to make the rescue and homecoming of Heurodis the true climax Smyser claimed for it. 3 Smyser continued to object to the use of the terms on broader grounds:

If we are going to find a "psychological center" in every piece of literature and then perforce identify this with the "physical center" (and even in the best paintings the two are usually not the same), we shall be obliged to re-evaluate every great work of Western civilization from the Iliad down, in a way that might leave only Sir Orfeo and The Heart of Midlothian uncondemned. 4

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1ibid.

2ibid.

3Smyser, p. 137.

4ibid.
Before turning to Severs' response to Bliss' structural interpretation and Smyser's objections it should be noted in passing that Bliss characterized the second section of the poem somewhat inaccurately when he employed the phrase "long search for Heurodis."¹ Orfeo went into the wilderness with no hope of finding Heurodis. He swore he would have no further contact with women and that he would live in the wilderness "ever-more." Only after he sighted the falconing party and recognized Heurodis did he resolve to attempt to regain her, and then only with the resigned fatalism reminiscent of a warrior in Beowulf. "Parfay," he said, "tide what bitide" (come what may) (315) he set out to regain her or to die, "of lif no deth I me no reche" (I do not care about life or death) (318). Again, closer attention to the text can show that the personalities of the characters in the story may be regarded as realistically complex individuals who do not always react in complete accord with the patterns sometimes assigned them.

Severs

Severs endeavored to dissolve Smyser's objection to Bliss' terms "physically central" and "psychologically central" by approaching the story on somewhat different grounds which, in imitation of Bliss' structural analysis, also deal with Smyser's objection to the story itself: that it is marred by the failure

¹Bliss, p. xlii.
to make Heurodis' rescue and homecoming the climax it should be. Smyser felt that the entire return and recognition theme, which was discussed in Chapter Two, was spliced on.\(^1\) Severs analysed the story in a way which could show that the final episode "was a natural development inherent in the story."\(^2\)

The two modifications of the classic story, Orfeo's Celtic kingship and the Alfredian-classical self-exile, open the story pattern to a double loss: the loss of the kingdom as well as the loss of Heurodis.\(^3\) The story, Severs says, "is carefully organized and carefully developed to exploit all the values in both these losses."\(^4\) Each loss is displayed separately and regained separately.

In order to substantiate these assertions Severs suggested that the story has four major sections rather than Bliss' three sections. After the prologue, which Bliss showed contains three sections, the poems displays the following sections:

I. Loss of Heurodis. (Ll. 57-194: 138 lines.)
II. Loss of the kingdom (Ll. 195-280: 86 lines.)
III. Orfeo's fairy experiences, culminating in recovery of Heurodis. (Ll. 281-476: 196 lines.)
IV. Orfeo's human experiences, culminating in recovery of the kingdom. (Ll. 477-605: 128 lines.)\(^5\)

\(^1\) Severs, pp. 199-202.
\(^2\) Severs, p. 198.
\(^3\) ibid.
\(^4\) Severs, p. 199.
\(^5\) ibid.
In the first section Heurodis' abduction finds full expression in the technique of suspense which prevents the reader from knowing why Heurodis has become hysterical until she explains it in her own words to her bewildered husband.\textsuperscript{1}

Orfeo's natural response of profound grief triggers the second section in which his grief drives him to abandon his luxurious life. The passage in which his men implore him not to abandon them has a parallel in the concluding episode where they rejoice to see him return to them. The lengthy passage which compares Orfeo's wretched life in the wilderness with his former comforts prepares the reader for the luxurious ceremonial bath and the regal robes which his men produce for him at his return. Severs feels that the second section finds its normal response and conclusion in the fourth section.\textsuperscript{2}

The same is true for the third section; it is the denouement of the first section in which Heurodis was abducted. The suspense created by the uncertainty of Heurodis' return increases while Orfeo's exile is displayed to full advantage. Then the uncertainty is accented when Orfeo sees her in the company of the falconing ladies and sets off to regain her. The tension grows until the final moment of the third section when the King of the Otherworld recognizes the binding power of his own word and surrenders her to Orfeo.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1} Severs, p. 201.  
\textsuperscript{2} Severs, p. 200.  
\textsuperscript{3} Severs, p. 201.
The suspense of Orfeo's exile, the sense of his anguish and loneliness as a king in the wilderness, have been in abeyance while Orfeo rescued Heurodis. They re-emerge from the second section into the fourth section where Orfeo returns to his kingdom in disguise. The suspense resolves itself by following the same pattern which it had followed in the third section where Heurodis was regained. Both climactic scenes take part in a royal court; Orfeo appears in both disguised as a minstrel; his ragged clothing causes comment in both episodes; he seeks something from the ruler of each court; he plays his harp and thus provides the motivation for the respective climaxes; he employs a "strategy of misrepresentation;" in both climactic episodes the reader knows the true situation; in both scenes Orfeo emerges with the goal he had sought. In the first section Orfeo was in possession of both his kingdom and his wife. This state of affairs is restored at the end of the fourth and final section.¹

Severs' analysis will form the basis for further suggestions about the nature of the story and its structure. It will be useful, therefore, to cite his own summation in full:

To be sure, the fact that in two episodes the same technique is employed -- suspense -- or that striking parallels obtain between them, does not establish an artistic unity embracing them both. That must be

¹Severs, pp. 201-202.
established on other grounds involving the conduct and the effect of all the story's parts. But the pervasive similarity of technique and parallel development does contribute in a minor way to the over-all effect of unity, and so support the basic considerations of organic structure which I urged earlier. The tale is a unified whole, and the final episode is an essential and integral part of the whole.¹

Severs' analysis of the structure of the lay adheres closely to the text. There are no apparent features of the story which are overlooked or distorted in the structure he suggests. Smyser's objection that the return and homecoming of Heurodis should have been the proper climax of the story² has received a response in the suggestion that the story has a two-fold pattern which demands a two-fold climax.³ It might be suggested, however, that the discovery of a double climax to a single story is a rather drastic cure for an ailment Smyser would prefer to call a simple defect in the story. But in fact, Severs' assertion that the "pervasive similarity of technique" which contributes to the "effect of unity" can support "basic considerations of unity" appears rather restrained if the lay really is a single, well-wrought unit of artistic work. Perhaps this is the flaw that Kane found. It appears to be extremely difficult to demonstrate the artistic unity of Sir Orfeo

¹Ibid.
²Smyser, p. 137.
which has been claimed for it on other than "pervasive" grounds.

An Analysis on the Basis of Vinaver's Principles

In 1966 Eugene Vinaver said in his Presidential Address to the Modern Humanities Research Association that "'organic unity' in the sense in which we commonly use the term is a metaphor traceable as far back as the 16th-century, but not beyond."1 It may be suggested that Smyser's appeal for a direct climax and Severs' response with two complimentary climaxes could imply that both are working with a chronologically faulty set of assumptions. Vinaver added that "our failure to realize this has caused us to overlook the very things that give life and meaning to medieval literary art and to much of our own."2 Vinaver suggested that a more sympathetic approach would take into consideration the different stylistic standards of medieval artistry. The narrative was to be systematically and carefully elucidated in a way similar to the contemporary musical standard, the "organa dupla, or two-part organa superimposed upon given traditional chants."3 Thirteenth century writers, Vinaver says,

worked with the same ultimate purpose in mind: they too wanted to make the narrative articulate, to motivate it, to give it a 'causal' perspective; but the

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1 Vinaver, p. 13.
2 ibid.
3 Vinaver, p. 7
method they adopted was a characteristically 13th-century method, paralleled in many other manifestations of contemporary thought: it consisted in forging links between originally independent episodes and in establishing relationships between themes which had heretofore existed in isolated form.¹

Vinaver discussed the Arthurian stories to exemplify his point but it is worthy of note that the suggestions he made square rather well with the outline of *Sir Orfeo* which Severs proposed. The plot of *Sir Orfeo* from this point of view would show the theme of the double loss and the double recovery in an overlapping style reminiscent of the 'organa dupla'. In characteristic thirteenth century style both themes are presented and then each receives separate treatment. The theme of abduction is left in abeyance while the author takes up the abandonment of the kingdom and the pathos of the unhappy king in the wilderness. The first element of the story is picked up and resolved when the King of the Otherworld returns Orfeo's wife. The third section has thus resolved, as Severs said, the first section before the fourth section can resolve the situation in the second section by restoring the kingdom to Orfeo. The 'organa dupla' has been developed, overlapped, and may find its conclusion in a device analogous to the unison statement of the theme that concluded much of medieval music: Orfeo and Heurodis and firmly returned and re-established together in the

¹ibid.
concluding lines:

Now King Orfeo newe coround is
And his Quen, Dame Herodis. (567-570)

This interpretation has much to recommend it: it appears to reenforce Severs' "overall effect of unity;" it resolves Smyser's search for a single climax with an approach to the work which is appropriate to the period in which the lay was written; it is an almost classic example of an 'organa dupla' in a literary work; and it maintains the integrity of the work without appeal either to classic or Celtic antecedents or to artistic theories other than those of its own century.

"To say all this," in Vinaver's words, "is to take up a position diametrically opposed to the doctrine preached nowadays in high academic places -- the doctrine of literary absolutism which assumes that the essential forms of literary expression remain static and can be judged by the same standards throughout the ages." Without presuming to overturn academic doctrines one may point out that the unity in Sir Orfeo which emerges through the perspective Vinaver recommended is less "pervasive" than firmly based on a thirteenth century artistic

2Smyser, p. 137.
3Vinaver, p. 7.
4Vinaver, p. 23.
principle, and is surely as unified a whole as the unity which interlaces the inputs and outputs of a flow-chart into a single and dynamic whole, or the three-plot story which William Faulkner built into his novel Light in August.

An Analysis on the Basis of Tolkien’s Principles

There does not appear to be a difficulty in relating Sir Orfeo to Tolkien’s discussion of fairy-stories. Such stories are accounts of adventures of men in the Perilous Realm, according to Tolkien.¹ The Perilous Realm is simply that contact with the world of Faërie which pervades Sir Orfeo. Ultimately, Tolkien says, Faërie is indescribable, although it is not imperceptible.² Its origin in the folkloric tradition of different stories and historic events which contribute to a sort of "pot"³ from which the story teller may take what he needs for his story accounts for the term "lumber-rooms of Europe"⁴ in reference to Faërie and the stories about it. Contact with the Perilous Realm offers four values in addition to the standard literary ones: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape and Consolation.⁵

¹Tolkien, p. 9.
²Tolkien, p. 10.
³Tolkien, p. 19.
⁴Tolkien, p. 43.
⁵Tolkien, p. 46.
Fantasy

Tolkien understands Fantasy in a laudatory way, as the use of artististry and imagination to create a strangeness of expression in the story.¹ As Sir Orfeo weaves in and out of the Perilous Realm Tolkien’s meaning becomes clearer. The poem begins with a perfectly normal literary device, a fine day in May. The heat of this fine day, as Kane pointed out, and the presence of the ladies in the orchard lead to the apparition of a fairy king because of the accepted mechanism of fairy appearances near grafted or orchard trees. Thus the real world and the enchanted world of Faërie weave together. Orfeo’s visions of the fairy hunt and Herla’s army and the dancing knights and ladies follow exactly the same sort of hot “undretide” (mid-morning). Kane is correct in pointing out that the enchantment is dispelled in this passage by the brutally realistic fact that the falconing party is able to kill its prey: it is mortal. The weaving between the real world and the enchanted world continues as Orfeo sets off to recover his wife with a fatalism and matter of fact attitude that strengthen the impression of a real personality with clearly defined goals; these make the march through the wilderness and the entrance through an enchanted rock perfectly acceptable inside the story. Orfeo’s realistically treated determination triumphs.

Each of the preceeding examples shows how a potentially

¹Tolkien, pp. 46-55.
unbelievable situation becomes believable inside the story because the author's artistry has set up a realistic situation and woven the enchanting elements into it in such a way that Fantasy in Tolkien's sense results. The reader has been induced to lend a Primary Belief to a world which has reality only inside the story. Tolkien is especially insistent that this technique is effective only where the audience is fully aware of the realities of the actual world so that this method can take on the enriching quality of delighting and surprising the reader with the richness of the author's imagination.\textsuperscript{1} Without the realistic details of the hot day in May, the dead bird in the falcon's claws or the determined singlemindedness Orfeo finally displays, the enchanting passages would have no savor and become ridiculous.

Recovery

Fairy-stories have the value of Recovery which clarifies the reader's point of view. The reader realizes that the story is not an objectively true one, but lends his belief temporarily because of the matter of fact approach and gains a sharper perception of his own real world by contrast with the events in the story.\textsuperscript{2} The fantastic element "helps by setting things apart completely, thus letting us see them as they are without the

\textsuperscript{1}Tolkien, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{2}Tolkien, pp. 55-59.
interference of our needs or wishes."¹ In *Sir Orfeo* the properties which take on enchanted qualities, such as the orchard, the harp, the rock, the castle, the beggar's hut and his simple cot, the steward, the dining hall in Orfeo's palace -- all relatively ordinary things which every thirteenth century person could have experienced at least at a distance -- these properties become focal points in the story; they take on enchanted proportions and, when the story is ended, retain enough of an impression of enchantment in the mind of the reader or auditor to be perceived without the ordinary, everyday impressions a person normally has of the things which surround him, to, as Tolkien phrases it, "recover" an impression of independence from people.²

The twentieth century reader may have less experience of harps and castles and banquet halls in palaces but he can relate the same process to a hot day in May or to an orchard. Once the story has been read, the reader may retain enough of an impression that the next May, if there is a hot day, he may recall that in the story it was on just such a day that Heurodis was abducted. This recollection may not trigger a hunt for fairy armies -- such is not the function of Recovery -- but it may serve to strengthen the impression in the reader that the day is not merely one more day to be worked through and the heat merely to be suffered in a mundane and unaware manner, but that this day is a day like to

¹Tolkien, p. 57.
²Tolkien, p. 58.
itself and nothing else. Such is the Recovery Tolkien attributes to fairy-stories, not unlike Gertrude Stein's famous observation that "a rose is a rose is a rose."

**Escape and Consolation**

Tolkien dwells rather lengthily on the quality of Escape in fairy-stories.¹ He explained how they can provide the refuge all literature provides from what he calls the "ugly realities" of modern life.² He does not devote much detail to other aspects of Escape which may be more pertinent. He mentions the satisfaction the reader will derive from seeing the hero escape from fundamental anguish.³ Orfeo escaped hunger, after his diet of roots and berries, when he returned to his kingdom. He escaped the fundamental grief of having lost his wife when he recovered her from the King of the Otherworld; he may even have escaped evil and death, for although Kane may have overstated the conflict between good and evil in his analysis of Sir Orfeo, it is undeniably true that there is a threatening facet to adventures in a world where the mysterious and fantastic are constantly happening. Evil and death are not stated themes of the story, but the reader does hearken to the suspicion in his own mind that the next turn of events could bring just such a conclusion

¹Tolkien, pp. 59-68.
²Tolkien, p. 65.
³ibid.
to an adventure in which the real and fantastic weave back and forth with such regularity. The final escape from such suspicions with the joyous resolution generates the fourth and final value of fairy-stories: Consolation.¹

However wild the turn of events in a fairy story, however intimately the real world and the Perilous Realm become woven together, the fairy-story resolves itself in a happy ending. Tolkien admits that not all fairy-stories do have such a happy ending but, he suggests, most fairy-stories do. He goes a bit further in suggesting that "just as Tragedy is the highest form of Drama, its highest function," so the fairy-story should have a happy ending.² Obviously not all drama is tragic but, as Tolkien has phrased it, tragedy is "its highest function." Not all fairy-stories have a happy ending, but the highest function of a fairy story is to have a happy ending -- Tolkien coined the term "eucatastrophe" for this ending.³

The sense of relief and of joy shared with Orfeo and Heurodis when they are restored to their proper places at the head of the kingdom which the reader experiences find a plausible explanation in Tolkien's words:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is

¹Tolkien, pp. 68-70.
²Tolkien, p. 68.
³ibid.

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no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale -- or otherworld -- setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far as evangellum, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.¹

Literary and Artistic Values

The Loomises mentioned one particularly noticeable defect in Sir Orfeo which Kane may have had in mind when he said that there were technical flaws in the lay. Although the meter is basically a four-stress line of iambs, it sometimes exceeds and sometimes falls short of metric perfection. The Loomises did not consider it a serious defect:

The English poet may lack the suave elegance of Marie de France, the polished refinements of her French couplets, but in his own sometimes roughened couplets, there is distinctive warmth and charm.²

For the reader who insists, as Ezra Pound put it, on "tub-thumping," the only reply can be Sands' practical suggestion that the "best one can do is to get through them [the defects]

¹ibid.

as gracefully as possible.\textsuperscript{1}

There are a number of literary qualities which may balance this defect. Bliss reported that Stanley found the lay more charming because of a lack of dramatic irony. The lay is addressed directly to the reader without overtones which might distract from the narrative.\textsuperscript{2}

The narrative quality of the poem is worthy of separate attention.\textsuperscript{3} The story is told directly by the author in the role of the minstrel whom he appears to be; he ends the prologue by calling for everyone’s attention and begins his story. He introduces each character, develops the abduction, the exile, the rescue and the return home in a straight-forward manner. The story is everything in this lay where there are no distractions but continuing development in accord with the canons of taste of the thirteenth century which Vinaver explained.\textsuperscript{4}

One of the devices which allows the narration to move along rather quickly is the use of dialogue.\textsuperscript{5} Important events are not described; the author rather prefers to let the characters

\textsuperscript{1}D. Sands, \textit{Middle English Verse Romances}, New York, 1966, p. 186.


\textsuperscript{3}Hibbard, p. 195.

\textsuperscript{4}Vinaver, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{5}R. S. and L. H. Loomis, p. 314; Bliss p. xliii.
speak for themselves and explain as much of the action as possible. Thus, before Heurodis' abduction, the reader is left completely in the dark with Orfeo until Orfeo asks the reader's question and insists on knowing why his wife is upset. Her reply eliminates the suspense that has been introduced and informs not only Orfeo but the reader who gains the impression of being at Orfeo's side in his retinue, listening to the reply. After Heurodis has told about the fairy king's appearance and his intention to carry her away Orfeo's reply is immediate, simple and direct: "Alas, forlorn icham!" (103). To his insistence that they will never be separated and his touching invocation of the Biblical phrase of marital fidelity which Ruth had used Heurodis replies abruptly and realistically, "Nay, nay, sir, that nought nis." (107). In this simple reply the scene grows into a believable dialogue between a husband and his wife. After this scene the author returned to his story and continues without recapitulating.

At the end of the story the same device is used again and the reader is able to look on with Orfeo at the steward, waiting to learn how he will react. Orfeo replies to the steward's imperious demand to know where the harp came from with equal abruptness: he took it from a dead man in the wilderness. The steward reacts with the immediacy of death; he screams that his lord is dead and falls down in a faint. With this method of

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1Severs, p. 201.
presentation the author has contrived to use realistic dialogue and gestures to heighten the narrative and move it along quickly.

The enchantment of the story and its ability to create a suspension of disbelief were explored in the discussion of Tolkien's principle of Fantasy in the fairystory.¹

The author is particularly skilled at the creation of suspense.² The device which he used to prevent the reader from knowing what caused Heruodis' mad fit until the reader could join Orfeo has already been discussed. In the fourth section of the lay the same device is used again to create suspense in the steward.³ Orfeo addressed the steward after he revived from his swoon and spoke to him in a lengthy sustained condition:

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Lo,
Steward, herkne now this thing! (listen)
Yif ich were Orfeo the King, (if)
And hadde y-suffred full yore
In wildernes meiche sore,
And had y-won my queen owy
Out of the land of fairy,
And hadde y-brought the levedy hende (gracious)
Right here to the townes ende,
And with a begger her y-name,
And were myself hider y-come
Poverlich to thee, thus stille,
For to assay the gode wille; (test)
And ich founde thee thus trewe,
Thou no shust it never rewe --
Sikerlich for love or ay (fear)
Thou shust be king after my day, ...
And yif thou of my deth hadest been blithe, (glad)
Thous shust have voided also swithe. (532-550)(swift)
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²Kane, p. 83; Severs, p. 201; Bliss, p. xliii.

³Bliss, pp. xliii-xliv.
Orfeo recounted the entire story of his sojourn in the wilderness, his recovery of his wife, his return and even his plans for the steward (depending on how the steward reacted), before the steward and the other men in the hall recognized him. The evidently impetuous but loyal steward shouted with sudden delight, knocked the dining table out of his way and threw himself at Orfeo's feet -- his suspense resolved.

The artistry of this passage is particularly evident in a comparison with the two briefer manuscripts of the text. In MS. Harley the entire passage is omitted; Orfeo merely says, "Syr, Y am Orfeo the King." In MS. Ashmole the sustained condition recorded above is begun, then breaks off after the second line to assert, somewhat ludicrously at that point, that the speaker is Orfeo.¹

Contrast played its part in the author's repertoire.² The protracted passage concerning Orfeo's misery in the wilderness, quoted in Chapter Two in the discussion of the theme of the wild-man in the woods, is a case in point. One particularly colorful example from this passage may be cited here:

He that hadde y-ward fowe and gris (striped grey furs)
And on bed the purper bis, (linen)
Now on hard hether he lith;
With leves and gresse he him writh. (217-220) (covers)

¹ibid.
²Severs, p. 200.
The reference to the fine furs and handsome linens in the imperial color which Orfeo had once known find an effective contrast in the grim reality of a hard heath and leaves of grass that replace his former comfort. The reader might recall the illustrations of Fortune turning her wheel: a man struggling up the one side, a resplendent king on the top, and a distraught looking man toppling off the other side as his crown falls from his head and the wheel keeps turning. The thirteenth century audience might have recalled that scene from an illustration in a manuscript or a picture in a church window or a reference in a sermon and thought of the truth brought home to Orfeo: fortune changes. The author's skill emerges in the realistic comparison, in the balance with which he described the two experiences, and in the images and emotional reactions which his images can evoke.

Proof of the author's descriptive powers can be found in reference to Heurodis' account of the fairy king whose hundred knights and hundred ladies rode "snowewhite stedes" and whose clothes were "as white as milke." She described his forests, "frith with flours" and told about his "castels and tours, rivers, forestes." When Orfeo entered the Otherworld Heurodis' description was verified and increased. The passage which described the gold arches and the buttresses decorated with little animals was quoted in Chapter Two. The author's ability to

1Hibbard, p. 195.
describe a scene vividly is not limited to scenes of inspiring beauty. Orfeo's return to Winchester in the beggar's rags occasioned comment among the townspeople:

"Lo," they said, "swiche a man!
How long the here hongeth him opan!
Lo, how his berd hogeth to his knee!
He is y-clongen also a tree!" (481-484) (Shriveled/like)

Evidently the "ballad-like simplicity" with which the story proceeds is not untutored.1 Skilled narration and dialogue play a major role in the development of the story as the author proceeds to tell the story with an aplomb that strengthens the reader's suspension of disbelief. The author appears to have been competent enough to weave a rather high number of classic and Celtic themes into a traditional story with references to previous stories (and, perhaps, to some historic events as well); to have employed dialogue and suspense, contrast and description in a style so forthright that the artistry has successfully disguised its own art;2 and to have produced a unified story almost classic in the preciseness with which it appears to reflect the overlapping 'organa dupla' to which Vinaver referred.3

Conclusion

At this juncture in the discussion of the lay Sir Orfeo it

1ibid.
2Hibbard, p. 195; Bliss, p. xli.
3Vinaver, p. 7.
is possible to invoke a great litany of diverse elements. One could call upon Ovid and Vergil, Etain and Midir, Connla and Tydorel, Breton minstrels and Irish harpers. One could refer to Celtic attics full of abductions under grafted trees and wild men in the woods, dancing knights and ladies and King Herla's still-marching troop. The line of scholars who have carefully studied this lay since its first and partial printing in 1802 should be present along with Kane and Bliss and Severs who, each in his turn, analysed the story ever more closely. (An at least partial demonstration of the excellence of the lay can be found in the fact that a fragile 604 lines can have withstood so careful and prolonged a scrutiny.)

Rather than weight a short narrative poem under the invocations that precede it may be best to conclude by asking with Eugene Vinaver whether we are not "entitled to say that the change from the medieval to the so-called modern pattern is a change not from primitiveness to maturity or from maturity to decadence, but from one valid structure to another?"\(^1\) Assuming that we are so entitled, the lay appears to be a charming piece of mature handiwork, almost classic in the fidelity with which it adheres to its own structure in order to develop a cohesive and overlapping narrative. In the literary tradition which required the author to conclude the lay piously we may ask him to include not only King Orfeo's adventures but the lay's close

\(^1\) Vinaver, p. 23.
scrutiny in saying:

Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care,  
God graunt us alle welle to fare! (579-580)
APPENDIX ONE

Item One

Filii Mortue (The Dead Woman's Sons)

This text has been printed in Latin in Constance Davies' article "Notes on the Sources of 'Sir Orfeo,'" MLR, xxii (1936), p. 355; in Roger Sherman Loomis' article "'Sir Orfeo' and Walter Map's 'De Nugis,'" MLN, li (1936), p. 29; and in J. Burke Severs' article "The Antecedents of Sir Orfeo" in Studies in Medieval Literature, MacEdward Leach (editor), University of Pennsylvania, 1961, footnote 8, p. 205. The three report that it is published in Walter Map De Nugis Curialium, M. R. James (editor), Oxford, 1914.

Quia de mortibus quarum iudicia dubia sunt incidit oracio, miles quidam Britannie minoris uxor suam amissam diuque ploratam a morte sua in magno feminarum cetu de nocte reperit in conwalli solitudinis amplissime. Miratur et metuit et cum redivivam videat quam sepelierat, non credit oculis, dubius quid a fatis agatur. Certo proponit animo rapere, ut de rapta vere gaudeat, si vere videt, vel a fantasmate fallatur, ne possit a desistendo timiditatis argui. Rapite eam igitur, et gavisus est ejus per multos annos conjugio, tam iocunde tam celebriter, ut prioribus, et ex ipsa suscepit liberos, quorum Hodie progenies magna est, et filii mortue dicuntur. Incredibilis quidem et prodigialis iniuria nature si non extarent certa uestigia ueritatis.

Item Two

The abduction of Ela

This text has been printed in Latin in Constance Davies' article "Notes on the Sources of 'Sir Orfeo,'" MLR, xxii (1936), p. 356 where she reported that "Dugdale, in the Monasticon Anglicanum VI, Part i, quotes from the history of the foundation of Lacock Priory for Nuns the following story of the abduction of Ela, the young heiress of William Fitzpatrick, Earl of Salisbury. This William died in 1196, leaving Ela, his only..."
daughter, an orphan, as her mother had died two years previously. Being heiress to great wealth and property it appears that her Norman relations carried her off to Normandy.

"et ibidem sub tuta et arta custodia nutrita. Eodem tempore in Anglia fuit quidam miles, nomine Gulielmus Talbot, qui induit se habitum peregrini, in Norman-niam transfretavit, et ibi moratus per duos annos; huc atque illuc vagans ad explorandum dominam Elam Sarum, et illa inventa, exuit habitum peregrini et induit se quasi cythatisator, et curiam ubi morabatur intravit; et ut erat homo jocosus, in gestis antiquorum valde peritus, ibidem gratanter fuit acceptus, quasi familiaris. Et quando tempus aptum invenit, in Angliam reparavit, habens secum istam venerabilem dominam Elam, et haeredem comitatus Sarum, et eam regi Ricardo praesentavit. At ille lectissimae eam susceptit et fratri suo Gulielmo Lungespe maritavit, per quem liberos subscriptos habuit ...."
APPENDIX TWO

Manuscripts of 'Sir Orfeo'

Auchinleck MS. (Advocates' 19. 2. 1.)
MS. Ashmole 61 (Bodleian 6922*).
MS. Harley 3810.
APPENDIX THREE

Editions of Sir Orfeo in Middle English

Scottish Antiquary, XVI (1902), 30-38.


Gibbs, A. C. Middle English Romances. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966. (Orfeo included)


Fairy Tales, Legends and Romances. 1875, 83-100.


Sampson, G. (ed.). The Cambridge Book of Prose and Verse. 1924, 265-274. (Selections.)


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Zielke, Oscar (ed.). *Sir Orfeo: ein englische Feemärchen aus dem Mittelalter.* Breslau, 1880.

*This work is not listed by Bliss.*
APPENDIX FOUR

Translations of Sir Orfeo

German


Modern English

Hunt, E. E. (ed. and trans.). Sir Orfeo, Adapted from the Middle English, 1910.


Weston, Jessie L. (ed. and trans.). Chief Middle English Poets. 1914, 133-141.

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