Triumphant Orfeo: Spiritual Allegory in *Sir Orfeo*

Heidi Støa

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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CONTENTS

Abstract/ Résumé

The Middle English lai *Sir Orfeo* combines elements from the Greco-Roman, Christian, and Northern European folkloric traditions in a narrative which is both a successful romance and a text informed by Christian allegory. Through an examination of the poem's possible sources and analogues, I demonstrate that the lai's representation of Orpheus is rooted in the archaic Greek myth of Orpheus' triumphant rescue of individuals from the underworld. In *Sir Orfeo*, the early myth's emphasis on Orpheus' positive qualities—in particular his musical prowess—and its continuation in the literature and art of early Christianity is merged with folkloric elements which similarly focus on the power of music to defeat the destructive forces of the otherworld. The thesis argues that the protagonist, Orfeo, is thus represented as an agent of God's order and his defeat of otherworldly forces as an act of Christian heroism.

Le lai moyen anglais *Sir Orfeo* lie des éléments des traditions folkloriques l'Europe septentionale, Greco-Romaines et chrétiennes dans une narration à la fris une romance bien réussie et un texte influencé d'une allégorie chrétienne. Par un examen des sources et des analogues possibles du poem, je veux démontrer que la représentation du lai a ses racines dans le myths archaïque d'Orphée qui, triomphant réussit à sauver des individues du monde au delà. Dans *Sir Orfeo* l'emphase du mythe archaïque est sur les qualités positives d'Orphée, surtout ses talents musicaux, en plus sa continuation dans la litterature et l'art de la premiere époque chrétienne, est liée aux éléments folkloriques, en même temps attachant l'importance au pouvoir de la musique pour vaincre las forces destructives du monde au delà. Le protagoniste, Orfeo, est de cette manière representé comme un agent de l'ordre divin et sa défaite des forces du monde au delà est un acte de l'héroïsme chrétien.

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Introduction

Sir Orfeo is a Middle English text that tells the story of a king, Orfeo, and a queen, Heurodis. The world of these protagonists is upset when a fairy king abducts Heurodis to his own realm, despite Orfeo's efforts to safeguard her. However, the story ends well: after Orfeo renounces his kingdom and goes into a voluntary exile in the woods, he is able to recover Heurodis by his marvellous harp playing. He brings her back to his realm and the reunion of Orfeo's and Heurodis' marriage is concomitant with Orfeo's reinstatement as king. The names of the protagonists and the setting of the lai in "Traciens" (*Sir Orfeo* 47) make it clear that *Sir Orfeo* is a medieval variation on the Orpheus myth. Other narrative elements are easily recognisable from the well-known Latin sources of Virgil and Ovid: Orfeo's journey to the otherworld, and his ability to release Heurodis through a musical performance, for example. Because of these similarities, many examinations of *Sir Orfeo*, especially earlier source-studies, have taken the poem's divergences from the Latin texts and its inclusion of Celtic fairy lore as their starting points. In addition, most scholars acknowledge the impact of the medieval commentary tradition on *Sir Orfeo*—such commentaries were primary sources of classical myths including the accounts of Virgil and Ovid in the Middle Ages.

George L. Kittredge early suggested a model for how the classical story had been transformed in *Sir Orfeo*: he argued that the original poet (whom he believed was Breton) would have kept the elements of the myth most compatible with "his circle of ideas," while "such things as he could not understand, were cast aside or forgotten" (185) and that this process could account for the divergences between *Sir Orfeo* and the Orpheus-story in Virgil's *Georgics* or in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Orfeo-poet "preserv[ed] or reject[ed] the incidents of the classic

story according as they agree or disagree with Celtic ideas and traditions" (186). Kittredge is the first of many scholars to hold this view, in which *Sir Orfeo* uses the basic framework of the Orpheus-myth, but the tenor of the poem has little or nothing in common with classical tradition, which has been subsumed by the cultural identity of the Breton poet.

I argue, in contrast to such readings, that the points where distinct traditions intersect in the poem result from the poet's intelligent and inventive creation of a work in the tradition of Christian Neoplatonic allegory. My thesis suggests that *Sir Orfeo* is a text deeply influenced by this tradition, and that it reworks folkloric and classical elements to advance a Neoplatonic worldview in which the human and divine realms are interconnected. The poem's happy ending and circular action can productively be read as allegorical expressions of the Neoplatonic model of loss and retrieval of harmony. A religious framework facilitates an understanding of the poem's emphasis on Orfeo's double loss of both his kingdom and his wife: the loss of harmony affects Orfeo both on the personal and the political level, suggesting the interconnectedness of these realms and the idea of universal harmony so prevalent in Neoplatonism.

This thesis is not intended to provide an account of sources and analogues that is exhaustive; it will, however, examine the more plausible sources and analogues for *Sir Orfeo* which contribute significantly to an understanding of the poem. Determining particular texts as "sources" for *Sir Orfeo* is of course a difficult task, because we know nothing about the lai's anonymous author and little about the immediate context of his composition. The texts I examine are therefore examples of something the author may have come into contact with: they are widely circulated and influential texts, such as the many medieval commentaries on Orpheus. Some of these, like the *Ovidius Moralizatus* of Petrus Berchorius and Giovanni del Virgilio's and Nicholas Trivet's commentaries on Boethius, are also roughly contemporary with *Sir Orfeo*.

Other examined materials, such as early Greek or Alexandrian representations of Orpheus, are texts which the author probably did not know, but which I believe are crucial for the development of the traditions which he makes use of.

In my first chapter I discuss the Celtic source most frequently given for the lai, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, and also sections from Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* as texts which can aid our understanding of the complex relationship between the realms of humans and of the otherworld in the lai—I do not, however, suggest that the *Orfeo*-poet had come into direct contact with either of these stories. I also discuss analogues which date after *Sir Orfeo*, but which still illuminate important themes in the lai. These analogues include the Shetland ballad "King Orfeo" and the Norwegian ballad "Villemann og Magnill." The latter has never been extensively studied in conjunction with *Sir Orfeo*, although it is another striking example of an Orpheus story which ends in triumph for the protagonist and which has decidedly religious overtones. As in the case of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the ballad helps us understand how the Orfeo-poet envisions the relationship between Orfeo's human world and the fairy otherworld. I argue that the ballad "Villemann og Magnill" demonstrates how the originally pagan folkloric otherworld becomes associated with the Christian Hell and how the ballad's protagonist accordingly can be read as a Christian hero.

My second chapter examines the development of the Orpheus myth from the archaic Greek period to its reception in early Christianity. While the figure of Orpheus as he emerges in the accounts of Virgil and Ovid is a definite influence on *Sir Orfeo*, the older tradition of Orpheus as a type of shaman or magician and a proponent of harmony and order are also crucial for the understanding of the lai's protagonist. I argue that the evidence of early Greek texts in which Orpheus successfully rescues individuals from the otherworld, as well as the Christian

uses of this myth of the "triumphant Orpheus," must be considered as a model for Orfeo's retrieval of Heurodis.

The third and final section of this thesis follows the allegorical interpretations of Orpheus in the medieval period, their basis in Neoplatonic thought, and their impact on *Sir Orfeo*. Allegorizations in the tradition from Boethius focus on Orpheus as a figure who sins and must repent and this is the basis of Orfeo's self-exile. However, the importance of love and marriage in lai is integral to the author's creation of an allegory about the retrieval of universal harmony. In the end, the *Orfeo*-poet places more emphasis on the happy result of Orfeo's exile than the exile itself. The lai therefore offers an optimistic view on the possibilities for order and reconciliation in human society as well as in Creation.

CHAPTER 1

Orfeo and the Otherworld: Folkloric Materials

The classical otherworld in Virgil's and Ovid's Orpheus-stories is clearly delineated from the human realm: its inhabitants do not cross over into the realm of the living. In contrast, the fairy otherworld of *Sir Orfeo* breaks into Orfeo's realm at an early point of the poem. While the classical materials and motifs in *Sir Orfeo* are present from the very beginning (in the classical names of the protagonists and "Traciens" (*Sir Orfeo* 47) as the setting for the story), the folkloric elements are suddenly and violently introduced in the moment of Heurodis' awakening from her dream. The suddenness of this scene expresses the tensions inherent in the relationship between Orfeo's kingdom and the realm of the fairy king. In Virgil's and Ovid's accounts Eurydice is transported to the underworld because she is bitten by a serpent (in Virgil while she flees the lustful Aristaeus). While the rulers of the underworld have power over Eurydice as soon as she is among them, they have no part in the events which result in her death. In *Sir Orfeo*, there is no snake and no Aristaeus: Heurodis is approached by the ruler of the otherworld itself and he *demands* that she comes with him. The otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* thus has an agency and a will to alter the human realm which cannot be found in any of its classical counterparts. The active role of the otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* makes it one of the most fascinating—and most problematic—elements in the lai. In particular, the intrusion of fairyland in Orfeo's realm forces the reader to consider exactly what fairyland is and what the fairies are. It also raises the question of how the two realms are related, because the fairy king's abduction of Orfeo's queen itself implies that the two realms are intertwined—why would the fairy king abduct Heurodis if there was not already an established relationship between the realms?

While critics throughout the history of *Sir Orfeo*'s modern reception have noted the many folkloric motifs and structures in the poem, few have probed the relationship between Orfeo's world and the fairy otherworld, how that relationship contributes to the *Orfeo*-poet's merging of classical and folkloric traditions, and what that entails for interpretations of the poem. Kittredge's early reading of *Sir Orfeo* summarises the folkloric material which can be connected with the poem as sources or analogues. He maps out connections between *Sir Orfeo*, *The Wooing of Étaín*, the Child ballad "King Orfeo" and Map's *De Nugis Curialium*. Kittredge shows a remarkable willingness to consider how disparate traditions could have come together in the poem and he discusses at length the possibility of a Breton minstrel encountering the classical myth of Orpheus as well as other lais based on classical materials. However, his thorough discussion of source materials does not concern itself with the *significance* of the *Orfeo*-poet's merging of those materials with the classical myth. J. Burke-Severs' examination of the poem's source material almost seventy years later makes many of the same connections between *Sir Orfeo* and the Celtic materials as Kittredge did (with the exception of "King Orfeo") and his reading establishes how the narrative of *Sir Orfeo* moves toward a "double climax" (199) in which Orfeo's loss and recovery of Heurodis coincides with his loss and recovery of his kingdom. He argues convincingly that this double climax reinforces the importance and poignancy of both of the losses and forms a narrative unity. Burke-Severs' important claims about the lai's double structure thus aid our understanding of the relationship between Orfeo's world and the fairy otherworld, because they show that the fairy king's abduction of Heurodis is an action which affects both the romantic relationship between Orfeo and Heurodis and the social relationships and order of Orfeo's realm. Thereby, the abduction represents a strong threat to the fundamental unity of those relationships in the lai.

In later years, critics have been increasingly attentive to the meaning of the otherworld in *Sir Orfeo*. Much of this criticism centres on the wealth of associations connected with fairies and fairyland in the medieval period, which are diverse and often appear to be discordant with one another. Critics have on the basis of the ambiguous status of fairy lore in the medieval period concluded that the fairy king's intrusion represents chaos and disorder in the text. As Neil Cartlidge remarks, one strand of *Sir Orfeo*-criticism bases itself on an "[insistance] on the essential inscrutability of the relationship between the real world and the world of 'fairi'" (195) and rejects any set meaning for the fairy realm.

One such recent reaction to the "inscrutability" of *Sir Orfeo*'s fairyland is that of Alan Fletcher.[1] Fletcher's position is that the fairyland in *Sir Orfeo*, in particular the "gallery" (143) of stunned people in the court of the fairy king (Bliss 387-404),[2] represents a "free fall of meaning" and a "black hole ... in morality" (165) for the medieval reader, who (terrified) would try to retreat to various medieval "master narratives" (165) in order to firmly explain what it could mean. Because fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* stands for forces which are confusing, frightening, and fascinating, Fletcher reads Orfeo's defeat of the fairy king through his harping as a "refuge" (167) from the chaotic fairyland for the reader. However, as Cartlidge rightly points out, Fletcher underestimates the ability of medieval readers and medieval culture to contain apparently contradictory or subversive materials. Fletcher's position seems at once oddly speculative and close-minded in his assumptions of what would constitute a "fall of meaning" for

[1] See also Cartlidge's astute criticism of Fletcher's argument (198-200).
[2] I refer to the Auchinleck MS in Bliss' transcription throughout the thesis, unless otherwise noted. *Sir Orfeo* is extant in only three MSS: Auchinleck, Harley 3810, and Ashmole 61. The Auchinleck MS is, according to Bliss, likely the most complete MS and the one which gives the most coherent impression. Both MS Harley 3810 and MS Ashmole 61 are abbreviated and corrupted to a significant degree (Bliss xv-xvii).

a medieval reader—after all, modern scholarship has long been aware that medieval authors' use of such materials co-existed with their adherence to the "master-narratives" of the day.[3]

As I will discuss, there are strong and enduring associations between the fairy otherworld and the Christian otherworlds. In this chapter, I argue that fairyland can be read as a double for Orfeo's kingdom and as a realm that simultaneously has features of the Christian Paradise and Hell. These interpretations are based on the assumption that fairyland in the lai is intended as an allegorical conceit of destructive, otherworldly powers, which are finally defeated by Orfeo's playing. Rather than being a facile and superficial *refuge* from some interpretative abyss opened up in the text, as Fletcher argues, that ending represents *recovery* after a disaster—a compelling and forceful affirmation of the divine order and meaning of the universe in which the *Orfeo*-poet clearly had faith.

In *Sir Orfeo*, fairyland is established as a structural and visual parallel to Orfeo's realm shortly after the appearance of the fairy king in Heurodis' dream, and this doubling of the realms persist throughout the lai. The two rulers are set up as equals and, visually, Orfeo's realm and the fairy realm are strikingly similar. The narrator uses the same phrases to describe Orfeo's realm and the fairy land: lines from Heurodis' description of the landscape she sees in her dream (159-60) are repeated when the narrator laments Orfeo's loss of "castles and tours / Riuers, forest, friþ wiþ flours" (245-6). Similarly, the fairy king has courtly "[k]niȝtes & leuedis" (298), just as Orfeo and Heurodis has.

[3] Michael Camille, in his compelling study of medieval marginal art, argues that the unordered and contradictory, even the monstrous, in fact functioned as an affirmation of the strictly regulated and hierarchical medieval world: "The medieval image-world was, like medieval life itself, rigidly structured and hierarchical. For this reason, resisting, ridiculing, overturning, overturning and inventing it was not only possible, it was limitless. Every model had its opposite, inverse anti-model" (26).

Because Orfeo and his fairy antagonist are both presented as kings, they are placed in a relationship of equality. The association of two powerful kings indicates the potential for struggle and adversity between them: the danger of the one sovereign usurping the rule and realm of the other must always be present. The fairy king's abduction of Heurodis affects Orfeo on both the personal and the political level, and his interference with Orfeo's realm can perhaps be read as a move to destabilise a rival realm. However, as we are never given any specific motivation for the fairy king's abduction, and because he appears quite unconcerned to let Heurodis go in the end, there is no way to simply define the fairy king as Orfeo's adversary. Indeed, in *Sir Orfeo* the otherworldly protagonist fluctuates between sabotaging and helping his human counterpart. This is the case in several of the lai's folkloric analogues. Only in the Middle Irish tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* and the Scandinavian ballad "Villemann og Magnill" is the relationship between the human hero and the otherworld plainly hostile. Even in these the two latter texts, however, there is a certain slippage in that relationship, in which the adversaries nearly merge into the same type of character through their struggle against one another.

An excursus on the origins of the Celtic matter is helpful for understanding the relationship between the human world and the otherworld. The Middle Irish *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann* (*The Book of the Conquest of Ireland*/ *The Book of Invasions*) a "pseudo-history" (Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* 54) of various peoples settling in Ireland, shows just how deeply rooted the idea of the rival otherworld, which also is a kind of double for the human world, was in early Irish culture. Proinsas Mac Cana notes that "[t]he 'conquest' of the title refers no doubt to the arrival of the Gaels, but in the extant compilation this is in fact the last of a series of six immigrations" (*Celtic Mythology* 54). The narrative describes the conflict between the fifth group to arrive, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the Gaels (more correctly their ancestors, the Sons of

Míl). The Tuatha Dé, a people with magic and druidic powers, were defeated in this territorial battle, but were able to pressure the winning Gaels into a deal which would give them some territory:

> the Tuatha Dé still retained the power of their magic arts and they deprived the Gaels of their corn and milk…[i]t was then decided that the country should be divided into two parts, the lower half going to the Tuatha Dé and the upper half to the Gaels. Thus the Tuatha Dé retired underground and the Dagdha [their druid-leader] assigned to each of their chiefs a *sídh* or fairy mound (63).

This narrative of origin gives an important insight in to the status of fairies and the fairy realm as antagonists to humans and their realm. Mac Cana describes how the people of the Sídhs through these beliefs came to occupy such a place in the folkloric imagination: "the Tuatha Dé came to be securely established in the Irish landscape, living in close proximity to its human inhabitants who are ever and always conscious of their presence. Theirs is the other, hidden face of Ireland and it tends increasingly to reflect the features of the visible one" (63-4). The folk-belief in a conflict between humans and fairies with a subsequent resolution, but continued tension, is reflected in the way fairies are portrayed in the early Irish tales and in the transmission of elements from these materials into medieval texts such as *Sir Orfeo*. In the following, I will discuss the relationship between the world and the otherworld in *Sir Orfeo*, *Tochmarc Étaíne* and the Scandinavian ballad "Villemann og Magnill."

The early Irish tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (*The Wooing of Étaín*) has been linked to *Sir Orfeo* as a primary source (see for example Kittredge 191), but it remains a contested issue how close the connection between the tale and the lai really is. Bliss argues that "there is no reason to suppose that the composer of the lai of Orpheus … had any particular Celtic legend in mind; and

it is more profitable to seek for parallels to individual episodes in the poem" (xxxv). The inclusion of *Étaín* as primary source for *Sir Orfeo* is problematic, especially since early critics such as Kittredge (who wrote on the lai in 1886) worked from the version of the tale given in O'Curry's *On the manners and customs of the ancient Irish*, which does not give an accurate account of the story. In fact, the tale was not known to scholars in its full version until the early twentieth century,[4] when parts of the tale which had been lost for centuries were found in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. What is now considered the complete version of the text was printed in 1937 (Gantz 37), but O'Curry's version was still referred to as late as the 1960's.[5]

Tochmarc Étaíne is a tale in three parts, which in a characteristic Celtic manner has a complex and somewhat confusing intrigue with multiple twists and turns. As the title indicates, the action revolves around the lady Étaín, who is given to the fairy Mider as a wife. Unfortunately, Mider already has a wife and the jealous and raging Fúamnach transforms Étaín into a fly which is blown away from the realm. In her fly-form, Étaín falls into the cup of a human woman who then gives birth to Étaín as a human child. When Étaín is married to the human king Echu Airem as a young woman, she is thus also married to Mider, and it is Mider's attempts to get her back from the human realm which forms the basis for the conflict between the realms.

Bliss argues that there is no reason to privilege *Tochmarc Étaíne* as a source for *Sir Orfeo*, because "the really significant features of each story are unique. The whole point of the story of Étaín is that she had been Mider's wife in a previous existence, and of this there is no trace in *Sir Orfeo*" (xxxv). However, this is only true if one insists on strictly identifying Mider with the fairy king and King Echu with Orfeo, and neglects to acknowledge the similarities

[4] I have not been able to determine which year.
[5] See for example Burke-Severs' article.

between Orfeo and the fairy king—specifically the fact that although Orfeo belongs to the human realm, he has supernatural musical powers which eventually surpass the powers of the fairy king. A more flexible reading of the stories uncovers significant parallels between the tale and the lai. Orfeo can be productively identified both with Mider and Echu at various times in the lai, both on the level of action and in a more profound sense: since it could be argued that both Mider and Echu have the "right" to Étaín, as they have both married her.[6]

The third part of the tale, in which Mider challenges Echu to a game of "fidchell" (Gantz 52) and the king makes the rash promise to play for a stake is a striking parallel to Orfeo's harping in the fairy court and the fairy king's promise to grant him his wish. Mider loses twice, and they decide that the stake the third time will be whatever the winner demands. Unsurprisingly, Mider goes on to win the third game, and he demands "[m]y arms around Étaín and a kiss from her … Echu fell silent at that; finally, he said 'Return a month from today, and you will have that'" (55). In this episode both Mider and Echu function as analogues to Orfeo. The rash promise of the fairy king places Orfeo in the position of Mider and Orfeo's harping takes the place of Mider's skill at *fidchell*. Simultaneously, Echu's reaction and his attempts to protect Étaín resemble Orfeo's assembling of his men to shield Heurodis from the fairies:

> Amorwe þe vnder-tide is come,
> & Orfeo haþ his armes y-nome,
> & wele ten hundred kntes wiþ hi*m*,
> Ich y-armed, stout & grim;
> & wiþ þe quen wenten he
> Ri3t vnto þat ympe-tre. (181-6)

[6] I am indebted to Professor Dorothy Bray for her suggestions about the relationship between Mider, Echu, and Orfeo.

King Echu "arrange[s] for the best warriors and warbands in Ériu to assemble … each band encircling the next … [with] the king and queen in the centre of their house and the doors locked, for they knew it was a man of great power who would come" (56). If the Irish tale is read as a source or an analogue to the lai, Orfeo's position becomes one of partial identification with the fairy king. They have an interest in the same woman (although the fairy king, who has a queen, presumably is not romantically interested in Heurodis) and they are both in possession of supernatural powers which they use against their opponents.

A similar identification surfaces in the Scandinavian ballad "Villemann og Magnill," which, like *Sir Orfeo*, is a variation on the Orpheus myth which replaces the underworld with a folkloric otherworld. "Villemann og Magnill" has occasionally been identified as a possible analogue to *Sir Orfeo* (Kittredge 187, Liestøl and Moe 91, Spring 45), although little work has been done tracking the parallels between the lai and the ballad. Oral renditions of the ballad[7] were first written down in its Norwegian version in the 1840s by a scholar travelling in the Western Telemark region. While there is much uncertainty about the dating and transmission of ballads in Scandinavia, they in general contain linguistic evidence which places their origin in the medieval period. In particular, ballads such as "Villemann og Magnill" frequently retain Norse and Middle Norwegian syntax and grammar which by the early nineteenth century had started to become very rare in Western Telemark and which in more urban areas had been out of use for at least a century (Solberg 18). The Nordic ballad genre is generally considered to have originated in (or in close proximity to) the late thirteenth century Norwegian court and the

[7] For this text I am using primarily the version given by Liestøl and Moe and I include my translation as an appendix. As the Norwegian ballad corpus has yet to be collected in a scholarly edition it is hard to decide which version to use, but this version is similar to many other versions given in *Norsk Balladearkiv online* and to the scholarly edition of the Danish version of the ballad ("Harpens Kraft"). I also refer to version given by M. B. Landstad—note that Villemann in that version is named Gaute, and the ballad's title is thus "Gaute og Magnild." Note that the spelling of the name "Magnill" varies—"Magnill," "Magnhild," and "Magnild" are all common versions.

original language of the ballads was thus Norse or Middle Norwegian (Solberg 71-2).[8] The ballads were inspired by courtly literature from continental Europe, which was well known in the Norwegian court: among others, the lais of Marie de France were translated and adapted to its Norwegian audience (as *Strengleikar eða Lióðabok*) together with the romance of Tristan and Isolde (as *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*) and the works of Chrétien de Troyes (Solberg 60-71). It is therefore perhaps likely that the inspiration for "Villemann og Magnill" came from a continental source (which may be a further indication of a lost French lai of Orpheus, as has been much speculated).

In "Villemann og Magnill," the protagonists are a young couple who are about to be married and who must cross a great river, perhaps in order to get to their wedding (this is not entirely clear from the ballad). The maiden, Magnill, is terrified of this crossing because two of her sisters have drowned in that river and she will not be consoled by her fiancé's promises to protect her. Magnill is afraid of *nøkken*, a folkloric creature of the otherworld who lives in rivers and lakes. *Nøkken* was well known to snatch those unfortunate enough to fall into the water and as we will see, he is sometimes interpreted as a demonic creature. In a plot quite similar to that of *Sir Orfeo*, Magnill is taken by *nøkken* and Villemann succeeds in rescuing her from the arms of that otherworldly creature by playing his harp. *Nøkken* is turned to stone by the bridegroom's playing and Villemann and Magnill are again reunited and free to marry.

The doubling of Orfeo and the fairy king which I have discussed previously is a process at work in "Villemann og Magnill" as well. While there is little doubt in the ballad that

[8] In Norwegian linguistic history, the Norse period is considered to be from around 750 to around 1350 and the Middle Norwegian period from 1350 to around 1550 (Otnes and Aamotsbakken 23), but due to the scarcity of written sources from Norway after the Black Plague the distinction between Norse and Middle Norwegian is often hard to define. What scholars propose as the ballads' original language is therefore often referred to simply as "Norse/ Middle Norwegian" (Solberg 72).

Villemann is the hero and *nøkken* the villain, Villemann's musical powers are traditionally associated with *nøkken* in Norwegian folklore:

> Nøkken er også blitt oppfatta som musikalsk, ein eigenskap han har lånt av fossegrimen. I segntradisjonen heiter det at den som ville bli verkeleg god spelemann, måtte få fossegrimen til å lære seg å spele. (Solberg 153)
>
> [*Nøkken* was perceived as a particularly musical being, a quality he got from *fossegrimen* [an otherworldly creature residing in waterfalls who is often interchangeable with *nøkken*]. In the tradition of folk legend it is said that he who wants to become a truly accomplished player must ask *fossegrimen* to teach him how to play.] [9]

As in *Sir Orfeo*, we see a paradoxical alignment of the human protagonist with his supernatural adversary through their shared powers. It is important to note that Villemann is unsuccessful when he attempts to defeat nøkken through his material means. Like Orfeo and Echu, Villemann initially believes that he can counter the otherworldly forces through his wealth and power. He tells Magnill that he will protect her by fortifying the bridge they must cross:

> Eg skò byggje brui so håg og so ny
> og setje derunde stolpar av bly.
> Eg skò byggje brui so sterk og so håg
> og setje derunde stolpar av stål.
> Og alle mine sveinar skò rie i ra (37)
>
> [I'll build the bridge so tall and so new
> and place underneath it pillars of lead.

[9] All translations from Scandinavian primary and secondary texts are my own.

I'll build the bridge so strong and so tall

and place underneath it pillars of steel.

And all my men shall ride in a row]

However, the forces Villemann is up against are more powerful than these human measures. When Magnill's horse rears, she falls in the river and momentarily becomes a prisoner of the otherworld, just like Heurodis. Only when Villemann takes out his harp and plays is he able to defeat his adversary and surpass that creature's powers over Magnill. As in *Sir Orfeo*, it is in the end hard to determine which character has more supernatural powers: the human hero, or his otherworldly adversary? But as I hope to show, it is precisely because Orfeo and Villemann take on otherworldly features, paradoxically, that they are able to recover—indeed, validate—their human relationships.

The complicated fluctuation between adversity and identification which exists in the relationship between Orfeo and the fairy king is further complicated by the ambiguous status of fairies in *Sir Orfeo* as well as in its analogues. While the fairy king may be intrusive and antagonistic, he is simultaneously described as a courteous ruler who in the end gives Heurodis up to Orfeo in order to stand by his word. Similarly, the scene in which Heurodis is visited first by fairy messengers and then by the king himself shows the fairies as "fair kni3tes" (135) and courtly "damisels" (144) on one hand, but brutal abductors on the other—Heurodis can describe the natural beauties of fairyland only because she has been taken there despite her insistence that she "durst nou3t, no [she] nold" (140). Heurodis' narration places the moment in which she is carried away in the middle of her account of the fairies' splendour:

Y no sei3e neuer 3ete bifore

So fair creatours y-core.

Þe king hadde a croun on hed;

It nas of siluer, no of gold red,

Ac it was of a precious ston

—As bri3t as þe sonne it schon;

&, as son as to me cam,

Wold ich nold ich, he me nam,

& made me wiþ hi*m* ride

Opon a palfrey bi his side;

& brou3t me to his palays,

Wele atird in ich ways. (147-58. My emphasis)

Thus the representation of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* becomes entangled with beauty and courtesy as well as violence.

This idea seemingly supports but also detracts from the assertion of Fletcher and others that fairyland is a uniquely chaotic signifier. Since fairyland is a realm of its own it is sometimes presumed to operate by a set of principles unattached to—and therefore impenetrable for—the human world. Patricia Vicari writes that the fairy king in *Sir Orfeo* appears to belong "to a pantheistic universe that predates good and evil; he is a force of nature, at times benign, at times destructive" (76). This is an assessment which, if correct, could be applied to fairies in a great number of medieval texts; indeed, it is possible that fairies in pre-Christian Celtic culture had such a status. However, *Sir Orfeo* and all the other fairy materials which I discuss in this chapter are mediated through cultures dominated by a Christian world view. It is fair to assume that we no longer have access to the status held by fairies in a culture which did not include the Christian idea of an otherworld, although traces of that culture remain in fairy lore. Claims that the ethos

of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* (or any other medieval text for that matter) is completely pagan, that it operates by its own unique set of rules, and is fully divided from ideas of Heaven and Hell in the Christian sense ultimately obscure the meaning and function of fairy lore in those texts. Fairyland is thus not wholly impenetrable to the medieval or the modern reader, but it *is* complex because it exists within a culture which not only contains the opposite realms of Paradise and Hell, but also the remnants of a culture which had different ideas about the otherworld.

The two otherworlds of Christianity are clearly delineated from each other, but they of course also share features—they are structurally parallel to one another, the evil of the one setting off the good of the other and vice versa. In *Sir Orfeo*, the underworlds of the classical myth and of Celtic folklore are transposed onto a narrative whose author and audience are informed by this Christian concept of the otherworld. Thus the *one* otherworld of the poem acquires qualities from *both* of the Christian ones—the challenge for the reader (as well as for Orfeo) becomes to decide which realm fairyland is closer to. In the following, I will map out associations of Paradise and Hell in *Sir Orfeo*, as well as in its folkloric analogues, and in conclusion attempt to determine the implications these associations have for an allegorical reading of the lai.

Fairyland as a place of supernatural abundance and perfection is a recurrent theme in early Irish literature and another element which figures the otherworld as superior to the human realm. Typically, the Celtic otherworld is a place of natural and material beauty beyond what is found in the world—one good example is the court of the pygmy in *De Nugis Curialium*,[10] where food, drink and all kinds of luxuries are perpetually available. In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Mider woos

[10] *De Nugis Curialium*, or *Courtier's Trifles* (c.1193), is a Latin compilation of stories and satirical texts written in England by the Welsh cleric Walter Map (c. 1140-1209). It survives in only one manuscript, MS Bodley 851.

Étaín with a song describing the wonders of his realm, in which everyone is beautiful and nobody ages:

> Bé Find ["fair woman"], will you come with me
> to a wondrous land where there is music?
> Hair is like the blooming primrose there;
> smooth bodies are the colour of snow ...
> A wonderful land that I describe:
> youth does not precede age. (55)

Mider himself is in possession of a suitably otherworldly beauty, just like the fairies Heurodis and Orfeo sees, and his appearance astounds Echu's men on the evening when Mider carries Étaín off: "they saw Mider coming towards them in the centre of the house; he had always been beautiful, but that night he was more beautiful still. The hosts who saw him were astonished, and they fell silent...." (56). Here, Mider's attractiveness appears to aid his abduction of Étaíne by catching Echu and his men off guard—his beauty appears to be one of his superhuman abilities which enables him to carry Étaín off in the midst of Echu's hall.

The beauty of fairies thus reflects their superiority over imperfect humans as well as their supernatural powers, but in *Tochmarc Étaíne* Mider provides further explanation for why fairies do not have the problems humans do. In his song, the fairies are

> [a] distinguished people, without blemish,
> conceived without sin or crime.
> We see everyone everywhere,
> and no one sees us:
> the darkness of Adam's sin

> prevents our being discerned. (56)

Mider explains humans' aging and imperfections and, it is important to keep in mind, why fairies can remain invisible to humans (unless they choose to reveal themselves) with reference to the Fall. Such an interpretation of the *Síde* as a prelapsarian Paradise is likely due to the influence of Christianity and the monastic recorders of early Irish texts:

> clearly [this idea] was central to the monastic view of the pagan happy Otherworld ... that other, and happier, land which loomed so large in the Irish consciousness was a continuation of man's primitive condition before he tasted of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus was the pagan concept of the Otherworld brought poetically, if not rationally, within the framework of Christian orthodoxy (Mac Cana. "The Sinless Otherworld" 57)

The *Bé Find*-song does not get much of a continuation in the themes or action of *Tochmarc Étaíne*. Mider's representation of his realm as Paradise does not appear to have any other function than to persuade Étaín to come with him and to emphasise the power he has over Echu. However, as a precedent for the figuration of fairyland as Paradise in *Sir Orfeo* this element of the early Irish story is integral to the understanding of the lai's otherworld as an allegorical device.

As in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* are fantastically attractive and inhabit a realm of supernatural wealth and abundance. Heurodis' narration of her dream (qtd. above) emphasises the striking appearances of the fairy king (in particular his crown made from one giant gem (151)) and his messengers, who ride "snowe-white stedes" and are dressed all in white (145-6). The fairyland Orfeo eventually enters is filled with dazzling architecture, red gold and

gems. Its splendour makes the narrator in the Auchinleck MS liken it to the Christian Paradise which, like fairyland, cannot be contained in words:

> No man may telle, no þence i*n* þou3t,
> Þe riche werk þat þer was wrou3t:
> Bi al þing him þink þat it is
> Þe proude court of Paradis. (373-6)

The narrator's comparison is apt, because the architecture of the fairy king's court is very much reminiscent of the New Jerusalem as John describes it in his Apocalypse:

> And the building of the wall thereof [of New Jerusalem] was of jasper stone: but the city itself pure gold, like to clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manner of precious stones ... And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, one to each: and every several gate was of one single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. (Apoc. 21:18-19, 21)

Similarly, the fairy king's castle is surrounded by a wall "as clere & schine as cristal" (358) and the buttresses and pillars are made of "rede" (362) and "burnist" (368) gold. The castle itself has "wide wones / Al of precious stones" (365-6) in the Auchinleck MS, and in MS Harley 3810 the castle's towers are "[g]ayly set w*ith* pe*r*les stoute" (346) and the pillars are "dy3t / Of p*re*cious stones & safyres bry3t" (353-4).

However, fairyland's resemblance to Paradise is swiftly challenged when Orfeo enters the fairy king's courtyard and sees the bizarre display of people "þider y-brou3t / & þou3t dede, & nare nou3t" (389-90). These people, who *seem* to be dead, but really are not, are described lying in the grotesque positions they were in when taken to fairyland: "sum lay wode, y-bounde / & sum armed on hors sete / & sum astrangled as þai ete (394-6). This catalogue of

injuries and calamities, which takes up considerable space (lines 391-408), forms a scene every bit as striking as the paradisal description of the fairy castle, but this horrific content places the delightful portrayal of the fairy realm in a dubious light. The juxtaposition of the two scenes, both highly visual, reinforces the contrast of the courteous appearance of the fairies with their violent threats to Heurodis discussed earlier: again, the splendour of fairyland is effectively undercut by indications of violence and terror.

There is considerable scholarly debate whether or not the horrors of the fairy courtyard should be interpreted as a death realm. Suggestions have ranged from Constance Davies' claim that the courtyard of the fairy king is a remnant of the classical Hades (163-166) to Dorena Allen's conviction that the people are "taken" by the fairies in accordance with folk beliefs in Ireland and Britain. Allen is certainly right to emphasise the influence of the belief that "many, perhaps most, of those who were thought to die were in reality no more dead than Orfeo's stolen Heurodis. In their last agony they too had been carried off, body and soul, by the triumphant *sidhe*" (104). However, I am not sure that her dismissal of the otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* as associated with Hell and death is sound. Beliefs in changelings and the "taken" persisted long after the Christianisation of Celtic cultures and the *Orfeo*-poet's use of this folkloric topos shows his characteristic exploitation of convergences in pagan and Christian traditions. Although there existed a folkloric belief that "in fairyland the dead still lived" (Allen 106), many folkloric sources indicate that this belief coexisted with accounts of the fairy otherworld as a death realm. Indeed, in several of the texts I discuss as sources or analogues to *Sir Orfeo*, namely the ballads "King Orfeo," "Villemann og Magnill," and one short tale from Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, the otherworld and its inhabitants are explicitly or implicitly associated with death and/ or Hell.

In *De Nugis Curialium*, a short section entitled "Again of Fantastic Apparitions" (Dist. iv, c. 8, also referred to in Dist. ii, c. 13. "Again of the Same Apparitions") tells a story with a plot similar to that of *Sir Orfeo*. It is the account of a Breton knight who, like Orfeo, loses his wife:

> long after her death [the knight] went on mourning for her. He found her at night in a great company of women ... He marvelled and was afraid, and when he saw her whom he had buried, alive again, he could not trust his eyes, and doubted what the fairies (fates) could be doing. He resolved to seize her, that, if he saw aright, he might have the real joy of the capture, or else might be eluded by the phantom. (345)

The knight takes back his wife, and they live together again as married people and have many children who "are called the sons of the dead mother" (345). There are clear parallels to Orfeo's story in the long period of grief for a lost wife, the sighting of the lost woman among a band of women and the final recovery of wife and marriage. In the version given above, Map hints at the possibility that the lady was taken by fairies ("he could not trust his eyes, and doubted what the fairies … could be doing"). Dist. ii, c. 13 does not mention fairies at all: "a knight is said to have buried his wife, who was really dead, and to have recovered her by snatching her out of a dance" (161). However, the "dance" referred to here is likely to be the common folktale motif of the fairy dance (which Orfeo witnesses in his rustic exile accompanying the fairy king's hunting parties: "Kniȝtes & leuedis com daunceing/ In queynt attire, gisely" [298-9]).[11] Allen dismisses Map's representation of the woman "taken" by the fairies as a *dead* woman: "[the story] is already well known to students of *Sir Orfeo*, but for the wrong reasons ... Map ... misunderstood an account of the recovery from the *sidhe* of a woman who, like so many others, was not dead,

[11] This dance also brings to mind the motif of the dance of death, but it would in that case be an extremely early instance of that motif—Paul Binski notes that the earliest extant representation of the dance of death is from after 1425 (153), although there are some references in literature to eleventh century dancers in Magdeburg in Germany (154).

but taken" (106-7). However, Map repeatedly stresses that the woman has been *buried* (161, 345) by the grieving husband and that the woman "was really dead" (161). If anything, this emphasis on the woman's death and her physical burial shows that Map *is* aware of the tradition of the "taken," but that he chooses to enforce a latent uncertainty in that tradition as to whether the "taken" are in fact also dead. Whether Map "misunderstands" or not, his tale is by no means a solitary example of such an uncertainty.

In the ballad analogues to *Sir Orfeo* from Shetland and Scandinavia, the fairy otherworld is similarly entangled with ideas that seem inseparable from real death and Hell. In both Child's and Shuldham-Shaw's versions of the ballad "King Orfeo," a folk song collected from oral performers in Shetland,[12] the fairies are explicitly held responsible for the death of Orfeo's lady by the king's servants:

> 'Oh I wis ye'd never gaen away,
> For at your hame is döl an wae.
> 'For da king o Ferrie we his daert,
> Has pierced your lady to da hert.' (Child 217)

Shuldham-Shaw's version places even more emphasis on the actual death of Lady Lisa Bell: "His nobles unto him did say / My Lady was wounded, *but now she is dead*" (my emphasis, 125). Further on in this version the fairies, after they have killed the lady, snatch her dead body despite King Orfeo's oath that they shall never get her:

> Now they have taen her life fra me,

[12] This text is found in four versions (Spring 42), the most complete being the "Shetland News"-variant from 1894, given by Shuldham-Shaw. Francis J. Child's version appears to be the first one collected, in 1840 (Spring 41). The two other versions were collected in 1947 and 1955 (Spring 42). I mainly refer to Shuldham-Shaw's version and occasionally to the one given by Child. As with the Scandinavian ballad materials, it is difficult to determine how old Shetland ballads are. However, both Child (216-217) and Spring (44-45) connect "King Orfeo" to *Sir Orfeo* and argue that the ballad could also be related to the Danish ballad "Harpens Kraft," a variant of "Villemann og Magnill."

But her corps they's never ha.

Now he have called his nobles aa,

To waltz her corps into the Haa.

But when the Lords was fæn asleep,

Her corps out of the house did sweep. (125)

As in Map's story, there is a strong and graphic emphasis on the dead body of the woman: in Shuldham-Shaw's version, the word "corps" is repeated three times in a sequence of six lines, reinforcing the death of Lady Lisa Bell, much as Map stresses the death and burial of the lady in his text.

"Villemann og Magnill" is the text which most explicitly turns the otherworld into a death realm. It is also the folkloric analogue which resembles *Sir Orfeo* most closely in its emphasis on the emotional impact of the otherworldly intrusion on the protagonists, perhaps because Magnill, like Heurodis, believes that her passage to the otherworld will be final—that she really will die and never see Villemann again. In both the lai and the ballad, the women's fears are given an amount of space and a vivid depiction which does not occur in the other texts (and a pathos which only Virgil's Eurydice comes close to matching). The start of the ballad is somewhat reminiscent of the opening of *Sir Orfeo*. The lai describes the calm setting of Orfeo's and Heurodis' royal garden, which is broken up by the horror of Heurodis' visceral reaction to her dream. The ballad's opening lines depict first a tranquil and domestic scene, which is then suddenly interrupted by the lady's fear:

Villemann og hass møy so prud

dei leika gulltavl i hennar bur

—So lifleg leika Villemann for si skjøn jomfru.

Kvór gong gullterningjen rann umkring,

so rann de ei tår på Magnills kinn. (36)

[Villemann and his maid so fair

played a game of golden pieces in her bower

—So delightfully Villemann played for his virgin so fair.

Whenever the golden dice turned around,

a tear down Magnill's cheek ran.]

Magnill, like Heurodis, appears to have no hope of salvation from the otherworld as she speaks in a series of replies to Villemann's assurances of protection:

"Å du må byggje, um du vil, unde sky:

de kan ingjen ifrå si folloga fly

Du må byggje av bly, du må byggje av stål:

de kan ingjen si folloga fly ifrå!" (37)

["Oh you can build, if you like, to the sky

no one from their destiny flies!

You may build with lead, you may build with steel:

no one from their destiny flies!"]

Magnill's belief in fate is a feature which does not occur in any of the other texts and which emphatically connects her fear of *nøkken* to her fear of death. Her belief that "no one from their destiny flies" is connected in some versions of the ballad to a prophecy that she will die on her wedding-day (Landstad 471, Solberg 202) and in others (including the version I use here, from

Liestøl and Moe) the deaths of her sisters who have all fallen from the bridge into *nøkken's* arms. Magnill truly believes that she will die, and there is no indication that her sisters are not actually dead—she is certain of her impending doom:

> Eg græt'e mei fyr mitt kvite holl,
> at de må kje koma i svartan moll.
> Eg græt'e mest fyr mitt gule hår,
> at de sko rotne i Vendels å.
> Eg græt'e so mykje fyr Blide-bru,
> der sokk til bonns mine systar tvo. (36)
>
> [I cry for my skin so white,
> that it will not go in the darkest soil.
> I cry the most for my flaxen hair,
> that it must rot in Vendel's river.
> I cry so much for Blide bridge,
> where sank to the bottom my sisters two.]

As I noted earlier, *nøkken* is associated with music, but he is traditionally also represented as a terrible creature who demands sacrifices (sometimes in the form of humans) from a community (Solberg 153). *Draugen*, a coastal variety of *nøkken*, in legend rows half of a wrecked boat and is often interpreted as an omen that someone will die in the near future (Solberg 154). The river itself signifies "heathenism and death" ("heidendom og død," Solberg 202) and drowning means that the body will not be laid to rest in consecrated soil and thus that the deceased may not gain access to Heaven and end up in Limbo or Hell.

Magnill voices her dread of "rot[ting] in Vendel's river"; in the version of the ballad given by M. B. Landstad she is explicitly concerned with the lack of a Christian burial if she should drown:

> Eg græt fast meir for mit kvite hold
> deð ska 'ki moga rotne i vigde mold. (471)
>
> [I cry more for my skin so white
> that it shall not rot in consecrated soil.]

As in "King Orfeo," the issue at stake is not only the lady's death, but what happens to her body afterwards. Although King Orfeo regains his lady alive, his initial concern is to keep her body from the fairies, perhaps so that she may have a proper burial. Magnill's fear is thus not simply that she will die—she is concerned with the afterlife of her soul. Should she be taken by *nøkken*, she would effectively be kept out of Heaven by his infernal powers. Villemann's triumph over *nøkken* is thus over a force whose goal it is to keep its victims from God.

"Villemann og Magnill" is the most clearly religious analogue to *Sir Orfeo*, and the one that most effectively supports a reading of the fairy king's realm as infernal and Orfeo's triumph over it as an expression of divine force. The *Orfeo*-poet's use of the motif of fairy "takings" implicates the fairies with death and thus, unavoidably, with Hell. Even without the analogues' suggestion of such a connection, though, the paradisal imagery I examined previously can itself signify that fairyland is associated with Hell rather than Heaven. The contrast between the brilliance of the fairy castle and the horrors within it raises questions about whether the image of the delightful fairyland is a deception. Lerer notes that "[v]ernacular romance often portrays the hero's encounter with palaces of illusory splendor, and religious narratives frequently contrast

deceptively Edenic loci with the true earthly or celestial Paradise" (93). There are indications in the paradisal imagery of the fairy city that it indeed is such a counterfeit paradise, particularly in the description of the precious stones in fairyland, which artificially light up the realm: "Al þat lond was euer li3t / For when it should be þerk & ni3t / Þe riche stones li3t as doþ at none þe sonne" (369-71). This passage may well be an ironic inversion of a passage from Revelation, which describes the light of God in New Jerusalem: "And the city hath no need of the sun, nor of the moon, to shine in it. For the glory of God hath enlightened it, and the Lamb is the lamp thereof ... And the gates thereof shall not be shut by day: for there shall be no night there." (21:23, 25). In the New Jerusalem God's light shines, but in fairyland the light comes from material gems, not the metaphorical gems of Revelation.[13] In such an interpretation, Orfeo (as well as the reader) is placed in a position comparable to that of the Dreamer in *Pearl*: his task becomes to recognise that the splendour of fairyland is illusory and that he must go beyond it.

In *Sir Orfeo* and its ballad analogues, the otherworld is finally defeated through the hero's harp playing. As I have suggested earlier, the ability of the folkloric Orpheus-figures to counter supernatural forces by way of music suggests that they are, in some way, equal to the forces they are up against—that they have supernatural forces just as the inhabitants of the otherworld do. The force of the harp (pipes in "King Orfeo"), though, is not destructive as are the powers of the otherworld in these texts. Orfeo's playing calms the wild "best[es]" (Bliss 280) of the forest in *Sir Orfeo* and "might a made a sick heart heal" (Shuldham-Shaw 126) in "King Orfeo." In "Villemann og Magnill," Villemann's playing has both a calming and a life-giving effect: he plays so that "the bird swooned on its wild branch" ("fuglen dåna på ville

[13] The materials of fairyland, too, are not necessarily as grand as they initially seem: see Lerer's fascinating discussion of how the enamel ("aumal" [Bliss 364]) on the fairy castle is not real enamel, but "artificial enamel made by painting on glass or foil" (100) which while it awed viewers, was really a kind of optical illusion. Drawing upon support from Dante, Ariosto and the *Roman d'Eneas*, he argues that the "use of aumal ... adumbrate[s] a moral sense, and it alerts the reader to the status of fairyland as a world of artifice" (100).

kvist") and in Landstad's version he even plays "kvíte bjönnen or hiðe [the white bear from its hide]" and "bànið mátte or moðirs maga [the child from its mothers womb]" (475). But befitting a hero of supernatural powers, his playing also has the power to completely devastate the adversary responsible for the initial disruption of his realm: "nykkjen han sprakk i hardan stein [*nøkken* he turned to hardened stone]" (Liestøl and Moe 38).

Perhaps because "Villemann og Magnill" is a folk ballad with such clearly Christian influences, it is the one analogue to *Sir Orfeo* in which the otherworld is not only defeated, but completely destroyed when *nøkken* is turned to stone.[14] In *Sir Orfeo* and "King Orfeo," the fairies appear to be pacified sufficiently by Orfeo's music for them to keep their promises and let the abducted ladies go without further ado. In all of these cases, however, the peaceful simplicity of harping is contrasted with the heroes' initial use of force: the armies and buildings they initially use to keep the otherworldly forces at bay are easily overcome by the inhabitants of the otherworld with their supernatural powers. Their initial flawed attempts to protect themselves from the otherworld by way of distinctly human and material measures can perhaps be likened to the deceptive surface of fairyland: the hero and the reader alike must cast aside the belief in the material, and see the spiritual value of the harmonious harping, which "causes change, brings pleasure, and gives life" (Liuzza 279). In the next chapters, I will show how this allegorical dimension of the lai and its folkloric analogues are deeply rooted in the classical tradition, and how that tradition, just as the folkloric traditions, was subsumed by the Christian worldview of medieval writers.

[14] There is a general precedent in Norwegian folklore for trolls and other creatures to burst when they either see the light of day, or hear the distant church-bells. A premise for abductions of humans by such creatures is usually to get them far enough into the forest so that they cannot be reached by the sound of the bells.

CHAPTER 2

The Triumphant Orpheus in Classical Myth and Early Christianity

The influence of Northern European folklore on *Sir Orfeo* is in many ways more transparent and easier to detect than the traces of the classical Orpheus-myth. This is a paradox, because from the beginning of the poem there can be no doubt that it is a lai about Orpheus, the legendary harp player of Thrace, and his Eurydice. But after the poem's prologue, the narrative does not always fit the models given by the Orpheus-representations of Virgil and Ovid (in *The Georgics* IV and *The Metamorphoses* X, respectively), which are the texts most critics have consulted as classical sources for the poem (and which arguably are the most influential Orpheus-accounts to date). *Sir Orfeo* has no Aristaeus (as in *The Georgics*) instigating Eurydice's death or even a poisonous serpent giving her a lethal bite (as is found in both Virgil's poem and in Ovid's). Orfeo loses Heurodis as his Latin predecessors do, he grieves and harps, but in the end he gets his spouse back and remains a powerful and virtuous king—a strong contrast to the exiled poet finally torn apart by furious Thracian women in the Latin sources.

*Sir Orfeo'*s happy ending is, of course, the main feature which separates the plot of the lai from its most famous classical counterparts. The absence of Orpheus' error and his subsequent final loss of Eurydice—the parts of the Orpheus myth which have resonated most strongly in Western culture—appear as the most dramatic divergences from the classical myth in *Sir Orfeo*. Indeed, the lai's happy ending has led a majority of *Sir Orfeo*-scholars working with the poem's sources to direct their attention away from classical tradition, to Celtic folklore and to medieval Christian culture. I have been able to find only one brief article wholly devoted to classical materials in *Sir Orfeo*, published by Constance Davies in 1961. Other accounts, in particular

comprehensive source studies such as Kittredge's and Burke-Severs', list the striking differences between the lai and its presumed antecedents in Virgil and Ovid (which I have sketched out briefly above), but they do not examine whether there may be parts of the classical Orpheus myth outside the Roman authors which may have influenced the poet. Critics convinced of the near total domination of folklore in the lai (such as Kittredge, Allen, or Vicari[15]) consider classical sources to be of relatively slight importance in the lai and rarely discuss them. For them, *Sir Orfeo* remains a Celtic fairy tale or romance with only a slight coating of classical culture, and this is perhaps the reason why, as Cartlidge notes, the "discourse" (199) of classical tradition is lacking in studies—old and new—of *Sir Orfeo*.

But *Sir Orfeo*'s striking reversal of Orpheus' fortunes is in fact a compelling reason for us to consider whether the lai's "classical threads" (Davies 161) are stronger than the lack of scholarly interest in them indicates. Orpheus' successful and permanent retrieval of a woman from the otherworld is an aspect of the myth which has strong precedents in the Greco-Roman tradition; indeed, Virgil's account of the myth in the *Georgics* (29 B. C.) is the first known version in which Eurydice is lost for a second time.[16] Although there is debate as to whether Virgil's contribution to the myth was original or not,[17] it is clear that the tradition of Orpheus as the successful rescuer of a woman from the underworld—a triumphant Orpheus—was

[15] Patricia Vicari feels that the "atmosphere of *Sir Orfeo* seems … quite Celtic and the treatment of the story entirely pagan" (74). However, she stresses the importance of music in the lai and in the figure of Orfeo, but considers this primarily a Celtic influence, perhaps with roots in a Indo-European figure corresponding to "patron[s] of utterance and knowledge" such as Mercury, Apollo and Odin (the latter being the Norse god of "poetry, music and wisdom, and the inventor of runic magic") (75). This is a claim which could possibly explain further the appeal of an Orphic figure such as Villemann in medieval Scandinavia, but it is a discussion outside the bounds of this thesis.

[16] There is a Greek account in which Orpheus loses Eurydice also, which is roughly contemporary with Virgil's work: Conon, a mythographer, mentions the story in a text which is written "between 36 B. C. and 17 A. D." (Dronke 201).

[17] For example, W. S. Anderson argues that "there are good reasons … to believe that the Latin poet [Virgil] was working in a familiar Greco-Roman myth" because Virgil relates the gods' injunction and Orpheus' transgression of it only briefly and without "the fullness that one would require in an unfamiliar tale, not even in the sequence of the fatal turning-around of Orpheus, precisely where, according to some scholars, *new* material enters" (27). Emmet Robbins does not believe in a Greek source for it: "[the unhappy ending] is likely Virgil's own invention or something he took from a lost Alexandrian source. Ideas of taboo … are rare in Greek myth and are not likely early ingredients of stories in which they are found at a late date" (16).

established earlier and was better known among the Greeks than the version which has become dominant since Latin antiquity. There are several references in Greek literature which imply that Orpheus' retrieval was commonly known to be successful: for example, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, Alcestis' husband Admetus says to his dying wife, "If I had Orpheus' tongue and melody / to beguile Demeter's Korê or her spouse / in song, to snatch you back from Hades / I would descend ...." (qtd. in Dronke 201. See also Segal 18-19). In Plato's *Symposium*, Phaedrus ironically references Orpheus' success and claims that what everyone thinks is a triumph in reality is not: Orpheus did not bring back Eurydice, but "a phantom of his wife, for whom he had come" (9). Phaedrus is clearly inverting the audience's idea of Orpheus' story—further evidence that the archaic version was the one in which Orpheus succeeds.

There is evidence that stories of the triumphant Orpheus were also known in the Middle Ages, although it seems clear that the other story type was the dominant one. Peter Dronke has shown that there are three, possibly four, extant Medieval Latin examples of this version of the myth, all written in eleventh century France (198).[18] The persistence of the 'triumphant Orpheus'-variant demonstrates that this story type resonated with medieval culture enough to be preserved through re-workings and re-imaginations, despite the greater impact of its Roman relative. It is also important to note that the tradition of the triumphant Orpheus had a strong influence on the early Christians, who in their strivings to reconcile old and new culture and to find adequate ways of representing their own religious figures would describe Orpheus as a pre-figuration for Christ, sometimes also David, and use Orphic iconography in representations of

[18] These examples are found in texts by Thierry of Saint-Thrond, Gautier, and Godefroy of Reimes, and they are written within a short period: 1075 to 1085 (Dronke 198). The fourth example Dronke mentions is a text "written in an early 12th century hand on the first page of a handsome manuscript of Gregory's *Moralia*" which "celebrates the wondrous singlemindedness of Orpheus' love" (210-11) and ends with "And then the lutanist brought back his one-and-only Eurydice!" (qtd. in Dronke 212). The problem with the fourth example is that in a thirteenth century MS, the poem has been amended so that Orpheus loses Eurydice after all, and Dronke therefore draws no firm conclusions.

these figures. Indeed, the existence of early Judeo-Christian accounts of Orpheus as a "monotheist" and mediator of the Pentateuch depend on the aspects of the myth which deal with Orpheus' successes, and these sources were crucial for the survival of Orpheus in later Christian culture (Friedman 13-37). In this chapter, I examine the Greek beginnings of the triumphant Orpheus and the representations of him in Virgil and Ovid, as well as his development in early Christianity. The early examples of a Christianised Orpheus influenced the conventions of medieval moralisation and thus demonstrate further the importance of keeping this strain of the Orpheus myth in mind for readers of *Sir Orfeo*.

The legend of an Orpheus who triumphs over the underworld depends on the idea of Orpheus as a "shaman-theologian, musician of supernatural powers, and Great Initiator" (Vicari 63) and a "prophet" (Friedman 7). This aspect of the legendary figure stems from mythical accounts of his magical poetic abilities and to his alleged founding of Orphism, "a mystical religion … with a well-developed theology, cosmogony, and eschatology" which survives in the *Orphica*[19] and other texts (Segal 1). Emmet Robbins argues that Orpheus' participation in the journey of the Argo associates him with shamanism and the ability to cross over into the otherworld. Orpheus is first represented as an Argonaut in a poem by the Greek poet Simonides (born 556 B. C.) in the sixth century (Friedman 6) and is given "special prominence" in literary accounts of that journey since Pindar's version from 462 B. C (5). Robbins characterises Jason's voyage on the Argo as "the oldest and most significant of all Greek myths" and the "essential" myth of

[19] The texts known as the *Orphica* are not actually from the archaic period: they are poems and fragments written by "Neoplatonic writers, and date from the late Hellenistic and early Christian periods" (Friedman 7)—a sign of the great interest Neoplatonists took in Orpheus and how well he functioned as a symbol for them. There is a surviving parody of Orphic cosmological poems in Aristophanes' *Birds* (Segal 8). According to Friedman there are also references to older Orphic poems in Plato and Orpheus' prophetic sayings in Euripides (7).

> the voyage out and return of the shaman … who mediates between this world and the beyond and whose most extraordinary characteristic is his ability to bring souls back from the dead. Jason is such a figure, his mission to rescue and repatriate a lost soul (7)[20]

Orpheus' association with this expedition perhaps foreshadows his most famous journey, to regain Eurydice from the underworld (in which case Jason's successful pursuit of the Golden Fleece and of Medea can be read as a parallel to Orpheus' successful quest). But accounts of his rescue of a woman from hell are not extant before the third century (Friedman 8) and Eurydice is not mentioned by name until the late second century, in *The Lament for Bion* (Dronke 203). In the fifth century, Isocrates (born 436 B. C.) writes that Orpheus "led the dead back from Hades" (Friedman 8), which implies that Eurydice was not unique and that Orpheus' reputation as rescuer of the dead from the underworld goes beyond that story.

Orpheus' extraordinary ability to mediate successfully between the realms of life and death is intimately linked to the representation of his musical powers in the archaic Greek tradition. Charles Segal emphasises that early Greek culture to a great extent was an *oral* culture, and writes that "[i]n such a culture poetry is oral poetry. It is therefore closer to its origins in ritual and incantation. The oral poet creates a special kind of rapport with his audience, what E. A. Havelock calls a 'mimetic' response" (14). The audience's high degree of engagement with the poet's performance makes them "consciously or subconsciously mimic, in their own bodies, the rhythmic movement and beat of the song," which induces a feeling that the poetry has powerful effect on their mental and physical state: "Nonliterate audiences feel this

[20] A sixth century Delphian frieze discussed by Robbins further suggests Orpheus' status as shaman in Greek culture as it associates Orpheus closely with Castor and Pollux, who are shown next to Orpheus playing a lute on the Argo (Robbins 5). The association of Orpheus with these brothers, famous for dividing their time between Hades and Olympus (so that the twins, one mortal and the other immortal, can stay together) further suggests his status as a shaman because they "represent, symbolically, the two terms of the shaman's voyage, this world and the beyond. Orpheus, like Jason, is privy to their knowledge [of both realms] and, like them, straddles the grave" (8).

'mimetic' effect as a kind of magic ... the power of the accomplished singer can seem almost boundless" (14-15). Orpheus' power to stir his audience is an element which is retained throughout the myth: Simonides describes how "birds innumerable" flock around Orpheus' head on the *Argo* and that "fishes leapt clean from the blue water because of his sweet music" (qtd. in Friedman 6). In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (a later play than *Alcestis*) he uses Orpheus as a simile once more, this time a wishful fantasy of a world in which "nature responds to human music and human feeling" (Segal 20) in Iphigenia's plea to her father: "If I had Orpheus' speech ... to persuade by magic song ... so that the rocks would follow me, and to charm whoever I wished by my words, I would have come to that point. But now I shall offer the wisdom I have, my tears" (qtd. in Segal 19). All versions of the myth which include Orpheus' rescue of Eurydice (successful or not) emphasise the striking image of the inhabitants of the underworld "awestruck" (*Georgics* 140), halting their futile labours. In Ovid's text, even "the Furies [weep] — / The only tears the Furies ever shed" (327). Orpheus' magic *moves* its hearers both mentally and physically, whether those hearers are living or dead.

As we have seen, the folkloric analogues to *Sir Orfeo*, as well as the lai itself, emphasise the miraculous effect of the protagonists' playing on nature and on the otherworldly forces they encounter. In his voluntary rustic exile, Orfeo renounces all of his possessions except his harp, which he hides in a hollow tree and extracts "when þe weder [is] clere & bri3t" (269). When he plays the harp, the creatures of the forest gather around him and are pacified:

> In-to alle þe wode þe soun gan schille,
> Þat alle þe wilde bestes þat þ*er* beþ
> For ioie abouten him þai teþ,
> & alle þe foules þat þ*er* were

Come & sete on ich a brere,

To here his harping a-fine

— So miche melody was þ*er*-in;

& when he his harping lete wold,

No best bi hi*m* abide nold. (272-280)

Later in the lai, Orfeo fills the court of the fairy king with "blisseful notes" (438) which make the fairy courtiers come to him and lie at his feet (440) and the fairy king to sit "ful stylle" (MS Harley 3810, 452). These scenes are analogous to the effect of Orpheus' playing for the inhabitants of the underworld in Virgil's and Ovid's poems:

His music shook them: drawn from the very depths

Of Erebus came insubstantial shades,

The phantoms of the lightness ...

More than this,

The very halls of Death and inmost dens

Of Tartarus were awestruck .... (*The Georgics* IV, 140-41)

Ixion's wheel stood still—entranced, amazed;

the vultures did not prey on Tityus' liver;

the Danaids left their urns; and Sisyphus,

you sat upon your stone. (*The Metamorphoses* X, 326)

In Ovid's text, Orpheus' playing after his second loss of Eurydice gathers a large collection of trees around him (in addition to the "wild beasts and birds" (X, 331)), many of which are the same trees which unhappy humans have been turned into elsewhere in the poem. This long

catalogue of anthropomorphised trees (of which I only quote a part), who come to the "plain / that was endowed with green but had no shade" (X, 329) in order to listen to the poet, literally makes him the centre of the *Metamorphoses*, as the poem's matter actually assembles around him:

> Yet when the poet, heaven-born, would play
> on his resounding lyre, shade on shade
> would seek that glade. Together with the tree
> of the Chaconians, these come to listen:
> the tall and leafly oak, the tender linden;
> the poplar, shape that suited Helios' daughters;
> the willow, most at home near flowing waters;
> the virgin laurel, beech, and brittle hazel... (X, 329)

The miraculous uprooting of the trees (even those which should be near the water come up the hill to Orpheus) emphasises the super-natural quality of the music. Ovid's self-conscious placement of the quintessential poet Orpheus in the "middle" not only of his own text, but in the middle of nature, forms part of the author's continual (though frequently ironic) foregrounding of artist-figures in his poem, and retains something of the archaic tradition's emphasis on Orpheus' poetic powers as magic.

In the early Greek tradition Orpheus' marvellous powers are frequently presented as forces of harmony and the character himself as a great civiliser. Greek authors regarded him as "a great poet and one of the spiritual founders of their nation" and Aristophanes and Socrates mention him in the same breath as they do Homer and Hesiod (Robbins 4). In some accounts Orpheus is "a priest of Dionysus who abandoned that cult to become a worshiper of Apollo; for

his apostasy he was killed by the Bacchantes" (Friedman 6) and at times he is described as Apollo's own son (Segal 9). In those accounts, Orpheus represents an ordering force, someone who teaches civilised and rational principles of nature and of human society and who tranquilises with his song. The magic of his lyre is creative, it causes positive change, and ensures peace and order: "Pausanias in the second century A. D. calls him 'wondrously skillful at magic' and pairs him with Amphion, legendary builder, by music, of the walls Thebes, in his ability both to charm wild beasts and in the civilizing power that causes rocks to take their proper place spontaneously in a city wall" (Segal 13). On board the *Argo*, Orpheus calms the fights of brawny sailors by singing to them about the origins and principles of the universe (8). In other texts, his music (and music in general) and poetic language are identified with *pharmakon*—a drug—and the physician's ability to create a healthy order in the patient's body (11). By way of his wondrous gift of music and poetic expression, Orpheus creates harmony not only in individuals, but in whole societies, and he is represented as an instrument for the ordering forces of the cosmos, indeed, as someone who has access to the principles of the harmonious universe.

These aspects of Orpheus' personality make him appealing to monotheists, Jewish and Christian, who used pagan myth to argue for the merits of monotheism to the pagans they were surrounded by. Robbins notes that Orpheus in certain classical representations appears as "a Greek missionary preaching his Apolline religion of catharsis and asceticism among the wild barbarians of Thrace, the orgiastic devotees of the un-Greek Dionysus" (12-3). Hellenistic Jews, and later Christians, exploit the visionary and civilising side of Orpheus which emerges from such accounts to represent him as a prophet for their own religion. At times he is represented as someone who actually knew about the Old Testament God, or as a figure who, though ignorant of God, preached Scriptural truth (this is, of course, a type of argument frequently employed by

early and medieval Christians in their dealings with classical culture). The similarities between Orpheus and biblical figures such as Christ and David (his rescues of people from the underworld, the miraculous effects of his harping) made early Christian artisans use his image in their labours to represent the figures of the new faith.

As a proponent of rationality and order who was well known for his cosmological and cosmogonical poetry, Orpheus was a particularly useful ally for Hellenistic Jews "in their religious and philosophical controversies with their pagan neighbours" (Friedman 11). The appearance of a spurious *Testament of Orpheus* around the third century B. C.[21] is a fascinating example of the way in which Jews in Alexandria sought to counter Greek criticism of their culture and religion through the appropriation of a prominent mythological figure such as Orpheus (19). The *Testament* is written in Greek hexameter and claims to be Orpheus' own testimony about his travels to Egypt in his youth, where he was instructed in monotheism by Moses, and his final conversion to Moses' teachings (13). He urges his son, Musaeus, to convert also:

> Do not chance the loss of a dear eternity because of former opinions. Look to the divine word ... Enter readily on the path, perceiving the single and eternal pattern of the universe. For an ancient tradition speaks of this Being. He is one, self-begotten, and all things are brought to pass by Him. He is immanent, yet transcendent ... such is the word of the one born of water [Moses], the opinions of God having been given to him in the double-folded Law. Nor is it lawful to speak otherwise ... O child, fix your thoughts on these matters, keep a

[21] The text, which is of unknown date and authorship, was considered as authentic and of great antiquity by Hellenic Jews and early Christians, though scholars now believe that it is likely written by an Alexandrian Jew (Friedman 16-17). My discussion of the Testament follows Friedman's thorough examination of it in *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 13-37.

> rein on your tongue, and keep my words in your heart. (*The Testament of Orpheus*, qtd. in Friedman 14-15)

Friedman posits two interrelated reasons for the production of this piece: to prove that Jewish culture was *older* than and in fact "fathered" (19) Hellenic culture and accordingly that the ideas of Orpheus—indeed, *all* Greek philosophy—sprung from Moses but had been passed off as originally Greek until now.[22] In this act of appropriation, Orpheus' knowledge of the principles of nature and of civilisation, even his marvellous feats, are turned into evidence of the close relationship between the two cultures, and even of Judaism's *superiority* over Greek culture.

The Testament of Orpheus was produced in a situation in which the Jewish population of Alexandria needed to prove their culture's worth to their Hellenic neighbours, and to counter attacks which (for example) claimed that the "Jews ... [had] no culture [and] no real gods" (Friedman 19). The earliest Christians found themselves in an even more vulnerable position within Roman society, and they too attempted cultural appropriations of Greco-Roman materials. Patristic writers maintained the claim of their Jewish predecessors that Greek philosophy was of Scriptural origin and kept using the figure of Orpheus as an affirmation of that claim. Friedman notes that apologetic writers use Orpheus and other pagan figures as evidence of the emerging culture's value quite frequently until around A. D. 313, the year of the Edict of Milan (34). With Constantine's edict and Theodosius' later affirmation of Christianity as state religion, the need to legitimise it by reference to Greco-Roman culture diminishes—although Christian artisans keep using the pagan imagery associated with Orpheus toward Christian ends (34) and, as I discuss in

[22] The Alexandrian Jew Aristobulus who lived in the second century B. C., for example, was "known for his view that there was a very ancient translation of the Pentateuch into Greek (made before the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 B. C.), whence Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle derived all Greek science and philosophy ... he attacks the originality of the Greek philosophers writing on cosmogony by showing their indebtedness to Mosaic history" (Friedman 17).

this chapter and in the next, the presence of Greco-Roman culture does not cease to cause problems for Christians.

Christ was early on regarded as a psychopomp by "pagans and Christians alike," and Christianity's emphasis on "the soul's immortality and the body's resurrection at the Last Judgement" was one of the factors which led to its "victory" over other, competing religions in the Mediterranean (Friedman 38). Early Christians sought ways to represent the stories of Christ the psychopomp in ways that would resonate with converts brought up with the art and myths of the pagan tradition (and presumably also to the multitude of *potential* converts around them).[23] In this matter, Christian artisans were balancing on a fine line between associating Christ (and other Scriptural figures) too closely with gods and demi-gods from pagan tradition and making sure that their images were understood. In this situation, Orpheus as a "purified pagan type" (39) became a key figure in the representation of Christ as the rescuer of souls as it was given, for example, in the Biblical stories of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15 and 27-28, Matthew 18:12-13, and Luke 15:5-6). Orpheus' representation as a shaman must have been conducive to his association with Christ, but also the pastoral settings in many of the accounts about him, his legendary power over creatures animate and inanimate, and the existence of pagan iconography which frequently depicts him as a kind of shepherd surrounded by animals, had a great influence on these artisans. Friedman's thorough discussion of early Christian funerary art depicting Christ as the Good Shepherd[24] through iconography associated with Orpheus reveals several

[23] It should also be noted, as Friedman (39) does, that Jewish tradition, because of its resistance to religious figurative representation, could not be of much help to Christian artisans in this matter. However, Eleanor Irwin notes that in "the Jewish synagogue at Dura-Europos there is a figure with a lyre in a wall-painting which is interpreted variously as Orpheus or David" (57).

[24] My cursory account of early Christian art in this section follows Friedman's discussion of the Orpheus-Christus imagery and its meaning unless otherwise indicated. Friedman's full and detailed discussion (including images) of the development of the Good Shepherd/ Orpheus-Christus iconography can be found on pages 39-53, see also Dronke, 206-208. For uses of Christ and Orpheus in theurgy and magic, see Friedman 58-71. For his discussion of Neoplatonism, see 67 and 76-85.

striking examples of a Christian iconography in development, built on the imagery of Greco-Roman culture. He refers to the figure which emerges from these developments as "Orpheus-Christus." This figure is increasingly stylised, even made emblematic, as certain animals and objects are more frequently present in paintings and mosaics depicting him. Friedman interprets the various elements by their significance in Christianity, Neoplatonism, and theurgy, "three strains of late antique thought ... [which are] far from mutually exclusive" (40). Common to all these traditions is the emphasis on the possibility of ascension to the heavens after death (though the importance and form of that ascension of course varies widely) and also the immortality of the soul—possibilities ensured by Christ's sacrifice for his believers, but also associated with Orpheus to an increasing degree in the art of the early Christian period (76).

Orpheus-Christus is often surrounded by specific animals such as sheep (representing, of course, Christian souls), peacocks (common symbols of immortality), doves (which "seems to have signified the peace of those in the Church and a life of contemplation, simplicity, and innocence," the Holy Spirit, or "divine election in this life" (49)), and eagles (who were associated with heaven as "psychopomp[s] in pagan, Jewish and Christian thought" (50) and who were increasingly seen as a symbols for Christ himself). He sometimes sits under seven stars arranged in a row or a half-circle, and his lyre is often featured prominently in the image. The stars, like the eagle, are symbols of ascension to the heavens which are found on several syncretic gems made for magical purposes (58-62). One of these gems illustrates the astonishing degree to which late antique people were exposed to diverse religions and cultures and consequently their particular "syncretistic visual imagination" (85). The gem depicts Christ on the cross under seven stars and a crescent moon, and the words "ΟΡΕΦΟC ΒΑΚΚΙΚΟC,"

meaning "Orpheus Bacchus"[25] (58). Friedman notes that the purpose of this gem was magical or theurgic, not religious, but that it was likely produced as an aid for its owner's journey "to the astral realm ... after death" (65). The seven stars are also found in Christian art, in which they reference similar ideas of "an afterlife among the stars" as the theurgic gem, ideas which "Christianity had borrowed from Hellenistic thought" (67). One third-century lamp shows Christ carrying a sheep on his shoulders up to seven stars: "the soul's new home" (Friedman 68). Related Christian uses of the stars alluded to "the all-inclusive power of God" (71), represented in the *Apocalypse of John*, by the seven stars Christ has "in his right hand" which signify the "seven angels of the seven churches" (*Apoc*.1:13, 20).

Orpheus' musical ability was also a feature which resonated with the preoccupations of early Christians. A range of images in Christian funerary art (see for example Friedman 42, 44, 48, and 73) show Orpheus-Christus playing his lyre (or holding it out to the side, as if to display it better to the viewer), sometimes in the midst of groups of animals including—but not restricted to—the ones listed above. The lyre is an instrument of great importance in pagan, Christian, and Neoplatonic thought—we have already seen the emphasis Greco-Roman accounts give Orpheus' harp and also the recurrence of harping and music as important devices in the folkloric texts examined in the previous chapter. In the Old Testament David—sometimes interpreted as a pre-figuration of Christ—famously calms Saul's rage with his harp and thus has a harmonising effect much like Orpheus does. David is also, like Orpheus-Christus, a shepherd. It was therefore not

[25]Friedman does not expound the connection between Orpheus and Bacchus beyond observing that the conflation of the pagan figures and Christ in the gem suggests "that the original purpose of the gem was not to commemorate the passion of the Christ, but rather to invoke as many gods as possible" (72). But Segal notes that Orpheus traditionally does have a relationship with Dionysius/ Bacchus, although it is unclear exactly how it works: despite his frequent representation as "the son or protégé of Apollo, protected by this god after his death, the enemy of Dionysus and his followers, who are responsible for his death" (9), his father is sometimes said to be Oeagrus, a Thracian king associated with Bacchus (see for example Plato 9), and there are accounts of Orpheus himself founding "Dionysiac mysteries" (Segal 9). This, writes Segal, indicates the ambiguities surrounding Orpheus as he "[i]n his crossing of boundaries ... veers between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac" (9).

too great "a step to attribute David's skill allegorically to Christ" (Irwin 57) and further to see Orpheus as a type who could signify David and Christ through his lyre. In Neoplatonism, the lyre was regarded as an instrument which could remind the soul on earth of its heavenly home, because it "was constructed according to the pattern of the universe, its seven strings corresponding to the seven spheres" (Friedman 80). Orpheus and his harp were associated with this movement of the soul by Macrobius in the commentary on *Somnium Scipionis*: "the soul carries with it into the body a memory of the music which it knew in the sky, and is so captivated by its charm that there is no breast so cruel or savage as not to be gripped by the spell of such an appeal. This, I believe, was the origin of the [story] of Orpheus" (Macrobius qtd. in Friedman 80). Orpheus as singer and his harp were therefore apt symbols in the art found in Christian burial places (see for example Friedman 72-85), expressing hopes of the Christians' souls successfully ascending to Heaven after their bodies were buried.

I have noted examples in which Orpheus becomes a part of Jewish and Christian texts as a prophet of Scriptural matter or as a figure associated with Christ. My account has thus largely focused on positive images of Orpheus in Jewish and Christian culture and on the ways in which writers and artists advocated their religion by using Orpheus as an affirmative figure. As I have outlined, the prime features of the archaic Greek myth of a triumphant Orpheus facilitated the monotheists' transformation of him into a figure which served their needs for legitimisation and representation of their beliefs. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that there is another, negative strain running through the interpretative history of the Orpheus myth. As a victim of his passions and a grief-stricken singer, Orpheus is given a role which is contrary to the civilising culture hero he has been viewed as in Greek tradition (though as we have seen in Plato's text, that representation was probably never undisputed). Segal rightly points out that Orpheus'

"function in most of Western literature and art has been to embody an antirational, anti-Promethean strain in our culture" (10). For all the magical song, shamanistic triumphs, and civilising endeavours of the early myth, there are pessimistic interpretations which do not render Orpheus a victorious super-human, but rather make him a figure for flawed humanity.

These negative interpretations of the myth are usually focused on Orpheus as poet, and are often sceptical of the value of music and poetry. While I have outlined a tradition in which Orpheus is considered a psychopomp and a culture hero by the power of his song, and in which song itself is seen as a magical force which creates change and growth, there is also a tradition which regards both the singer and his song with suspicion. This scepticism is demonstrated in the part of the *Symposium* (which I have referred to earlier) in which Phaedrus raises doubts about what it was that Orpheus recovered from Hades—was it his lost love, or simply a phantasm? Because Orpheus is a coward, "*like the lyre player [he was]*" (Plato 9. my emphasis), he insists on going to the underworld *alive*, rather than dying for love like Alcestis did (and as, presumably, every brave and most of all *true* lover would do) and "[c]onsequently, they [the gods] imposed a punishment on him, and made him die at the hands of women and did not honor him as they had Achilles, the son of Thetis" (9). Phaedrus elegantly strips Orpheus of all his magic as well as his status as a psychopomp of any importance, and represents him instead as a victim of his own vain fantasy. His quest for Eurydice thus ends with an illusory object: he returns only with a phantasm. Orpheus' powerful song is really an illusion, as is evidenced by the chimerical result of his excursion to the underworld.

Indeed, if we consider Plato's well known criticisms of artistic expression and rhetoric, Orpheus' song is in itself cast in a negative light. His ability to move his audience becomes not a sign of his connection with the universe or any harmonising powers, but simply an example of

deceptive and potentially harmful persuasion. The notion of poetry as *pharmakon*, too, has connotations that are not altogether positive, because as a "drug" it is most frequently associated with love—with relieving lovesickness and thus bringing back the rationality of the lover, but also with inducing (potentially maddening) love. Segal notes that Aeschylus in one text has Aphrodite "exer[t] her power of love through her follower, Persuasion, who is an 'enchantress'" (11). Thus we see the potential for poetry not only to heal, but also to wreak havoc on the minds and bodies of lovers through *persuading* them to give into love. Clearly Plato is concerned with this kind of passionate persuasion and its consequences, and while later versions of the Orpheus story do not necessarily associate music with the madness of love, Orpheus as a crazed, tragic lover rather than a transmitter of civilisation and order becomes the focal point of the stories in which he glances backwards at Eurydice,[26] starting with Virgil's account in the *Georgics*.

The fourth book of the *Georgics* is the culmination of a poem with a truly Orphic subject matter: the order and regulation of nature. Despite Virgil's admission that he works on a "[l]ittle … scale" in his short book on bee-keeping, the description of the society of the bees as well as the forever repeating process of demise and regeneration of the species allow the poet to address existence on a scale larger than the bee-hive: "I will show you a spectacle / To marvel at, a world in miniature" (Virgil 124). This miniature world seems perfectly harmonious: the seasons dictate the lives of the bees with regularity and the keeper strives to ensure the balance of their environment. He must make certain that the hives' entrances are not too wide, because "...winter's grip / Solidifies the honey; summer's heat / Dissolves it into liquid. For the bees / Either extreme is harmful" (125). Here, the bees and the keeper work towards a common goal, their wishes (warmth and safety for the bees, productivity for the keeper) in accordance with

[26] "Plato's ... definition of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* attempts to replace the emotion-arousing, literally 'spell-binding' power of language with its logical, poetic function" (Segal 11).

each other. But swarms of bees do not always behave in ways that are beneficial to the keeper. They might be "aimless, gadding about / In the air, disdainful of the cells and leaving / its quarters to get cold" (127). The speaker's advice to the keeper demonstrates the necessity of harsh regulation: "To check them [the bees] is no great task: just take the kings / And tear their wings off. While these stay at home / No one will dare to take off in the air" (127). In this context the archaic Orpheus, with his access to the principles of universe and his sympathy and "identifi[cation]" with nature (as opposed to the farmer's mastery by "forcing" it), falls tragically short (Segal 21-22). Segal notes that in the "post-Saturnian" (21) world of the *Georgics*, regeneration is essentially violent. The closeness and accord with nature which Orpheus has represented in much of the Greek tradition (and which so many later interpreters relied on for their representations of a harmonious universe with the Christian God as ruler and Christ as psychopomp) is thus no longer available.

In the 'fallen' world of the *Georgics*, Orpheus' song is ultimately futile and his actions demented. Virgil emphatically characterises Orpheus' breach of the gods' injunction not to look back at his wife as a "madness" which "overcame / The unwary lover" (*Georgics* 141). Eurydice does the same: "'Orpheus,' she cried, 'we are ruined, you and I! / What utter madness is this?'" (141) Segal and others have suggested that Virgil actually splits Orpheus into two separate characters: Orpheus and Aristaeus. Aristaeus, with his rational, unsentimental search for a solution to his problem of dying bees acquires the constructive and generative qualities of an earlier Orpheus, in contrast to the Virgilian Orpheus' "disastrous passion, the *furor* or desperate madness of love, which violates the law [of the underworld] and is punished by eternal separation" (21). Although Aristaeus is capable of destruction and must make up for his instigation of Eurydice's death, associated by Virgil with the ploughman's destruction of the

nightingale's nest (*Georgics* 142), he ensures the continued generation of the bees and is, like the ploughman, productive.[27] Orpheus, though portrayed with deep sympathy by the author, ultimately emerges as a figure whose music is no longer wholly transcendent and magical, but rather an expression of his private grief: it shows "an aspect of poetry which is tragically self-indulgent ... [and] wasteful of its own energies" (Segal 23), perhaps confirming Phaedrus' representation of Orpheus. Certainly, Virgil's description of Eurydice's disappearance implies Orpheus' diminishing grasp of reality: Eurydice "like smoke into thin air / Vanished away, unable any more / To see him as he vainly grasped at shadows" (141).

The idea of Orpheus as a man who is deceived by his passions and imagination—and who is capable of deceiving others—is also expressed in Christian interpretations of the myth. Perhaps the most striking example of this is found in Clement of Alexandria's (c. 150-c.215) interpretation of Orpheus from his *Exhortation to the Greeks* (Irwin 51). As a convert to Christianity born and raised in Hellenic culture, Clement wished to employ that culture in the service of the Church, and he felt that Plato and other "theologians" such as "Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod" were actually taught by prophets "in a direct line of Moses" (from Clement's *Stromata*, qtd. in Friedman 33), just as the still influential *Testament of Orpheus* had claimed. With such arguments he supported his belief that Christianity was "a fulfilment both of the Old Testament Scriptures and of Greek philosophy" ("Clement of Alexandria"). In the *Exhortation*, Clement reinterprets Greek myth in a Christian context, so that the Hellenic reader will see the superior value of the Christian analogues he establishes for these myths. For example, Odysseus' resistance to the Sirens by having himself bound to the mast of his ship becomes an image for how Clement's readers "[i]nstead of emulating Odysseus ... ought to

[27] In Segal's reading, *no* human has access to "nature's mystery" in the *Georgics*—that kind of knowledge is restricted to the divinities Proteus and Cyrene (21). Orpheus has lost his former status as god or shaman, and has become fully and devastatingly human.

depend on the power of the cross to protect them from evil. 'Bound to the wood [of the cross],' he tells them, 'you will be freed from all corruption'" (Irwin 52).[28] For Clement, the story of Odysseus' resistance is a figure of the virtuous Christian defying vice by the support of the Cross, but it is an incomplete pre-figuration which can only reach its true and full potential with the advent of the Christian faith. Similarly, Orpheus' song which the Greeks believe moves the unmovable and which brings order and harmony is only a false semblance of the *true* music of the Word—the "New Song"—and Orpheus himself is nothing but a fraud:

> A Thracian, a cunning master of his art ... tamed the wild beasts by the mere might of song; and transplanted trees—oaks—by music ...
>
> How, let me ask, have you believed vain fables, and supposed animals to be charmed by music; while Truth's shining face alone, as would seem, appears to you disguised, and is looked on with incredulous eyes? ...
>
> To me, therefore, that Thracian Orpheus, that Theban, and that Methymnaean[29] ... seem to have been deceivers, who, under the pretence of poetry corrupting human life, possessed by a spirit of artful sorcery for purposes of destruction ... were the first to entice men to idols ... But not such is my song, which has come to loose ... the bitter bondage of tyrannizing demons ....
>
> Behold the might of the new song! It has made men out of stones, men out of beasts. Those, moreover, that were as dead, not being partakers of the true life, have come to life again, simply by becoming listeners to this song.
>
> (Clement qtd. in Friedman 54-55)

[28] For Orpheus in the *Exortation*, see also Dronke 206-208.
[29] The "Theban" is Amphion, who built the walls of Thebes by music, and the "Methymnean" is Arion, "who attracted a dolphin by his singing and with its help was rescued from wicked sailors" (Irwin 52).

Orpheus as a legendary singer, then, has similarities with both Christ and David, but in the end his song deceives, upsets, and tears down, rather than enlightening, ordering, and building up, as the Word does. It is a paradox, as Friedman remarks, that although Clement's piece is meant to expose the hollowness of Orpheus' song and to contrast him negatively with Christ, the text might (and likely did) encourage the conflation of the two figures which we have seen earlier: "for a careless reader, or one not too familiar with Christian doctrine or Clement's highly metaphoric style" the text could "serve to identify [Orpheus and Christ] ... rather than separate them" (56). Early Christians interpreted Orpheus both negatively and positively in order to serve their varying rhetorical and representational needs in a given text or work of art. As the next chapter will show, this is no different from the medieval uses of the Orpheus myth, although there are comparatively far fewer instances of the archaic, triumphant Orpheus story during the Middle Ages than in the periods I've discussed in this chapter.

But for *Sir Orfeo*, a poem which shows a medieval English Orpheus defeating the powers of the otherworld and winning back his queen for ever, and whose powers of music are so emphasised by the lai's poet, the long-standing (if little remembered) tradition of a triumphant Orpheus must be taken into account. The image of Orpheus that emerges from such a study is, of course, more nuanced than that which most critics of the lai have considered. What I have referred to as the "negative" strain of the myth *is* important for *Sir Orfeo*—in particular, I believe the scepticism about the possibilities of (poetic) expression which it reveals is a feature current not only in medieval moralisations of Orpheus, but also in *Sir Orfeo*—but so is the archaic, "positive" strain. With its focus on Orpheus' ordering and constructive abilities, the archaic myth and its development among early Christians contains many of the traits which has made *Sir Orfeo* seem so contrary to the classical Orpheus myth: like the early myth, the poem emphasises

the *resolution* of grief and conflict over tragic perpetuation of suffering, and it represents Orfeo's powers of expression as positive and fruitful rather than futile or deceptive. There is, of course, no way of knowing how well-known the older myth was in the Middle Ages. The existence of Latin versions of it in France (noted by Dronke) at least indicates that it was not completely unknown—and in the final chapter I discuss commentaries that seem to further indicate that medieval audiences could have heard of a triumphant Orpheus, and that texts influenced by Neoplatonism in particular could take advantage of this part of the Orpheus myth. But most importantly, *Sir Orfeo* and its folkloric analogues (in particular "Villemann og Magnill") show that the story type is attractive and interesting enough to survive—and thrive—in very different times and contexts, and for that reason alone it deserves serious consideration.

CHAPTER 3

Sir Orfeo and Allegory

An allegorical interpretation of a text (or a myth, or a work of art) attempts to extract a meaning from it which is not readily apparent, but which proves relevant or even edifying to the interpreter as she realises its true meaning. The practice of moralising texts is, as Patricia Vicari writes, "what men of any age do to their inherited culture to make it conformable to their needs" (81). Moralisation as a practice of writing and reading—as a framework for thought—was widespread in the Middle Ages, because of the strong continued presence of classical pagan culture even after the advent of Christianity in Europe. As we have seen, the inheritance represented by the myths, art and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans weighed heavily on the early Christian community in its struggle to reconcile the culture it partly sprung out of with the new teachings of Scripture. Allegory provided a solution to this difficult problem.

The impetus for Christians to allegorise pagan myths was doubly strong: it came from a lasting appreciation of classical culture among themselves well as from their inherited textual practices. By the time the Greek Fathers had started their attempts to adapt classical culture to their own beliefs, the pagans themselves had allegorised ancient myths and literature for centuries. Jean Seznec points out that the use of myth in philosophy, such as Plato's or the Stoics', "ennobles" (86) the myths and thus removes them from their original function. The Stoics, like the later Christians, were concerned with the moral content of the myths and subjected the works of Homer to allegorization in their attempts to reconcile "philosophy with popular religion" (84). Virgil's adaptations of the Greek myths and Homer are in a sense moral interpretations, much like the Stoics' were. He turns the lusty and devious Olympian gods into

"dignified and grave" (86) characters that represent Roman values of authority and domesticity: "Virgil refuses to repeat the frivolous tales … which Ovid so enjoys collecting … [In the *Aeneid*] Jupiter presides over his council with sovereign majesty, and Venus herself is only a mother who fears for her son" (86-7). Virgil re-imagines the Greek materials in order to suggest a Roman ethos perhaps at odds with the original myths.

Early Christians thus relied on textual practices and strategies which had strong affinities with pagan moralisations, such as the parables and the general "patristic tendency always to look for profound meanings hidden behind the words of the Scriptural narrative … seen first in the Greek Fathers, who owe it to their Alexandrian antecedents" (Seznec 88). The Fathers' penchant for allegorical interpretation naturally made resistance to pagan moralisations difficult. As Seznec notes, they could hardly "condemn without qualification a method which they themselves made use of at every turn" (87). They were, again in Vicari's words, the (sometimes reluctant) "inheritors" of a pagan culture which constituted the basis of their education, their common ground. Christian educators wished to advance Scripture as superior to all other texts, but at the same time they could not fully reject the classical inheritance: "Was it thinkable that an educated man should know nothing of Homer or Virgil? (Seznec 88). Such a rejection was *not* thinkable for many Christians, and thus teachers had to explain to the students the mythical context of the great classical works while making sure it did not interfere with the Christian message.

Even the staunchest critic of classical tradition would have had severe problems avoiding it. When the ecclesiastic Alcuin "reproaches one of his monastic friends for too great a liking for Virgil," for example, "[he] does so by quoting him a verse from the *Aeneid*" (Leclercq 113). The "optimists" (116) of the Christian community, on the other hand, firmly believed that the good qualities of the classical authors and the classical myths could be turned to use for the

advancement of the Christian virtues. An author such as Ovid (perhaps him in particular) was known as a problematic author among monastics and clerics, but

> once it had been decided to study him [in the monastic schools], they [the monastics] wished to make him acceptable. There was no difficulty over the things he had said which were right, but as for the rest, he had to be brought into conformity Holy Scripture in order to safeguard his prestige and authority. (119)

So the medieval allegorists went on to transform their classical inheritance into what they needed it to be: they "claimed for themselves the right to make the [classical] authors conform to usage, to the actual needs of a living culture" and in this way many of the classical authors and myths were posthumously "'converted' to Christianity" (119). Remnants of Greco-Roman culture were ubiquitous throughout the medieval period: classical myths and classical authors were used as the starting points for rhetorical exercises in schools (see for example Friedman 147) and classical figures were frequently featured in literature and the other arts. Moralisations in which pagan mythological types were made to represent Christian vices and virtues were common and Orpheus, with his strong appeal to Christian culture, was primarily available to medieval audiences through the widely circulated commentaries and moral interpretations of Virgil's and Ovid's works.

The influence of moralisations on *Sir Orfeo*, and the question of whether the poem should itself be read allegorically, has accordingly received much critical attention. Most scholars acknowledge some influence from allegorizations of the Orpheus-myth: Boethius' account in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and King Alfred's adaptation of it into Old English are the more prominent examples. However, the extent of that influence, as well as the question of whether the lai itself can be read allegorically, remain contested issues. Patricia Vicari, who is convinced

of the dominance of Celtic lore in *Sir Orfeo*, finds no support for an allegorical intention behind the lai and little influence from moralisations (see for example 74-76). Friedman suggests that while some parts of the lai are influenced by Christian moralisations of the Orpheus myth, the lai itself cannot be read "as a Christian allegory" because it is not a "tightly woven symbolic scheme imbued with Christian didacticism" (190).

On the other hand, Patricia Grimaldi argues that the poem is a "complex allegory ... because it employs an elaborate system of parallels to Celtic folklore and mythology, Christian morality, and political ethics" (147) which can be interpreted according to medieval schemes of interpretation, such as the "four senses" of Biblical exegesis.[30] Grimaldi accordingly distinguishes between three levels of meaning in the poem: one literal framework of Celtic folktale which is the basis "support[ing] multiple levels of interpretation" (150); an "allegorical and moral" meaning which shows Orfeo as a penitent Christian pilgrim, and an ultimate, "anagogic" interpretation in which Orfeo is represented "as a type of king who undergoes a political education" (148). I am not convinced that Grimaldi's schematic reading of the poem works consistently —in particular, I am uncertain that her categories function according to the plan she outlines. For example, the education of a king in worldly, political terms to me appears closer to a literal or historical sense than an anagogic sense. However, Grimaldi's reading is important because it stresses that the *Orfeo*-poet's selection and melding of materials form an "elaborate system" (147) of overlapping associations and thematic convergences and that these networks of meaning make possible allegorical interpretations of the lai.

Unlike most medieval Orpheus commentaries, or the lai's possible descendant, Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Sir Orfeo* has no *moralitas* and the author never gives an

[30] This type of scheme was mainly used in the interpretation of Scripture, but also in the reading of other kinds of texts. One such scheme is famously described by Dante in the letter to Can Grande and consists of a division of literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic levels of meaning ("Allegory").

allegorical explanation for any episode. There is no *Pearl*-maiden or Boethian Lady Philosophy to guide Orfeo (or the reader) and in that way clearly signal the workings of allegory. Still, there are compelling reasons to read *Sir Orfeo* as a text not only *influenced* by commentaries and allegories, but one which *invites* allegorical readings. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the lai's otherworld and its intrusion on Orfeo's realm is represented as a Satanic disruption of order. Because of that association, and because of the continuing association of the archaic Greek Orpheus and Christ, Orfeo's defeat of the fairy king and his ensuing rescue of Heurodis is imbued with religious significance. Orfeo's voluntary rustic exile after Heurodis' abduction has powerful connotations not only to Orpheus' mournful harping on the banks of Lethe, but to famous self-exiles of the Bible, such as Elijah or John the Baptist. In response to these Christian elements, Penelope Doob unequivocally characterises Orfeo as a type of the "holy wild man" in contrast to other wild men in romance, such as Merlin (159-161). Holy wild men are holy because their exile is *voluntary*: these men are usually repenting their sins or simply wishing to stay away from the "evil" of human society through their self-exiles (Doob 159). Medieval moralisations of Orpheus and Eurydice emphasise sin (in particular Eurydice's sin) and Doob and others argue that Orfeo's period in the wilderness is the result of his need for penance after he loses Heurodis. Grimaldi, for example, suggests that "*Sir Orfeo* was doubtless perceived by Christian readers as an allegory of 'the progress of the soul,' from sin to redemption through the expiation of vice" (155-56).[31] This pattern is certainly evident in *Sir Orfeo*. As Kenneth Gros Louis notes, it is Orfeo's renunciation of his former state which somehow allows him to see Heurodis again, rather than a quest for her as in most classical representations of Orpheus (245). Orfeo's self-exile thus emerges as the primary reason for the lai's resolution.

[31] For another discussion of Orfeo's exile see Michael Masi (6-7).

The poem's structure, with its movement from order to confusion and back again, evokes models of loss and retrieval of harmony prevalent in (Christian) Neoplatonism. We have already seen the association of Orpheus with order and harmony both in Neoplatonism and Christianity (traditions which, as we have seen, are closely related) and I argue that Orfeo's retrieval of Heurodis by music suggests that he has the ability to order and remedy which Neoplatonists and early Christians alike found so appealing in the classical figure. Orfeo is a courtly hero whose kingship and marriage are regained, perhaps paradoxically, because he renounces all of his worldly goods and status. *Sir Orfeo*'s structure of "double loss" and double resolution, identified by Burke-Severs (199), demonstrates the close connection between the stable marriage and reunion of the lovers on the one hand, and the stability of the kingdom on the other. Like Gros Louis (see for example 245-246), I suggest that Orfeo is given the ability to restore the order of both his realm and his marriage through his religious self-exile—a third, spiritual structure complementing Burke-Severs' double structure. Indeed, ideas of self-exile and pilgrimage are closely linked to ideas about God's order in the universe and man's ability (or inability) to discern that order. These ideas rooted in Neoplatonic thought are frequently expressed in commentaries on Orpheus, beginning with Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. *Sir Orfeo* develops identical themes through a representation of the destruction and restoration of God's order through the human institutions that reflect that order: kingship and marriage.

The values of order and hierarchy were paramount in medieval thought through the strong influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism on Christian theology, mediated by thinkers such as Augustine, Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius. Christian Neoplatonism strives to explain how the seeming diversity and disconnectedness of phenomena in the world can all be part of God's creation. Because the Christian God has a sole purpose in his creation of the universe

(Gersh 22-3), the creation is an expression of that unified and single creator. This means that everything in the world from the moment of its inception is intended by, and therefore related to, God. It is part of a divine order, which may not be readily apparent, but is nevertheless reality. In Augustine's early thought (influenced by pagan Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry), the universe with all its parts is harmonious and ordered because it moves towards its creator--a "metaphysically transcendent (non-spatial and temporal)" being who "somehow transmits" his unity to the created world (Gersh 23). Augustine writes:

> Those things which tend towards being, tend towards order … being is nothing other than unity. Therefore, to the extent that each thing obtains unity, it also exists … Simple things exist through themselves because they are unified … things which are not simple imitate unity through the concord of their parts. They exist to the extent that they achieve it. (Qtd. in Gersh 22)

This does not mean that the created things are ever able to reach the unity and harmony of the creator, but it does entail that each thing, each person and each society has a natural tendency toward order and harmony which can be realised to a greater or lesser extent.

These ideas were widely circulated by texts such as Boethius' (c. 480-524) *The Consolation of Philosophy* (written in 524). This enormously popular and influential text is a central source of both Neoplatonism and the Orpheus myth in the Middle Ages and it is a key intertext for *Sir Orfeo*. In Boethius' text, the imprisoned Boethius is visited by Lady Philosophy who instructs him of the love which springs from the Creator and maintains concord in the universe:

> [The] harmonious order of things is achieved by love which rules the earth and the seas, and commands the heavens.

> But if love should slack the reins, all that is now joined in mutual love would wage continual war, and strive to tear apart the world which is now sustained in friendly concord by beautiful motion.
>
> Love binds together people joined by a sacred bond; love binds sacred marriages by chaste affections; love makes the laws which join true friends. O how happy the human race would be, if that love which rules the heavens ruled also your souls! (35)

Boethius' Creator is not explicitly Christian, but the Neoplatonist representation of God as love and light emanating from the centre of the universe out to all its parts was an idea that influenced early and medieval Christians. In a Christian Neoplatonic worldview the universe as a whole is therefore saturated with correspondences to God. All things are linked together by their common affinity to the divine and they are related in an ordered and interrelated, but still hierarchical, system. Closely linked to these ideas is the notion of the creation as an allegory, in which all things are signs of the divine purpose, which must be deciphered correctly: "every object in the universe is a sign of spiritual truth. The cosmos is a 'book,' whose symbols, which must be 'read,' are made of plant fibres, starlight, fur, and feathers" (Vicari 65). It follows from these ideas that *all* things, including pagan myths and philosophy, must have a place in God's creation and are signs which can be interpreted to find evidence of the divine purpose. Indeed, the practice of allegorising pagan materials was driven by a strong desire to reconcile diverse traditions and to make them all work within an all-encompassing Christian framework. The influence of the allegorical tradition on *Sir Orfeo* is thus evident both in its Christianisation of pagan materials and in its representation of Orfeo's spiritual journey towards the reinstatement of order.

Orpheus' traditional association with Neoplatonic ideas of concord and discord makes him an appealing figure for writers such as Boethius. Boethius' interpretation is the first Latin allegorization of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (Friedman 93) and roughly follows Ovid's version, though it is briefer and omits the circumstances surrounding Eurydice's death. Boethius, like Ovid, emphasises the effects of Orpheus' playing on nature and on the inhabitants of the underworld:

> Long ago the Thracian poet, Orpheus, mourned for his dead wife. With his sorrowful music he made the woodland dance and the rivers stand still ... But as the sorrow within his breast burned more fiercely, that music which calmed all nature could not console its maker. Finding the gods unbending, he went to the regions of hell. There he sang sweet songs to the music of his harp ... Hell is moved to pity when, with his melodious prayer, he begs the favor of those shades. The three-headed guardian of the gate is paralyzed by that new song; and the Furies, avengers of crimes who torture guilty souls with fear, are touched and weep in pity. (Boethius 65-66)

But the tenor of Boethius' account, with its emphasis on Orpheus' burning sorrow and despair, is closer to a more negative, Virgilian view of the protagonist's potential. Indeed, this is appropriate since the narrator of the story is Lady Philosophy, who uses the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as a didactic *exemplum* for the dejected Boethius. Her opening and concluding statements outline the allegorical value of the Orpheus-story:

> Happy is he who can look into the shining spring of good; happy is he who can break the heavy chains of earth ... This fable applies to all of you who seek to raise your minds to sovereign day. For whoever is conquered and turns his eyes

> to the pit of hell, looking into the inferno, loses all the excellence he has gained. (65, 66)

In the context of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the story of Orpheus demonstrates the failing of a man who has been on his way to recognise truth (the "shining spring of good"), but who is pulled back into the realm of temporal and transient things ("the heavy chains of earth") as a result of his weakness.

Lady Philosophy consoles the despairing Boethius by reminding him that his situation is the result of Fortune's arbitrary movements. Through his dependence on the things of this world, Boethius has allowed Fortune to imprison him in temporal cares and exile him from his *patria*—his "true country of the mind" (Green. "Introduction," xx)—a *spiritual* exile far more devastating than the *physical* imprisonment and isolation that Boethius suffers. Boethius must recognise and accept that though he may not always understand it, everything in the world is ultimately a result of Providence, "the divine reason itself which belongs to the most high ruler of all things and which governs all things" (82). "Therefore," Philosophy tells him, "even though things may seem confused and discordant to you, because you cannot discern the order that governs them, nevertheless everything is governed by its own proper order directing all things toward the good" (83).

For Boethius, alienation is a result of man's attachment to Fortune and transient phenomena, as well as failure to comprehend Providence and the intrinsic order of the universe. Lady Philosophy's task in *The Consolation* is therefore to guide the imprisoned Boethius out of his state of alienation. Platonic ideas of the soul's original home in another realm and its need to recollect and return to this original state were widely influential through such texts as *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In a Christian perspective alienation can mean two things, according

to Gerhart B. Ladner. First, it can be alienation from God as a result of "a failure to love God and a refusal to adhere to the order which he had given," a state represented prominently by the fall of Lucifer or by the building of the tower of Babel in Scripture (Ladner 235). The second meaning of alienation is that of the good Christian in this life, the "*viator*" or traveller (235). A number of prominent early Christian thinkers (among them Gregory the Great and Augustine) describe life on earth as the path of the traveller, and these ideas were instrumental in the establishment of pilgrimage and monastic seclusion as religious institutions. On his way to his spiritual home, the *viator* is always a stranger, an alien, and this is a necessary condition for him to reach his destination: "sometimes the just on his travels will even seek out discomfort and refuse to dwell in the pleasantness of transitory surroundings, lest by delight found on the journey he be delayed from reaching his fatherland, and by attaching his heart to the road of peregrination he lose his reward when the heavenly *patria* finally comes into sight" (235). The *viator* on his way through existence is always in danger of slipping from his pious alienation from the material world—his *contemptus mundi*—into enjoyment and pleasure of it and thereby into alienation from his real destination and from God.

Sin, excessive attachment to the visible world, and spiritual confusion leading to lack of faith are all causes of such perilous alienation from God. The story of Orpheus who looks back at Eurydice and loses her clearly suits this idea and numerous medieval commentators in the tradition from Boethius interpreted the story as the protagonist's distraction from his spiritual goal. This identification of Orpheus with the failing *viator* is perhaps also made possible by the paradoxes and ambiguities associated with him in the classical tradition: his potential for both god-like triumph and deeply flawed humanity makes him a compelling representation of the precarious situation of humankind. In Boethius' text, Orpheus' love for Eurydice makes him

turn his eyes away from the light and back into the dark "night" (66). Eurydice, as the object of his love and grief, is made to represent the transient phenomena which Philosophy warns against. But there is no explicit condemnation of Eurydice's character—no hint that she has transgressed or committed a sin, unlike in several later interpretations. There is rather an implicit commentary on the *kind* of love which drives Orpheus to look back. If he had not done so he would presumably have returned to the light of "sovereign day" *with* his wife, so their relationship does not appear to be inherently wrong or negative. The problem with Orpheus' love is that it perhaps results from cupidity rather than the "chaste affections" which Philosophy insists bind together "sacred marriages" (35) and which are part of the great "bond of love" (87) that ensures the order and unity of the universe. Orpheus' desire and his love for the material world indicate a spiritual confusion and mental disorder akin to the passionate madness that we have seen Virgil hinting at in Eurydice's complaint against Orpheus, and this error obscures Orpheus' view of his true goal and the order which it represents. Indeed, Orpheus' spiritual confusion relates directly to his worldly existence. Boethius' focus on the faculty of sight implies that this alienation from God is fundamentally also an alienation from Orpheus' humanity:

> Boethius is developing a commonplace familiar in both pagan and Christian thought. Man was made so that he could behold the sky, as home of reason, while the irrational animal, whose nature is associated with the material rather than the spiritual world, faces the earth as he walks. Plato had made an early statement of this idea: "God invested and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the courses of intelligence in heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are akin to them." (Friedman 94)

Unlike in Virgil's and Ovid's versions, Boethius' Orpheus dies *in the moment he looks back*: "As they [Orpheus and Eurydice] approached the edge of night, Orpheus looked back at Eurydice, lost her, and died" (66). Orpheus' backward glance condemns him totally—it fundamentally alienates him from his reason and from the divine order.

Boethius thus emphasises Orpheus' excessive and destructive passion, rather than the object of his love, Eurydice. The majority of medieval moralisers, however, seize the opportunity of turning Eurydice into an example of the sinful tendency of human nature. Indeed, they usually focus on her fault, rather than that of Orpheus. An early example is King Alfred's (849-899) late ninth-century translation of Boethius' text into Old English. Alfred turns Boethius' syncretistic allegory into a text which is clearly Christian and adapted to Alfred's audience.[32] He describes Eurydice's soul as going to hell ("hire saule mon sceolde laedan to helle" (Alfred 5)) and warns of the dangers of looking back at one's "yflum" (7), which W. J. Segdefield translates as "sin" (118). Remigius of Auxerre's commentary (c. 904) equates Eurydice with "carnal desires" (Remigius qtd. in Friedman 98). In this type of moralisation, Orpheus himself paradoxically takes on many of the qualities he has had in the "positive" strain of the myth—he becomes a representation of the rational part of the soul, while Eurydice is given the role of the base and irrational passions. As Friedman notes, allegorizations such as these are in essence simple representations of the "Platonic drama of the soul ... occurring between *nous*, mind, and *thumos-epithumia*, passion and desire" (109),[33] with these two forces of the soul didactically split between two characters. A prominent example of this Platonic approach occurs in the work of William of Conches (1080-1145). In his commentary on

[32] Janet Bately describes Alfred's subtle changes of Boethius' text well: "[Alfred] parts from Boethius in his emphasis on a personal God who is very clearly the Christian God. So, for instance, where Boethius takes from the Neoplatonists the image of concentric circles to represent Providence and Fate (c. IV pr. Vi. 65-82), Alfred, introducing the Augustinian theme of the soul yearning for God, but reaching Him only through *contemptus mundi* ... uses instead the image of a cartwheel" (40).

[33] Plato describes the relationship between *nous* and *thumos-epithumia* in *The Republic* IV.

Boethius, he works Aristaeus back into the story, and in a striking reinterpretation by way of (spurious) etymology he equates Orpheus with "wisdom and eloquence and because of that he is called *Orea-phone*—that is, best voice," Aristaeus with "virtue, for *ares* is excellence," and, finally, Eurydice with "natural concupiscence" and "*temporalia*" (William qtd. in Friedman 106-107). In William's reading, excellence (Aristaeus) falls in love with human desire (Eurydice)

> because excellence always tries to raise human desire aloft from earthly things. But Eurydice fled Aristaeus because desire struggles with virtue, wishing its own pleasure which is contrary to the way of excellence. But then she dies and descended to the underworld, that is, to earthly delights. His wife having died, Orpheus mourned, because when a wise man sees his attention and pleasure controlled by temporalia, he is displeased. Though he conquered all by his music, he did not conquer his lost wife, because however a wise man overcomes the vices of others by his wisdom and eloquence, he cannot withdraw his own desires from the grasp of *temporalia*, and for this reason, Orpheus greatly mourned. (William qtd. in Friedman 107)

In the same vein, Nicholas Trivet's (d. 1334) commentary interprets Eurydice as the "affections" (Friedman 111) and further emphasises her concupiscence: "Aristaeus, that is, virtue, wished to join with her. But Eurydice, as she flees through the meadow, that is, the folly of the present life, threads on a serpent, not crushing it but casting herself down, that is, joining herself to the sensuality by which she is bitten, and dies" (Nicholas Trivet qtd. in Friedman 111). Perhaps the most flamboyant identification of Eurydice with concupiscence and *temporalia* appears in Robert Henryson's fifteenth century poem written in Middle Scots, *Orpheus and Eurydice*. In his

poem, which borrows significantly and openly from Nicholas Trivet's moralisation,[34] Henryson does his utmost to present Eurydice as a lustful woman attached to the things of the world: she is, after all, "the mychti quene of Thrace / Excellent fair, haboudand in riches" (74-75). This commanding queen is filled with desire and it is she, not Orpheus, who initiates their marriage:

> Quhen that scho saw this prince so glorious,
> Hir erand to propone scho thoct no schame;
> With wordis sweit and blenkis amourus,
> Said, 'Welcome, lord and luf, schir Orpheus;
> In this province 3e sall be king and lord!'
> Thai kissit syne, and thus war at accord. (79-84)

The narrator ends his description of the married couple's "gret plesans, and gret play" (88) with a rueful "Off wardlie ioye, allace, quhat sall we say? / Lyke till a flour that plesandly will spring / Quhilk fadis sone, and endis with murnyng" (89-91). This Eurydice, "oure affcioun" (430), is also lost to Orpheus who represents reason (427-29), and the narrator uses his lengthy *moralitas* (415-633) to warn against the dangers of lust for the flesh and worldly goods.

Such interpretations of Orpheus as a type of the Christian *viator* and Eurydice as the cause of his downfall appear frequently in medieval literature. Friedman argues that because the medieval Orpheus-moralisations focus mainly on the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus' earlier shamanistic exploits are largely forgotten:

> No longer are the deeds of Orpheus among the Argonauts relevant. His sojourn in Egypt and his Testament appear not to have been well known to medieval writers.

[34] There has been some debate as to whether Henryson may have known *Sir Orfeo*, see Denton Fox's introduction to Henryson's poems for a summary, cv. Similarities exist: Henryson's Orpheus must also go to fairyland to find his Eurydice and the king of that realm is referred to as Pluto. This detail, of course, also occurs in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale" and Henryson could have taken it from that source. Whether Henryson knew the lai or not (or an analogue, perhaps in the form of a ballad), his poem's extensive references to Neoplatonist theories of music and harmony prove the strong and persistent associations of Orpheus with Neoplatonist thought.

> Even the power of his lyre over the animals is often reduced to a mere detail in religious allegory. How Orpheus will act with regard to Eurydice becomes the crux of the story. (89)

It is true that Orpheus as an independent figure seems to be virtually unknown in the period, but it is also true that the strong focus on Eurydice's sin allows Orpheus to retain many of the positive characteristics of the archaic figure. I think, therefore, that the degree to which the medieval Orpheus is distinctly different from his archaic Greek and early Christian incarnation has at times been overemphasised. William of Conches, Nicholas Trivet, and Robert Henryson stress Orpheus' musical ability, his reason, and his eloquence—this is natural, as he is made to represent the rational part of the soul. These interpretations portray Orpheus as an essentially heroic character and their representations of him are very different in tone from Virgil's display of his protagonist's tragic desire and madness. William's account in particular shows Orpheus as a wise man *learning* from his experience, rather than being destroyed by grief and resentment: "Then Orpheus descended to the underworld in order to bring back his wife, just as the wise man must descend to a knowledge of earthly things in order to see that there is nothing of value in them before he can free himself from human desire" (qtd. in Friedman 107). This is important to note, because it shows that although the dominant medieval story of Orpheus is the one in which he loses Eurydice, he still emerges as a figure with great potential for insight and, especially in Trivet and Henryson, ascension to the heavens.

It is not surprising, then, that some medieval commentators continued the identification of Orpheus and Christian figures which had begun in the first centuries of the Church. Petrus Berchorius' (d.1362) thirteenth-century commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, which is well known for its series of changing (and at times contradictory) religious interpretations of Ovid's

text, demonstrates the prevailing positive view of Orpheus (and the correspondingly negative view of Eurydice). At one point Berchorius suggests that Orpheus could be interpreted as a "sinner" (Reynolds 437) in a reading similar to Alfred's or Remigius' commentaries, but his remaining alternative readings emphasise Orpheus' qualities as those of a psychopomp and prophetic singer, and even as a Christ-figure:

> Say allegorically that Orpheus the son of the sun [Apollo] is Christ the son of God the Father who wed Eurydice—that is the human soul—through charity and love and through his own special choice joined her to himself. A serpent—the devil—bit this new—that is created anew—bride while she was collecting flowers—that is desiring the forbidden apple—through temptation, killed her through sin, and finally sent her to hell. When Orpheus—Christ—saw this he wished to descend to hell personally and thus regained his wife—that is human nature, snatched her from the kingdom of darkness, and led her with him to the upper regions, saying Canticle of Canticles 2:10: "Arise, make haste, my love, and come." (347)

In this passage, Eurydice emerges as a type of Eve, but Berchorius represents Orpheus as Christ rather than Adam.[35] He thus turns the story into a narrative of salvation—an interpretation that is made possible by the long tradition of the triumphant Orpheus. As he moves on to the second part of Ovid's story, in which Orpheus sits mourning and playing on the hillside surrounded by trees and afterwards is attacked by the Thracian women, Berchorius reads the mourning harp-player as a representation of a Christian prophetic singer:

> a preacher, a singer of the songs of the divine word, who after he has come from hell—that is the world—should sit on the mountain of Scripture or Religion ...

[35] However, as Penelope Doob (174) notes, patristic writers frequently interpret Adam as reason and Eve as the desires of the flesh.

> [and] draw to himself—that is to the state of penance or faith—rocks and trees—that is insensible and hardened sinners,[36] and from them gather people by means of the sweetness of the divine word. (349)

Finally, Berchorius construes Orpheus' songs as those of the "holy and learned men of the primitive Church who by their sweetness of their song—that is preaching—call ... insensitive and unfaithful men—to the faith of the Church and gather a great wood—that is a great crowd of men—around themselves" (349) and the Thracian women as the pagan oppressors persecuting and killing early Christians.

Since the type of moralisation which interprets Eurydice as human desire or *temporalia* and Orpheus as the rational part of the soul is so prevalent in the medieval period, several critics have tried to identify that pattern in *Sir Orfeo*. The idea of Orfeo's self-exile as an act of penitence also appears to support this idea. However, this is not unproblematic since there are few indications of what might constitute Heurodis' sin in the lai. As several critics have noted, Heurodis does expose herself to the danger of fairies by falling asleep under the "ympe-tre" (*Sir Orfeo* 70)—there are strong precedents in Celtic lore and in romance for such actions resulting in fairy abductions, but this does not in itself imply wrong or sinful behaviour (see for example Coolidge 64-65). Friedman notes the medieval commentaries that identify the serpent that kills Eurydice with Satan (exemplified by the passage from Berchorius above) in order to argue that even though Heurodis appears "blameless" (26), "the Orfeo poet had a conception of her [Eurydice/ Heurodis] which *required* her to be attacked by Satan" ("Eurydice" 26). Indeed, Friedman contends that the association of Eurydice's death with Satan (and implicitly with sin) is

[36] This interpretation of stones as the hardened heart of men is strikingly similar to a passage of Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Greeks*, see Friedman 55. See also Ezechiel 36:26: "And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh."

the *only* element of the allegorical tradition which is clearly present in *Sir Orfeo*[37]—he finds similarities between the fairy king, who appears at "vnderentide" (*Sir Orfeo* 65), and the "noon-day demon" ("Eurydice" 22). The noon-day demon is an incarnation of Satan, who in midrashic and Christian exegesis is known to attack victims around noon, when they are prone to "accidia or spiritual sloth" (28). There are also extant series of MS illustrations which Friedman claims show the serpent that kills Eurydice as a draconopede, a "man-headed dragon" (25) frequently identified with the Devil in the medieval period, and he suggests that medieval readers would associate "the King of Fairies formed as a mortal man" (26) with this anthropomorphic serpent-devil.

Penelope Doob notes the similarities between the lai's representation of the site of Heurodis' abduction in the royal garden and moralisations such as Nicholas Trivet's and Berchorius' which emphasise Eurydice's gathering of flowers and the pastoral setting of her death as signs of her attachment to *temporalia* and her resemblance to Eve. Doob argues that Heurodis' pleasure in a beautiful spring day in the garden, looking at "þe floures sprede & spring" and hearing "þe foules sing" (67-8), represents an "overindulgence in the joys of nature [which] implies neglect of duty to God ... [because] sensual pleasures open the soul to the devil ... Heurodis intends nothing wrong, but her lack of caution leads to disaster nonetheless; the pleasures of the garden demand the agony of Orfeo in the wilderness" (175). This interpretation supports the idea of the noon-day demon, attacking the (spiritually) slothful in their sleep and it seems likely, as Friedman suggests, that the dominant interpretation of Eurydice as the human desires would have influenced the *Orfeo*-poet. Grimaldi and Doob both view Heurodis as accidentally sinful: as in the moralisations of Orpheus which we have seen, she represents "how

[37] "[I]n Sir Orfeo, romance conventions were responsible for the narrative line and numerous local details; a knowledge of the ethical tradition which saw Eurydice as prey for Satan helps to illuminate only one important aspect of the narrative" (Friedman. *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* 194-195)

easy it is to fall" (Doob 203). Orfeo's exile, then, becomes the Christian *viator's* rejection of worldly delights, his choice of "a life of pain on earth ... to avoid sudden damnation, so easily brought on in a moment of pleasure" (206).

The scene of Orfeo's abandonment of his kingship and his material wealth (except for his harp) has strong religious overtones. Orfeo casts off his all his clothing and puts on a "sclauin" (228)—a "pilgrim's mantle" (Bliss 70)—and he walks "barfot out atte ȝate / No man most wiþ hi*m* go" (232-233) in an act reminiscent of the monks' donning of their monastic garments before entering into isolation.[38] Doob notes how Orfeo's "wild" appearance during and after his exile, which is unkempt enough for the fairy king to try to deny him Heurodis and for his steward not to recognise him (*Sir Orfeo* 459-462, 505-515), is similar to medieval representations of the "suffering and ugly Christ ... unrecognisable by his sufferings for man" (194). The model of Christ as a suffering outcast was one model for early monastic asceticism and seclusion from the world and Doob is right to note the overtones of monasticism in the lai. Indeed, the association of Orpheus and monastic retreat is also made by Giovanni del Virgilio, a commentator on Ovid writing around 1325 (presumably the same time as the *Orfeo*-poet). He presents an interpretation of Orpheus which supports the reading of Orfeo as a pilgrim and a holy wild man who regains his spiritual goal through his self-exile. For Giovanni, Orpheus represents "the wisest and most eloquent of men" and Eurydice "profound judgement."[39] The loss of Eurydice to the serpent-devil who kills her makes Orpheus realise that he has "lost profound

[38] Habits were usually strictly regulated for monastics and the scapular, the mantle, was an important part of monk's clothing in monastic rules such as that of Benedict of Nursia ("Clothing").

[39] The interpretation of Eurydice as "profound judgement" has its roots in the works of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (c. 480-550). Fulgentius develops Orpheus as a poet-hero and turns the myth into an allegory of rhetoric by etymological explanations of the characters: he claims that the name "Orpheus" is derived from "*oraia phone*, 'that is, best voice' and Eurydice from *eur dike*, or 'profound judgement.'" (Friedman 89). Fulgentius thus turns the story into a representation of "the two aspects of music—the power of words to move the listener, and the more mythical harmony of tones," and since he, unlike Boethius, includes Virgil's Aristaeus he makes that character into "the best sort of men who pursu[e] the secrets of harmony" (Friedman 89).

truth" and he regains her after "humbly" worshipping God (122), only to lose her a second time because he breaks God's condition. This makes Giovanni's Orpheus finally give up "temptation" and devote himself to God: "reconciling himself to God [he] began to spurn women, giving his soul instead to God, and began to love men, that is, to act in a manly way, on which account he was dead to the delights of the world; for such men are dead to the world; and thus he truly has Eurydice back, that is, profound judgement" (Giovanni qtd. in Friedman 122-123). As Friedman notes, Giovanni here manages to solve the "thorny" (123) issue of Orpheus' homosexuality in Ovid's text (*Metamorphoses* 328) by interpreting his rejection of women and love of men as a kind of monastic community (Friedman 123) and his shunning of women as a "marriage to God" (124).

The patterns of alienation, pilgrimage, and exile are thus important narrative devices which link *Sir Orfeo* to models of spiritual allegory. However, a too strong focus on sin and repentance in the narrative can obscure the lai's primary spiritual concern, which is the idea of the unity of creation and the Boethian bond of love which ties the human and the divine realms together. Doob, Grimaldi, and others rightly focus on the *cause* for Orfeo's exile in the dangers of *temporalia*, but in the end I believe that the Orfeo-poet is more concerned with the *effects* of the exile than with its *cause*. While the pain of Orfeo and Heurodis is elaborately described, the happy ending of the lai is what ties all the strains of the narrative together and it is that ending which recalls the archaic Greek Orpheus myth and the continual tradition of positive interpretations of Orpheus. Rather than focusing on Heurodis as the reason for the discord in Orfeo's world, the lai establishes the fairy king as the source of this chaos, and Orfeo's defeat of the fairy realm brings back order as well as his love. Heurodis is thus given a positive interpretation in the lai—she is represented as a cause and a sign of the harmonious order of love,

rather than its downfall. As we have seen, love is the driving force for Orphic figures from Virgil onwards, but the mutual affection of the protagonists is more forcefully emphasised in *Sir Orfeo* and in the analogue "Villemann og Magnill" than in the other texts I examine here. Love in the lai and in the ballad is represented not as tragic and ultimately futile, as in Virgil, or as a cause of sin and distraction from the true spiritual reality, as in Boethius and the moralisers discussed above, but rather as a true force of good and a premise for harmony in the universe. Likewise, Orfeo's playing—a feature of the myth which is common to *all* the possible sources and analogues examined in this thesis—in *Sir Orfeo* as in "Villemann og Magnill" is represented as able to cause real and fruitful change and signifies spiritual harmony.

In the tradition from Virgil, Eurydice's disappearance causes the hero's actions, but as a character she remains elusive. Neither Virgil nor Ovid introduces Eurydice as anything other than Orpheus' bride. But Heurodis' role goes far beyond that of Virgil's "poor doomed girl" (140); the lai's short presentation of Heurodis is able to give the reader an impression, however perfunctory, of her social standing and of her worth as an individual. She is the wife of a king and a heroine of beauty and virtue:

> ... a quen of priis ...
>
> Þe fairest leuedi, for þe nones,
>
> Þat miȝt gon on bodi & bones,
>
> Ful of loue & of godenisse;
>
> Ac no man may telle hir fairnise. (51, 53-5)

By introducing Heurodis in this way, the author signals that her role in the lai will be more than just a trigger for the hero's actions. Indeed, she will be the key to the poem's resolution and to the restoration of the hero's standing in society. The *Orfeo*-poet's emphasis on her good

qualities, however formulaic and lacking in detail, prepares the reader for her crucial role in the poem.

Sir Orfeo's focus on Heurodis is partly due to its genre—medieval romances usually have a strong focus on women and on love. But as we have seen, the medieval reception of the Orpheus-myth was in general overwhelmingly interested in Eurydice's role, though usually not in a positive way. The *Orfeo*-poet's presentation of Heurodis is still more detailed than what most moralisations give her, likely because so many of them follow Ovid, who makes Eurydice even less of a character than Virgil does: where Virgil's Eurydice forcefully blames Orpheus for his "madness" (141) in looking back at her, Ovid only states that she "did not reproach her husband ... One final, faint "Farewell"— / so weak it scarcely reached his ears—was all / she said" (327). In *The Metamorphoses*, Eurydice as a character is almost eradicated—she is literally reduced and keeps that form in the medieval moralisations.

The choice of genre therefore enables the Orfeo-poet to develop Orfeo's and Heurodis' love as an expression of the bonds of love by which creation is held together. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury have noted the importance of marriage and marital love and loyalty for the Middle English Breton lais, as opposed to the illicit or adulterous love common in many romances and in the lais of Marie de France: "Because of [the lais'] shorter length they intensify and emphasize the importance of truth in love, both for its stabilizing influence on the family unit and its concomitant stabilization of a larger community" (5-6). This is certainly true of *Sir Orfeo*, in which the separation of the lovers has such wide-ranging social and personal consequences. Their mutual affection is demonstrated in the beautiful and moving dialogue between the two after Heurodis responds in horror to her dream of the fairy king, in which Heurodis' distressed and resigned "Bot euer ich haue y-loued þe / As mi liif, & so þou me / Ac now we mot delen

ato / — Do þi best, for y mot go" (123-6) is answered by Orfeo's attempt at reassurance: "Whider wiltow go, & to wham? / Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe / & whider y go þou schalt wiþ me" (129-30). H. Bergner suggests that Orfeo's response to Heurodis is a formula which originates both in medieval civil marriage vows and in Scripture, which makes Orfeo's words to Heurodis significant in ways both "secular and religious" (433). While the marriage vow in Canon Law was "accipio te," Bergner notes the many "profane" marriage vows which can be found in literary sources and which "were looked upon by many as being lawful ... [and] were ... deeply rooted in medieval judicial thinking" (433). A vow such as the Middle High German "Du bist min, ich bin din" [You are mine, I am yours] (433. My translation) is reflected in Orfeo's statement, which has a structure and concision similar to Bergner's examples from Medieval Latin and vernacular sources. Orfeo's vow "echoes these formulas of consent with their dialectical structure and the strictness with which the reciprocal duty of loyalty is emphasised ... reminding [Orfeo and Heurodis] of the marital obligations which they have irrevocably and mutually contracted" (434). If Bergner is right and the *Orfeo*-poet evokes the social contract of marriage, it makes the catastrophe of Heurodis' abduction even more devastating. It upsets a basic social relationship that not only ensures constancy between the spouses, but, as Laskaya and Salisbury note, has a stabilizing effect on the larger society. The fairy king's intrusion on Orfeo's marriage is effectively also a destruction of Orfeo's community, and the reunion of the spouses enables a renewed order and stability in Thrace/Winchester.

Again, the double structure of marriage and society is complemented by a third religious dimension. Orfeo's pledge to Heurodis reflects popular wedding vows, but also the promise given by Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:16, qtd. by Bergner from the Wycliffite Bible): "whider euere þou gost I schal gon / & wher þou abidest & I to gidere / schal abidyn".

Ruth's promise, though not actually a marital vow, came to "[play] a prominent part in the religious art of the Middle Ages whenever the depiction of matrimony, holy or secular, was concerned" (Bergner 434). Orfeo's statement is a good example of how the author is able to evoke multiple levels of meaning while maintaining a strong focus on his romance narrative: the vow at once suggests to the reader the worldly and romantic love between Orfeo and Heurodis, the importance of their union for the community and the "sacred bonds" (Bergner 432) by which the couple are joined not only to each other and to society, but to God.[40]

[40] The *Orfeo*-poet's association of the success of heterosexual marriage with the harmony of the universe completely ignores the part of the myth, well known from Ovid, in which Orpheus becomes homosexual after the loss of Eurydice. Segal writes that "[Orpheus'] rejection of heterosexual love and procreation cannot be traced back farther than the Hellenistic period. A homosexual Orpheus perhaps reflects a view of art as pure 'artifice,' defying the laws of natural reproduction. This relation between art and nature is what one would expect of the Hellenistic poets, with their stress on the importance and independence of art and their programmatic self-consciousness about artifice as an essential component of art" (9). There is, perhaps, an element of these ideas in *Sir Orfeo*: certainly, the poet uses the heterosexual marriage of Orfeo and Heurodis as an affirmation of the creative and harmonizing powers of Orfeo's music.

Conclusion

As I noted in my first chapter, the fairy otherworld of *Sir Orfeo* is set up as a dangerous but alluring parallel to Orfeo's own realm: a place which alternately entices people to enter it and threatens to intrude. Heurodis' decision to fall asleep under the grafted tree in her garden can be read, as we have seen, as her surrender to the lure of *temporalia* which the dazzling fairy world represents. In order to rectify the situation which Heurodis' disappearance has created in the universe of the lai, Orfeo must confront his adversary, the fairy king. It is significant that Orfeo succeeds in this confrontation not through the power of his material resources, but through his musical ability. Music is thus represented as a truly benign and creative force which is able not only to defeat the dazzling trickery of the fairy realm, but to restore accord in the lai's universe.

The harp, of course, is the key to *Sir Orfeo's* resolution because it ensures his entry into the court of Traciens as a minstrel (513-515). The court he enters is described as a place full of sounds: "Þer were trompuors & tabourers / Harpours fele, & crouders / Miche melody þai maked alle" (521-523). Orfeo listens to the musicians playing their various instruments and when they cease, he takes his harp, tunes it, and plays "[þ]e blissefullest notes ... Þat euer ani man y-herd wiþ ere" (527-528). His solitary performance makes the steward recognise him—more precisely, the steward recognises the wild-looking minstrel's *harp* as that of his long-lost and dearly missed king, Sir Orfeo. The reinstatement of Orfeo as king, like his earlier recovery of Heurodis from the fairy otherworld, is the result of his musical ability. His harping signals the renewed harmony of the court of Traciens. The return of the city's queen is also celebrated with music: "Þai brouȝt þe quen in-to þe toun / Wiþ al maner menstraci / Lord! Þer was grete melody!" (588-590) There is, I think, an implied contrast here between the court musicians

making "[m]iche melody" before Orfeo's performance and the "blissefull[e]" melody he plays alone. Orfeo's harping, like that of other Orpheus-figures I have examined, not only *pleases* because of its beauty, it also *orders*. The many melodies of the court are arranged in to one "grete melody" at his return, signalling the newfound order of the kingdom after the upheaval created by the fairy king's intrusion.

The poem presents Orfeo's harping here as a restoring and constructive force, like the Orpheus of ancient Greece so often employed by Neoplatonists and Christians as a symbol of a divine ordering force. I have suggested that *Sir Orfeo*'s plot demonstrates the interconnectedness of relationships in the universe (between spouses and citizens as well as between humans and God) and that the poet's interest in this theme has particular resonances with Christian-Neoplatonic thought. The harp, with its strings representing the diverse parts of the universe moving together in harmony, is a particularly resonant image in that tradition (as I have discussed in the second chapter of this thesis). The beginning of the lai has already described Orfeo as a wonderfully skilled harper: he has taught himself to play so that "þer no-þing was / A better harpour in no plas" (31-32), a description which concurs with the traditional reputation of Orpheus as a marvellous musician. But initially, Orfeo, like Villemann, does not attempt to use his ability against the forces which threaten himself, his spouse, and his kingdom. Only after he has exiled himself to the woods does Orfeo play his harp in a way which will ultimately pacify the court of the fairy king. Through his rustic exile, Orfeo discovers the force of his harp as an instrument which not only can pacify and civilise, but which most of all can *unite* diverse tunes into one greater and jubilantly harmonious song. In this way, Orfeo's roles as king, as lover, and as Christian *viator* (the roles which comprise what I have called the lai's triple structure) are united: they are united by his ability to recognise and exploit the spiritual harmony represented

by the harp. Finally, this idea of diversity in unity is also represented by the lai itself. The varied and divergent traditions and texts which *Sir Orfeo* is based on are merged in to one coherent whole. Like the final melody in Traciens, the *Orfeo*-poet's text is both pleasurable and ordered: "Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note!" (602)

Appendix:

"Villemann and Magnill"[41]

1. Villemann and his maid so fair
   played a game of golden pieces in her bower.
   —So delightfully Villemann played for his virgin so fair.

2. Whenever the golden dice turned around,
   a tear down Magnill's cheek ran.

3. "Cry you for fields, or cry you for meadows,
   or cry you because you sleep in my bed?

4. Cry you for gold, or cry you for land,
   or cry you because you sit at my hand?"

5. "I cry not for fields, I cry not for meadows,
   I cry not because I sleep in your bed.

6. I cry not for gold, I cry not for land,
   I cry not because I sit at your hand.

7. I cry for my skin so white,
   that it will not go in the darkest soil.[42]

8. I cry the most for my flaxen hair,
   that it must rot in Vendel's river.

9. I cry so much for Blide bridge.
   where sank to the bottom my sisters two."

10. "Magnill, Magnill, silence your woe:
    I'll build a bridge over Vendel's river.

11. I'll build the bridge so tall and so new,
    and place underneath it pillars of lead.

12. I'll build the bridge so strong and so tall
    and place underneath it pillars of steel.

13. And all my swains shall ride in a row –

[41] My translation is from the version given by Liestøl and Moe.
[42] In M. B. Landstad's version: "Eg græt fast meir for mit kvite hold ... ded ska 'ki moga rotne i vigde mold" (471), meaning "I cry more for my skin so white/ my shape so fair ... that it shall not rot in consecrated soil."

I'll be sure to watch you from the cold [streams]."[43]

14. "Oh you can build, if you like, to the skies:
no one from their destiny flies!

15. You may build with lead, you may build with steel:
no one from their destiny flies!"

II.

16. Villemann's men rode in a row,
twenty four before and twenty four after.

17. When they came to the middle of that tall bridge,
her horse reared in its red golden shoes.

18. The horse reared in its red golden seams,
and the virgin fell in the steady streams.

19. Noble Magnill reached out her white hand:
"Oh Villemann, Villemann! Help me ashore!"

20. Villemann spoke to his servant young:
"You'll get me my harp from its red golden case!"

21. The harp came out, so pleasant the sound—
presented to Villemann, sorely weeping.

22. Villemann went to stand by the stream,
masterfully he strikes the golden harp.

23. He played with cunning, he played with ease:
the bird swooned on its wild branch.

24. He played with ease, he played with [skill]:
the mountains resound, and it's heard in the sky.

25. Villemann played so long a tune:
made the bark tear from ore and oak.

26. He played till the branches fell from the trees,
he played the horns off the young cattle.[44]

[43] I have placed my suggestions for translations of words which are of uncertain meaning in the original in brackets.
[44] In M. B. Landstad's version, further effects of the playing are described: [he played] "kvíte bjönnen or hiðe" [the white bear from its den] and "bànið mátte or moðirs maga" [the child from its mothers womb] (475).

27. He played with anger and played with wrath,
he played Magnill from *nøkken's* arms.

28. "There have you the one, there have you the two,[45]
leave now my water still."

29. "Welcome the first, welcome the two!
but never shall you have your water still!"

30. Villemann played and the harp it shone,
nøkken he turned to hardened stone.

31. The first words which Magnill spoke:
"Blissful the mother of such a son!

32. Blissful the mother who owns such a son,
more blissful still is his wife to be!"
— So delightfully Villemann played for his virgin so fair.

[45] The referents here are Magnill's two sisters, who the water monster *nøkken* is forced to give up in addition to Magnill (Solberg 202).

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