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Sir Orfeo: The Self and the Nature of Art

by Christina J. Murphy

Considerations of *Sir Orfeo* generally have focused more upon praise than analysis.[1] The few serious criticisms of *Sir Orfeo* available are limited by their *a priori* classification of the poem as a romance.[2] *Sir Orfeo* is not strictly nor solely a romance but a work which has developed within several traditions,[3] the most important and pervasive of which in the poem is the Orpheus myth. The alterations of the myth made by the poet provide, perhaps, the best way of analyzing the poem's meaning, significance, and effect.

The author of *Sir Orfeo* made at least four significant changes in the myth of Orpheus. Orfeo emerges not as a divine being born of Kalliope and Apollo but as a king. Such a change may be, of course, a direct result of the social structure of Europe in the fourteenth century and of the expectations of audiences of that century's popular romances. But, even with these objections in mind, it still could be asserted that the poet might have written of Orpheus as a divine being and have made his poem an allegory of man's fate in the world. The fact that Orfeo is a king adds two important features to the de-

[1] J. Burke Severs in "The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*," in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), p. 187, calls the poem "one of the loveliest and most charming of all Middle English romances"; L. A. Hibbard Loomis, *Medieval Romance in England* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1961), p. 195, describes the work as "inimitably fresh in style and content"; W.L. Renwick and H. Orton, *The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton* (London: Cresset Press, 1952), p. 381, characterize *Sir Orfeo* as a "charming tale of minstrelsy and true love"; David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature* (New York: Ronald Press, 1970), I, 66, describes the work as "fresh and charming"; and Margaret Schlauch asserts in *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 191, that the poem is "a gem of its kind."

[2] See particularly A. J. Bliss, "Introduction" to *Sir Orfeo* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966); and George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1951).

[3] For a complete discussion of the traditions within which *Sir Orfeo* developed see Constance Davies, "Classical Threads in *Orfeo*," *Modern Language Review*, 56 (1966), 159–65.

sign of the poem. First, it makes Orfeo a powerful representative of his society and yet also a representative man. His story is at once both individual and universal. This device, of course, adds much to the dramatic intensity of the poem. But, even more significantly, the device enables the poet to show by contrast with art the limitations of society in dealing with the irrationalities of the faery world.

The diminution if not total elimination of the quest motif of the Orpheus legend is the second change made by the poet of *Sir Orfeo*. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis in his excellent article "The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile" attacks A.J. Bliss' statement that the second edition of the poem "tells of Orfeo's long search for Herodis, and of his eventual success."[4] Gros Louis claims that this is not the focus of the second edition and that, in fact, "there is no search in the entire poem nor does Orfeo ever plan to make one. If we do not recognize this crucial fact, we fail not only to see the uniqueness of *Sir Orfeo* in the tradition of the Orpheus myth, but also to understand the intention of its author."[5]

Orfeo's recovery of Herodis marks the third change of the legend in the poem. Orfeo does not lose Herodis a second time as Orpheus lost Eurydice by looking back at her at the mouth of Hell in disobedience of the conditions laid down for her return to earth. Orfeo's journey in pursuit of Herodis is a complete success. The fourth change made by the poet is a concomitant factor of Orfeo's triumph. At the end of his journey, Orfeo returns to rule his kingdom in harmony and peace. Orpheus' journey ends with his death—he is torn to pieces by the Maenads, his head floating down the river still singing and finally coming to rest on the island of Lesbos.

The fundamental aspects of the Orpheus myth the poet of *Sir Orfeo* preserved. The view of Orpheus is that which prevailed into the Renaissance, derived, as it was in medieval times, from the same major source—the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. Orpheus was regarded as a poet-prophet, "a harmonizing and civilizing influence who caused order to prevail through his power over universal nature."[6] Moreover, "mythographers interpreted the legend of his death as an alle-

[4] Bliss, p. *xlii*.

[5] "The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile," *The Review of English Studies*, 18 (1967), 245–46.

[6] Caroline W. Mayerson, "The Orpheus Image in *Lycidas*," *PMLA*, 64 (1949), 189.

gory of human wisdom and art, which are periodically destroyed by barbarism but which reappear in succeeding cycles of culture."[7]

The fact that Orfeo does not die in the poem should not be a bar to this type of interpretation. Orfeo's journey to the underworld can be viewed as a symbolic death, imitating as it does Christ's death and resurrection and thus reflecting the influence of Christian theology upon the work. A standard reading of *Sir Orfeo* is to view it as a Christian allegory in which Orfeo as a Christ-like figure contends with the Faery King of the underworld who is thought to be in such a reading an apt analogue for Satan. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis has pointed out that Orfeo is very much unlike the aggressive classical Orpheus.[8] Orfeo remains passive and restrained at the moment of his earthly trial and does not challenge the authority of the gods. The Renaissance view, like the medieval, metaphorically identified Orpheus with Christ primarily because of their similar attributes—their humility, gentleness, and "power to subdue and reconcile hostile and mutually antagonistic forces."[9] This aspect of the Orpheus myth *Sir Orfeo* celebrates. The emphasis is upon harmony and reconcilliation rather than upon the tragic pose of defiance. Culture and art survive the threats of barbarism and irrationality in *Sir Orfeo,* but not at the cost of the hero's life. The focus is decidedly Christian. The importance of the individual man is stressed, and the Christian virtues of humility, loyalty, faith, and devotion are rewarded.

The poem makes a fundamental statement not only about the nature of virtue and man's state in the world, but also about the nature of art. The "power to subdue and reconcile hostile and mutually antagonistic forces" metaphorically attributed to Orpheus and to Christ in the work is also the primary value that the *Sir Orfeo*-poet finds inherent in art. The Orpheus myth serves as an apt symbol for art itself, for, as Gustaf Freden states in *Orpheus and the Goddess of Nature,* Orpheus' song can "create harmony out of the dissonance of the universe; it brings the whole of the cosmos into harmony."[10] If one accepts James F. Knapp's hypothesis that "the conflict in *Sir Orfeo* may be described in terms of a mythic hero attempting to deliver his

[7] Mayerson, pp. 189–90.
[8] Gros Louis, p. 249.
[9] Mayerson, p. 193.
[10] *Orpheus and the Goddess of Nature* (Goteborg: n.p., 1958), p. 19.

world from the powers of darkness,"[11] the question naturally arises as to how man can deliver himself from darkness in this Boethian picture of the universe. Boethius found his answer in Philosophy. The *Sir Orfeo*-poet emphasizes virtue and individual integrity and places his faith in the power of art to deliver man from the chaos of darkness and the irrationalities of life.

The poem begins with a description of Sir Orfeo, a king in England and a great nobleman. He is "a stalworth man," as bold as he is liberal and courtly. "Orpheo most of anything / Lovede the gle of harpying":

> Syker was every gode harpoure
> Of hym to have moche honoure.
> Hymself loved for to harpe,
> And layde theron his wittes scharpe.
> He lernid so, ther nothing was
> A better harper in no plas.[12]
> (11–16)

The first sixteen lines of the poem present and emphasize the two primary motifs of individual virtue and art.

Depicted in the next section of the poem is Orfeo's love for his queen, Herodis. When Orfeo hears of the queen's grief and hysteria after her return from the orchard, "Never him nas werse fer no thing." He rushes to her chamber with ten knights, and, beholding his queen's distraught look and hysterical grief, speaks to her "with grete pitie." The queen's story that "now we mot delen a-two" draws from Orfeo a response of loyalty and love:

> Whider thou gost, ich wil with thee,
> And whider I go, thou schalt with me.
> (105–106)

When the queen tells him of the threat from the Faery King, Orfeo's response is one of personal grief:

[11] "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29 (1968), 269.

[12] *Sir Orfeo*, in *The Age of Chaucer*, Vol. I of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 269–85. All references are to this text.

> "O we!" quath he, "allas, allas!
> Lever me were to lete mi lif
> Than thus to lese the Quen mi wif!"
> (152–54)

But Orfeo must subjugate his personal response to his role in and relationship to society. He asks counsel of each man as to how he can save the queen from the powers and evil of the underworld, but no man can answer him. Orfeo phrases his decision in terms of his relationship to his society. As the head and representative of his society, he takes "wele ten hundred knightes with him / Ech y-armed stout and grim" to protect the queen. But his effort fails, and Herodis is abducted by the Faery King.

The implications of Orfeo's actions from the time he is told of Herodis' fate until she is taken from him into the underworld are extremely significant. Orfeo reveals that he possesses a great knowledge and understanding of interpersonal relationships. He is a man who knows himself and who knows the queen's love for him. He has, too, a great understanding of societal relationships. He is praised as a great king and a noble man. He asks advice of each of his men, demonstrating his wisdom in dealing with his subjects and his lack of self-centered and self-defeating pride.

But Orfeo's attempt to save his queen through a display of force and the power of ten hundred knights represents both a type of pride and a type of ignorance on his part. He is both proud and ignorant in thinking that he can circumvent the forces of destiny and fate. Queen Herodis, as miserable and unhappy as Orfeo about her misfortunes, makes no attempt to overcome her fate. Instead, she submits to the dictates of the gods, and her obedience may be one of the reasons why she is allowed to return to the upper-world with Orfeo. Orfeo's refusal to submit to the dictates of the gods represents on his part an ignorance of the workings of the cosmos. As knowledgeable as he is of interpersonal and societal relationships, he knows little of the workings of Nature and of the universe.

Orfeo, in many ways, resembles Shakespeare's King Lear. Both Orfeo and Lear undergo great personal suffering and change in fortunes, moving from a king to a pilgrim, from a leader of society to an exile from society; but both come also to a greater awareness and

realization of themselves in terms of their relation to the cosmos. Thus, we can see, as Gros Louis has asserted,[13] the significance of the fact that Orfeo's is a self-imposed exile rather than a quest deliberately undertaken in pursuit of Herodis. Orfeo calls in his "barouns, erls," and "lordes of renouns" and announces to them:

> "Lordinges," he said, "bifor you here
> Ich ordainy min heighe steward
> To wite my kingdom afterward:
> In my stede þen he shal,
> To kepe my londes over al.
> For, now ic-have mi Quen y-lore,
> The fairest levedi that ever was bore,
> Never eft I nil no woman se.
> Into wildernes ich wil te,
> And live their evermore
> With wilde bestes in holtes hore.
> And when ye understood that I be spent,
> Make you than a parlement
> And chese you a newe king.
> Now doth your best with al my thing."
> (180–94)

When Orfeo returns from the world of the Faery King and asks of the beggar who has taken him into his home, "who the kingdom held in hond," the beggar relates the story of Herodis' abduction by the faeries and tells of "how her king an exile yede." Orfeo's statement, "Into wildernes ich wil te / And live ther evermore" marks a significant alteration in the Orpheus myth by the *Sir Orfeo*-poet. The traditional emphasis in the myth had been upon the quest motif and the pursuit of the love object. But here the focus has changed, and the emphasis is upon the self rather than the love object. The self's relationship to the universe rather than to another human being is integral to the type of rebirth or spiritual awakening achieved by both Orfeo and Lear.

Entering upon his self-imposed exile, Orfeo takes with him only a pilgrim's mantle and his harp. These two objects are interesting symbols of the experience which Orfeo must undergo to reconcile himself to the laws of the cosmos, for the pilgrim's mantle represents an

[13] Gros Louis, p. 245.

individual, highly personal search for the true expression of the self and the harp represents a more universal form of self-expression. Orfeo's problem in the poem is to reconcile the particular with the universal, to reconcile the individual with the cosmos. Symbolized by Orfeo's harp, art thus becomes a metaphor for both the problem and its solution, for in art the particular expression of the individual self is merged with the more general, the more universal expression which is the domain of art. The balance achieved between the particular and the general in art symbolizes the reconciliation to cosmological laws which Orfeo seeks. The poet of *Sir Orfeo* has achieved a complex point of view in which his poem as a work of art comments not only upon the nature of the human condition, but also upon the very nature of art itself.

The progressions of Herodis and Orfeo in the poem reflect significantly upon the work's design and meaning. Herodis moves from the world of society to a world which is better described as "anatural" than as "supernatural." To this anatural world Herodis travels as a passive victim, moving from one realm or state of consciousness to another without any deliberate effort or attempt on her part. Orfeo, in contrast, moves from the world of society to the natural world and then to the anatural world. Whereas Orfeo influenced the laws of society through personal virtue, he excercises control over the laws of the natural world through art. During his ten-year exile into the "holtes hore":

> He toke his harp to him wel right,
> And harped at his owhen wille.
> Into alle the wode the soun gan shille
> That alle the wilde bestes that ther be-th
> For joye abouten him thai teth;
> And alle the foules that ther were
> Come and sete on ech a brere
> To here his harping a-fine
> So miche melody was therin.
> And when he his harping lete wold,
> No best by him abide nold.
> (246–56)

Such a view is in keeping with the traditional aspects of the Orpheus myth in which Orpheus through his harping could exercise control

over both animate and inanimate nature. In *Sir Orfeo,* Orfeo's powers are extended to the anatural world. In the world of the Faery King, Orfeo's harping exerts control and orders experience.

In Herodis' experience, magic mediated between the world of society and the anatural world; in Orfeo's experience, art exists as a constant in the world of society, the natural world, and the anatural world and is capable of mediating amongst the three. D.M. Hill has attempted to impose a Freudian reading upon *Sir Orfeo,* arguing of the passage in which Orfeo sees "the king o'fairy with his rout / com to hunt him al about" that:

> The passage describes how, during Orfeo's solitary and no doubt for the most part silent sojourn in the wilderness, he would be on occasion afflicted by the sudden bursting about him of the other world hunt. The passage constitutes a representation of the threat of madness: an objectifying of a mental state.[14]

No proof exists in the poem for such a reading. The hunt is described as a literal event perceived by Orfeo as an actuality. If, like Hill, one wishes to make a case for the *Sir Orfeo*-poet's great understanding of subconscious motivations and of the human mind, a better case could be made for the poet in terms of his understanding of the workings of the mind in the creation of art. What the poet here has objectified is the psychical triad of the superego, the ego, and the id which Freud attributed to the mind. Art serves to the *Sir Orfeo*-poet as it does to Freud as a mediator amongst these three worlds or realms of consciousness—the superego, represented in the poem by society and its dictates; the ego, represented by the natural world and its laws; and the id, symbolized by the Faery King's anatural world of the irrational. The fact that the Faery King's abductions of innocent women were often considered to be motivated by lust[15] lends further credence to this association of the Faery King's anatural world with the id, considered by Freud to be the seat of man's passions and natural instincts.

Orfeo, in seeing the hunting party of the Faery King, catches a glimpse of the anatural world, but only vaguely does he understand

[14] "The Structure of *Sir Orfeo,*" *Medieval Studies,* 23 (1961), 137.

[15] John Block Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon," *Speculum,* 41 (1966), 22–29.

what he sees. He has not yet the power or the means by which to objectify and order his experience of the anatural. Following the hunting party, he comes into "a fair cuntray / As bright so sonne on somers day" and discovers there a castle so beautiful that he thinks it is "the proude court of Paradis":

Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,
Riche and regal, and wonder heighe.
Al the utmost was
Was clere and shine as cristal.
An hundred tours ther were about,
Degiselich, and batailed stout;
The butras com out of the diche,
Of rede gold y-arched riche;
The vosour was a-wowed al
Of each maner divers animal.
Within ther were wide wones
Al of precious stones.
The werst piler on to biholde
Was al of burnist gold.
Al that lond was ever light,
For when it schuld be therk and night,
The riche stones light gonne
As bright as doth at none the sonne.
No man may telle, no thinke in thought
The riche werk that ther was wrought;
By al thing him think that it is
The proude court of Paradis.
(331–52)

But entering within the castle, Orfeo is confronted with a different sight:

Than he gan behild about al,
And seighe a foule liggeand within the wal
Of folk that were thider y-brought,
And thought dede, and nare nought.
Sum stode withouten hade,
And sum non armes hade,
And sum thurch the bodi hadde wounde,
And sum lay wode, y-bounde.
And sum armed on hors sete,
And sum a-strangled as thay ete,
And sum were in water adreynt,

And sum with fire al forschreynt;
Wives ther lay on child bedde,
Sum ded, and sum awedde;
And wonder fele ther lay bisides,
Right as they slepe her undertides.
(363–78)

The two passages comment upon the nature of illusion and reality and, as such, invite comparison with the court scene in Guillaume de Lorris' *Le Roman de la Rose.* As the lover in de Loriss' romance approaches the castle, he sees the figures of Hate, Felony, Villainy, Covetousness, Avarice, Envy, Sorrow, Old Age, the hypocrite Pope Holy, and Poverty sculptured upon the garden wall. Once inside the garden, the lover describes a different sight:

And whan I was / ther / in, iwys,
Myn herte was ful glad of this,
For wel wende I ful sykerly
Haue ben in paradyse erthly;
So fayre it was that, trusteth well,
It seemed a place espyrituell.
For certes, as at my deuyse,
There is no place in paradyse
So good in for to dwell or be
As in that garden thought me;[16]
(645–54)

The movement from the beautiful to the grotesque in *Sir Orfeo* is reversed in de Lorris' *Le Roman de la Rose.* This fact may be significant as a comment upon love, it its nature be, as the character Reason would have it, illusory after all. Clearly the alternation between illusion and reality in *Sir Orfeo* manifests the poet's view that in the complexity of human life man is constantly challenged to discover the essential nature of his existence.

In the castle of the Faery King, Orfeo sees his lost Queen Herodis, "slepe under an ympe-tre / By her clothes he knewe it was she." Queen Herodis, as the poem later confirms, remains unchanged by her experience. Orfeo, in contrast, who acts from his own volition,

[16] *Le Roman de la Rose,* in *The Roumant of the Rose and Le Roman de la Rose,* ed. Ronald Sutherland (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968). All references are to this text.

gains a great deal of understanding from his ten-year exile and his recovery of Herodis. He no longer acts in ignorance or defiance of the laws of the universe. He gains entrance to the Faery King's court through his humility and, even more importantly, through his art:

> Orfeo knokketh atte gate.
> The porter was redi therate
> And asked what he wold have y-do.
> "Parfay!" quat he, "ich-am a minstrel, lo!
> To solas thi lord with my gle,
> Yif his swete wille be."
>
> (355–60)

Presented to the Faery King who at first is hostile to Orfeo's presence and demands to know, "What man artow / That art hider y-comen now?" Orfeo wins the king's favor through the "blisseful notes" of his harp. In return for the entertainment Orfeo has provided, the king grants him his wish and Orfeo recovers his lost queen. Critics are quick to point out that this scene represents the transference of fourteenth-century courtly conventions onto the underworld and, thus, Orfeo's manners, grace, and humility are recognized and rewarded in the underworld as they would be in any medieval court.[17] They cite as proof of their contention the king's ability to be bound by his promise and his sense of honor. Ultimately, they assert that not Orfeo's art wins Herodis for him but the conventions of courtly life.

Such an interpretation is, at best, a misreading. Orfeo's first meeting with the Faery King is marked by hostility and anger. The king demands to know who Orfeo is and what he wants. The Faery King says to Orfeo:

> "I no fond never so folehardi man
> That hider to ous durst wende,
> Bot that ich him wald of sende."
>
> (402–404)

The king's pose is hardly one of the grace, courtesy, and hospitality associated with courtly conventions and with medieval society. The

[17] See especially Loomis, *op. cit.*; Kane, *op. cit.*; and Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken," *Medium Aevum*, 33 (1964), 110.

important fact thus becomes that Orfeo wins the king's acceptance and favor through his music:

> That al that in the palays were
> Com to him for to here,
> And liggeth a-down to his fete,
> Hem thenketh his melody so swete.
> The king herkneth and sitt ful stille,
> To here his gle he hath gode wille,
> Gode bourde he hadd of his gle,
> The riche quen also hadde she.
> (415–22)

What emerges from this scene in the palace of the Faery King is not a transferred depiction of medieval court life but a significant statement about art's power to tame the irrational. Art's power to impose order upon chaos is emphasized, and Orfeo's recovery of Herodis marks only a further extension of that power. Orfeo has earned the king's promise and has recovered Herodis through the power of his art. His art has conquered the anatural world and has enabled both Herodis and Orfeo to return to the world of human society. Orfeo's efforts as a king to control the anatural failed; but as a pilgrim-artist his efforts to know and his attempts to control that world succeeded. He returns to his society a man changed by his experiences. He now knows himself in relation to one aspect of the universe, one state of being or consciousness about which previously he had been both proud and ignorant. The association of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth with the myths of Dis and Prosperina in Celtic mythology[18] is here significant, for what is emphasized in the final sections of *Sir Orfeo* is rebirth—both in terms of the individual and society. The poet speaks not only literally but symbolically when he states:

> Now King Orfeo newe coround is.

Sir Orfeo has become the true pilgrim-artist, a man aware of art's intrinsic power to reconcile the individual with the natural and anatural forces against which man must contend for the realization of his own identity.

[18] Davies, pp. 162–63.