

Orpheus as Interpretative Tool: Insular Orpheus Narratives Looking Back on the Mythic Tradition

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Separated by distances of geographical location, time, and language, the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* and the Middle Scots *Orpheus and Eurydice* by Robert Henryson are united in that they represent insular endeavors during the medieval period to relate the same Classical myth.¹ Yet when read alongside one another, an array of distinctions and dissimilarities are produced, ones which range from relatively minor differences in detail to major narrative divergences. The most significant of these is a fundamental altering of the story's conclusion. Toward the

¹ In comparison with Henryson who was writing in fifteenth-century Scotland, the oldest surviving manuscript to contain *Sir Orfeo*, the Auchinleck manuscript, is thought to have been compiled in the London area c. 1330. The other two (Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61) are from the fifteenth century but are reasoned to descend from an earlier exemplar, possibly one coeval with Auchinleck. See further Bliss ix–xxvii. In lieu of a specific focus on one particular manuscript context, in this article I deliberately consider the *Sir Orfeo* narrative in a more collective capacity.

end of *Sir Orfeo*, the tale famously breaks with convention; Dame Heurodis (Eurydice) is successfully rescued, and she returns with Orfeo in triumph to reclaim his kingdom. By contrast, Henryson's version is more in keeping with what is canonically familiar: "He blent bakwart and Pluto come annone / And onto hell with hir agane is gone" (ll. 392–393). Henryson's Orpheus loses Eurydice a second time as a result of his glance backward toward her.

My first goal will be to demonstrate the significance of this backward glance. Even when absent, it plays a meaningful role within the storyline and structure of different unfoldings of the myth. I will argue that it additionally functions as a useful interpretative tool, by means of which a central aspect of the overarching mythic and hermeneutic tradition surrounding the character of Orpheus can be understood. To do this, I will first consider the most influential Classical versions in order to explore the origins and developmental process of the myth. I will then proceed to argue that both Henryson's poem and *Sir Orfeo* ought to be read first and foremost as participants in the larger context of a perennial Orpheus mythic tradition, since approaching the texts from this perspective presents the reader with an opportunity to perceive key distinguishing features of their distinctive literary environments.

As already noted, *Sir Orfeo's* conclusion represents a major departure from the ending presented in the Classical Latin texts which describe Orpheus's journey to the underworld: Book IV of Virgil's *Georgics* and Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The figure and tale of Orpheus antedate those two particular works and have their origin in older Hellenic mythic traditions. The Latin poets' may in fact also be indebted to an Alexandrian intermediary version of the myth that is now lost (Friedman 7). Nevertheless, the *Georgics* and the *Metamorphoses* contain early written accounts of Orpheus's descent that were influential throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern period.² No less influential is the version contained in Book III, Metrum XII of Boethius's *Consolation of*

² The influence of these specific texts can also undoubtedly be felt in various notable modern reworkings, receptions, and responses to the myth, including among many others: Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), Ann Wroe's *Orpheus: The Song of Life* (2011), and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* comic series (1989–1996, 1999, 2013–2015).

Philosophy, a foundational dialectical text that was widely read throughout the Middle Ages. The *Consolation of Philosophy*'s extensive circulation is testified to by the fact that Alfredian Old English translation/adaption of the work survives, that Geoffrey Chaucer himself (c. 1340s–1400) drew upon and translated it, and that “Boece” is tellingly referenced by name in the *Moralitas* of Henryson’s poem (l. 415).

These Latin versions overwhelmingly came to shape later presentations and reception of the character and myth, and yet it is crucial not simply to lump the three texts together, even when unpacking later interpretations of the myth. Boethius (c. 477–524 CE) was writing significantly later than either Ovid (c. 43 BCE–17 CE) or Virgil (c. 70–19 BCE), and in a much different cultural setting. Fuller understanding of the evolution of the Orpheus figure—as inherited from the Hellenic tradition and developed within the Latin—adds nuance to one’s view of subsequent adaptations and sheds light on the critical significance of his backward glance.

In an attempt to reconstruct the figure of a so-called Greek ‘*ur*-Orpheus’ at the beginning of his seminal *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, John Friedman determines there to be eight significant aspects which serve to define the character and narrative: His Divine Parentage, His Role as an Argonaut, His Musical Charming of Nature, His Role as a Religious Figure, His Role as a Poet, His Journey to the Underworld, His Death at the Hands of the Thracian Women, and His Fate After Death (5–10). Among these changing, disappearing, and resurfacing elements, it is arguably the *katabasis*, or descent to the underworld, that came to be the most recognized aspect of the narrative.

The primacy that this motif acquired is all the more intriguing, because the search for a lost individual and descent to the realm of the dead is far from unique to the story of Orpheus. Variations on the *katabasis* mytheme can be encountered, for instance, in such disparate mythological contexts as Old Norse (Hermóðr/Baldr) and early Japanese (Izanagi/Izanami). Within the Roman context, comparisons can be made between the Orphic descent and that which is made by Virgil’s own Aeneas. Significant parallels can also be drawn to Lot’s flight from Sodom with his wife in Genesis 19, and to Christ’s Harrowing of Hell prior to

resurrection following his death. Indeed, the comparison of Orpheus with Christ is of particular significance to a consideration of versions of the myth produced during the Middle Ages.

Subsequent to and in resonance with Boethius's ethically "didactic use of the legend" (Friedman 90), the dominant medieval traditions of interpretative Christian moralization and allegorical approaches to Orpheus and Eurydice would develop and take shape amongst other comparable treatments of Classical stories. As Orpheus descends to the underworld to save Eurydice, so Christ can be understood as rescuing his metaphorical bride the Church, or the individual soul. Sharon Coolidge further summarizes, "Not only did Christian writers expound on its figural associations with David and Christ, but commentators on Ovid, Virgil, and Boethius interpreted the narrative as an allegory of man's spiritual pilgrimage in this world" (64).

It is noteworthy that Orpheus should come to be aligned with Christ—"the Good Shepherd who draws men to Himself by His melodious Word" (Coolidge 67)—and also with King David, a fellow musician. For, it is Orpheus's characteristic role as a poetic and musical artist figure that most distinguishes his *katabasis* from other mythic figures. As will be shown in greater depth below, an appreciation for this artistic capacity can helpfully inform one's understanding of both the Classical and the insular medieval versions considered here. His role as an artist, moreover, is what lends Orpheus's backward glance a unique significance, beginning from the version of the story found in Virgil's *Georgics*.

In a comparative assessment of Orpheus's backward glances in Virgil and Ovid, Shane Butler highlights retrospection as a central component of the artistic writing process, and he offers the perspective that Orpheus's glance "has acquired a tragic inevitability: Orpheus *must* look back, else this is not his story" (59). Butler's notion of poetic retrospection is valuable, and it helpfully points the way toward what I will outline as the metatextuality of the Orpheus myth. However, the view that Orpheus "*must* look back" demands qualification. Though not in the same manner as *Sir Orfeo*, accounts prior to Virgil's seem by and large to have ended happily with the successful restoration of the dead to life (Friedman 7–8;

Gale 333–334).

On line 491 of Book IV, Virgil’s Orpheus “*respexit* [looked back],” and the use of this Latin verb underscores a double intrusion. Virgil grafts the theme of looking back not only into the narrative of the *Georgics*, but also into the metanarrative of the larger Orpheus myth. Through reference to other contemporary examples, Monica Gale notes how “the crucial verb *respicio* can mean ‘look back in time’ as well as ‘look back in space’” (334). A further applied meaning is ‘look at’ in the sense of ‘cast one’s mind back upon’ and even ‘have regard for,’ and it is from such senses that the Modern English ‘respect’ and other etymologically related terms ultimately originate (Glare, s.v. *respicio*). Taken together, these interrelated meanings neatly embody the *respectus* of both Orpheus and Virgil. Virgil, not unlike his Orpheus, is compelled by the recycling of a well-known, inherited character to *look back* to the traditions on which he draws, both with a certain reverence and with an eye to adaptation.

Having raised the issue of artist as art subject and made the connection that the Orphic backward glance can be representative more generally of the poet’s orientation toward the past, one could argue that Orpheus’s backward glance signifies artistic acts of imitation, rewriting, and revision; or argue for the poet’s role as a preserver of past events; or even, as Gale suggests, read it as a warning against excessive idealization and ideological usage of the past—“The motif seems essentially to convey the idea that excessive attachment to the past is dangerous and sterile” (347; see also Butler). Yet Virgil is not engaged in a simple act of artistic imitation, grieving for some lost age of literary authority. Nor, however, is his mode entirely iconoclastic. Rather, he and the other poets I consider here are engaged in an altogether more complex and adaptive creative process.

Whereas early Greek versions had placed much more of an emphasis on Orpheus’s actions as an Argonaut, Virgil’s version—positioned as it is toward the conclusion of the *Georgics*—shifts the focus away from this more traditionally masculine sphere and onto the figure of Orpheus as a grieving lover (Friedman 8). Thus, while ‘facing backward’ and drawing inspiration from collectively shared memories if not also from some specific previous version(s) of the myth, Virgil subconsciously updated

while he consciously altered and reemphasized. As the narrative of the story transforms into a tragic love poem, elements unsurprisingly come to reflect contemporary cultural norms and expectations.

In an apt metaphor, writing about the Orpheus myth necessitates a poetic *backwards glance* to consider previous renderings, and at the same time an acknowledgment of a certain *loss*. As with other reworkings and reinterpretations of familiar characters or narratives, the use of Orpheus obliges the narrative and character to be adapted and re-appropriated to suit the different performative purposes of a new poet as well as changing aesthetics. Yet distinctively in the case of Orpheus, his role as artist figure helps to gesture at the ‘hand pulling the strings’; increased attention is drawn to the artistic processes on display and the framework of presentation itself. This significant dual precedent can be understood as a defining feature of the Orpheus metanarrative into the Middle Ages, and while perhaps even more readily apparent in relation to the insular medieval versions taken up here, it is worthwhile to take note of this same dual compulsion to reference and repurpose even within the major Latin versions that came after Virgil’s.

Although the interval of time between the *Georgics* and *Metamorphoses* is comparatively smaller, the purposeful reshaping of the Orpheus figure is nonetheless evident. Ovid’s Orpheus looks back on Eurydice not once but twice—first on line 56 of Book X where she is lost for the second time (“flexit amans oculos; et protinus illa relapsa est”), and then again on line 66 of Book XI (“Eurydicenque suam iam *tutus respicit* Orpheus” emphasis added). The second time he *looks back safely* in the present tense after the pair is reunited following Orpheus’s own death. Just as W. S. Anderson has identified that Virgil “relies on the familiar, and introduces his own special emphases,” Ovid too could have assumed and even played off of his audience’s familiarity with Virgil’s version, deftly creating a “new perception of the mythical figure, a new literary appropriation of the myth” (25–27). This notion is particularly significant to bring forward.

In a simple sense, it furthers the idea that to write the Orpheus story was to reflect upon and rework a Classical and well-known myth. More specifically, however, it emphasizes the reality that at least from Ovid’s

version onward, the reflection and reworking were not simply of an archetype but were in response to and intertextually in conversation with particular, renowned versions familiar to both poets and audiences, although presumably to varying degrees. That is to say, significant known texts themselves became bound up in the myth's reception. To write or tell a version of the Orpheus story increasingly became an overt interaction with an audience's 'horizon of expectations,' inviting comparison to Virgil, and then subsequently to both Virgil and Ovid, and so forth.³ As a result, it is the alterations and variations, whatever form they take, that distinguish and mark successive narrative versions, lending each its unique character. Where Virgil's Orpheus had been presented as a lamenting lover figure, Ovid's rendering dwells much less on grief, diminishes the role of Eurydice, and instead emphasizes the tension between Orpheus's twin functions as lover and artist (Anderson 48).

Another pivotal transformation is seen to have taken place centuries later when the Orpheus story was reflected on and repurposed to entirely different ends by Boethius. The need to look back and the subsequent compulsion to reshape, however, remain consistent, and both activities are informed by Boethius's writing from within a distinct cultural environment. Boethius was alive more than four hundred years after Ovid, and he was writing at a time when the Western Roman Empire was still very much in the process of conversion to Christianity. As Noel Kaylor explains in the introduction to *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, despite edicts formally halting and prohibiting previous pagan practices, there still existed the inclination toward study and value of the established Greek and Roman art and literature traditions

³ 'Horizon of expectations' or '*Erwartungshorizont*' in the sense advanced by the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss: "The shared 'mental set' or framework within which those of a particular generation in a culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text or an artwork. This includes textual knowledge of conventions and expectations (e.g. regarding genre and style), and social knowledge (e.g. of moral codes)" (Chandler and Munday, s.v. horizon of expectations). See first Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (The Harvester Press, 1982).

amongst the educated classes, suggesting that while Boethius was “at least culturally a Christian [...] he seems also to have been intellectually a Classical humanist” (15).

It is altogether unsurprising, therefore, that in the hands of an individual who participatively transcends theoretically dichotomous traditions, the *Consolation of Philosophy*'s account of the Orpheus story should itself display a profoundly dual nature. While Boethius does act as a narrator of the tale, his primary role is as an interpreter of the story. Orpheus functions as both character and key moral exemplum, and Boethius adopts a “more moralistic approach, concerned chiefly with spiritual progress” (Friedman 90).⁴ Moreover, the narrative component upon which Boethius's moral hinges is in fact the backward glance itself. Lines 49–54 read:

Heu, noctis prope terminos
Orpheus Eurydicen suam
Vidit, perdidit, occidit.
Vos haec fabula *respicit*
Quicumque in superum diem
Mentem ducere quaeritis.

Alas, near the boundaries of night
Orpheus his Eurydice
Saw, lost, fell.
This tale *looks back* on you,
Whosoever unto the day above
Seeks to guide the mind.⁵

Boethius proceeds to offer several more lines of ethical explication, but it is this pivotal point which offers the greatest insight. Orpheus was undone when he looked at and lost Eurydice, but in Boethius's telling it is also the *tale itself* (“haec fabula”) which *looks back* (“respicit”) on the

⁴ Friedman also considers the alternative allegorical approach of Fulgentius (c. late fifth-early sixth century), which was “more concerned with music or rhetoric” and “contained many of the features which secular poetry was to give to the Orpheus myth in the twelfth and later centuries” (90).

⁵ This effectively literal, if also stilted, translation is intended only as an aid to comprehension. It and the added emphases are my own.

audience, once more employing the same crucial verb ‘respicio’ in the present rather than the past.

The trend is again towards first a looking back upon previous versions of the myth, and then a recycling and adaptation to suit new purposes. The significant shift in time period also presents a first important instance in which the cultural and linguistic ‘border-crossing’ of the Orpheus myth can be observed to function as a sort of litmus test for the literary environment in which a specific version was created. Boethius’s measured repurposing of Orpheus toward reconciliatory interpretative ends illustratively encapsulates central aspects of his influences and period of production. Writing while imprisoned during times of political upheaval as well as discord between preceding traditions and developing forms of Christianity with conflicting theological interpretations, Boethius’s Orpheus is no longer entirely the figure from Classical myth, nor is he fully the stand-in he would become in certain medieval allegory.

To leap forward from this point and discuss the roles of *Sir Orfeo* and Henryson’s Orpheus within this tradition unfortunately means passing by numerous significant versions, translations, and moralizations of the myth without in-depth consideration. Nevertheless, the essential principles evinced in relation to the myth’s roots hold true for its later offshoots: 1) use of the recognizable character and narrative effectively necessitates a *look backwards* of sorts, and 2) a rewriting of the artistic mythic figure encourages differences to enter the story which can prove indicative of altered literary emphases and altered cultural environments.

The Middle English *Sir Orfeo* defies easy categorization, and an unhelpful trend in much of the scholarship surrounding the work has been toward emphasizing its relationship to a single, particular context. As Jeff Rider highlights:

In the case of *Sir Orfeo*, for example, some critics have thought that the poem is best read in a Christian context and explain it in terms of Christian history and doctrine. Other critics prefer to read the poem in a Celtic context and decode it using Celtic mythology. Yet others read the poem in historical, philosophical or poetic contexts. (344)

The interpretative context of Christian allegory has already been raised

above, and correspondences between *Sir Orfeo*, Celtic story, and the Irish *The Wooing of Étain* specifically have long been suggested and debated (Bliss liii; Kittredge). One can even add further instances of different critical contexts and cultural influences, such as Dominique Battles's identification of lingering Old English literary conventions, making reference to adjustments within and the potential influence of *The Old English Boethius* (181; see also Severs).

While the correlations that are discerned and the conclusions produced from such scholarly interpretations are nonetheless informative, I would promote a degree of hesitation in terms of argumentative approach and critical agenda. Additionally, in response to Rider's challenge that, "To claim that a poem receives its best meaning—or its true meaning—when it is read in a particular context is at some level an attempt to annex or capture that poem for that context" (344), I would suggest that emphasizing one specific context to the effective exclusion of all others belies the very essence of *Sir Orfeo* and misrepresents the internal understanding and presentation the poem offers of itself.

Leading into the narrative proper, the opening lines of the poem also serve a nearly *paratextual* function of categorization, locating and identifying the text for the audience. As edited by Bliss from the Auchinleck manuscript:

We redeþ oft & findeþ [y-write,]
 & þis clerkes wele it wite
 Layes þat ben in harping
 Ben y-founde of ferli þing:
 Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,
 & sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,
 & sum of terecherie & of gile,
 Of old auentours þat fel while,
 & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,
 & mani þer beþ of fairy;
 Of al þinges þat men sep
 Mest of loue, for-soþe, þai beþ.
 ¶ In Breyne þis layes were wrouzt,
 [First y-founde & forþ y-brouzt,
 Of auentours þat fel bi dayes,

Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.]
 When kinges miȝt our y-here
 Of ani meruailes þat þer were,
 Pai token an harp in gle & game
 & maked a lay & ȝaf it name.
 Now, of þis auentours þat were y-falle
 Y can tel sum, ac nouȝt alle:
 Ac herkneþ, lordinges [þat bep trewe,]
 Ichil ȝou telle [Sir Orfewe.
 (ll. 1–24)

This introductory passage accomplishes several things. First and foremost, it draws the audience’s attention to the artistic process of the tale’s unfolding, and it descriptively pinpoints itself as emerging from the Breton Lai tradition.⁶ This is not exclusionary, however. At the same time, by making use of the proper name and figure of Orpheus, *Sir Orfeo* unambiguously places itself within the larger Orpheus mythic tradition as well. In so doing, the tale begins also to play with expectations by tapping into and perhaps borrowing a degree of associative literary ‘*auctoritas*’ from the named Latin ‘*auctores*’ considered above.⁷

Shortly thereafter, the localizing identification continues:

Orfeo was a kinge,
 In Jngold an heize lording,
 A stalworþ man & hardi bo;
 Large & curteys he was al-so.
 His fader was comen of King Pluto,
 & his moder of King Juno,
 Pat sum-time were as godes y-hold

⁶ For a discussion of source material and a possible lost Old French or Anglo-Norman Orpheus Lai, see first Bliss xxvii–xli.

⁷ These Latin terms are borrowed from Alastair Minnis’s *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* and are employed here deliberately rather than ‘authority’ and ‘authors’ in acknowledgment of the discordance between different eras’ notions of authorship. It is beyond the scope of this article to comment extensively on these historical distinctions, but it will suffice to say that forms of deferral to historical authority were not uncommon, and that the grounds for what constituted ‘authority’ depended not solely on ‘authorial’ factors in the modern sense, but also on factors such as theological or spiritual ‘authenticity,’ etc. As per Minnis’s definition, an ‘auctor’ was both a writer and an authority, “someone not merely to be read but to be respected and believed” (75–76).

For aentours þat pai dede & told.
 Pis king sojurned in Traciens,
 Pat was a cité of noble defens
 (For Winchester was cleped þo
 Traciens, wiþ-outen no.)
 (ll. 39–50)

Orfeo is connected to Greco-Roman deities, though not the figures from whom he was traditionally thought to have descended in Antiquity. He is also presented as a king in England, with Thrace identified as Winchester. It hardly seems necessary, therefore, nor is even appropriate to understand *Sir Orfeo* as participant in a single context or tradition, since the text itself does not do so.

This perspective functions as the most expedient point of entry not only to the poem itself, but also to the criticism addressing *Sir Orfeo*'s connection to various interpretative contexts. For, it allows observations that have been made to work in conjunction rather than in competition. *Sir Orfeo* should not be read as a distortion or deviation from any one particular context, as it cannot justifiably be affiliated with one in a unilateral fashion. The *Sir Orfeo* poet's backward glance does include Classical Greek and Latin elements and the versions already touched upon, but there is a captivating 'blended-ness' to the poet's reflection.

Far from changes representing an ignorance of source material, Rider notes how the *Sir Orfeo* poet seems in fact rather "well-versed" in the greater Orpheus mythic and allegorical tradition: "the poet is clearly writing against the tradition of reductive Christian moralization represented by [*Ovide moralisé* (1291–1328) and Bersuire's *Reductorium morale* (1325–1337)]," two significant works that are roughly contemporary with *Sir Orfeo* (Rider 355). Despite noteworthy narrative wanderings such as the disappearance of Classical figures from the tale's Otherworld, the distortion of Orfeo's divine lineage, and the relocation of the tale to English soil, the *Sir Orfeo* poet nevertheless has still performed the obligatory backward glance toward the earlier mythic tradition, as well as sideways glances to alternative tellings and contexts. The resultant text might very well be called something of an 'accumulated' work.

Not unlike the versions considered above, there is also a noticeable shift in focus displayed. The motifs of Orpheus as lover figure and even Orpheus as allegorical figure are downplayed to such an extent that, as Patrizia Grimaldi notes, Orpheus's role is almost entirely recast as a prototypical medieval Romance figure and much of the poem's "significance lies in [the] trials undergone by Orfeo" (148). Adjusted emphases can, moreover, be seen to play out with respect to the centrally important backwards glance.

At the precise point in the narrative where one expects the glance and second loss of the Heurodis, the text provides exceedingly little in terms of descriptive detail. Following the fairy king's acquiescence, lines 471–476 offer simply:

He kneled adoun & þonked *him* swiþe.
 His wiif he tok bi þe hond
 & dede *him* swiþe out of þat lond,
 & went *him* out of þat þede;
 Riȝt as he come þe wey he zede.

The terseness here makes the omission all the more palpable for one expecting another loss. A. M. Kinghorn describes the sensation thus, "[b]y his very lack of description and economy of information [at this juncture] the Middle English poet manages to 'touch the heart' and at the same time completely alters the emphasis of the traditional story" (367), with the result being a deliberate foregrounding of relief from built up apprehension. David Lyle Jeffrey similarly disagrees with the notion that the *Sir Orfeo* poet simply opted for a happy ending and suggests that "the second death of Eurydice has been so artfully anticipated that it is effectively 'there,' as well as not there, in the structure of the poem" (60). Brought together, the cases made by Kinghorn and Jeffrey support the interpretation that the poem calculates an audience's anticipation of the second death and effectively holds previous versions in expectational suspension with the current story.

In addition to their observations, I would additionally raise one other possible instance of intertextual playfulness that is apparent in the poem and relates to Orpheus's glance at Eurydice. While Orfeo does not lose Heurodis through a backward glance after her successful rescue from the

Otherworld, he does gaze upon her during a key pivotal moment that takes place earlier. After Heurodis first encounters and is taken by the king of the Otherworld while asleep, she awakens in great distress and is brought to her bed. It is there that Orfeo “bi-held” (l. 101) the queen, and on lines 105–112 he provides a lengthy and intensely visual description of her physical form:

Pi bodi, þat was so white y-core,
 Wip þine nailes is al to-tore.
 Allas! þi rode, þat was so red,
 Is al wan, as þou were ded;
 & al-so þine fingres smale
 Beþ al blodi & al pale.
 Allas! þi louesome eyzen to
 Lokep so man doþ on his fo!⁸

Following this, Heurodis relates her plight, and then despite Orfeo’s martial efforts, she is again taken away. A case might even be made that *this* is in fact Heurodis’s second abduction, and that the anticipated abduction that does not take place following Orfeo’s Otherworld performance would actually be the third.

Whether intentional on the part of the poet(s) or not, this instance provides a suggestive counterpoint to the Latin versions, and to Ovid’s two glances in particular, especially when considered alongside the other departures and idiosyncrasies of the text already noted. In resonance with the text’s Middle English literary environment—which if not precisely a cultural ‘melting pot’ was at least a fascinating ‘mixing bowl’—the accumulation of variations witnessed in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* produce an intrinsically blended character and setting. They also result in a complex, referentially destabilized, and perhaps deliberately disorienting textual presentation. Orfeo both *is* and *is not* the Classical Orpheus, just as he both *does* and *does not* look upon Eurydice and lose her again.

Situated closer to the end of the fifteenth century, Robert Henryson’s

⁸ N.b. while the enticing “bi-held” only appears in Auchinleck and not in Harley 3810 or Ashmole 61, there are nonetheless comparable visualizations of Heurodis reported by and focalized through Orfeo.

Orpheus and Eurydice both echoes *Sir Orfeo* and provides contrast to it in many regards. On the surface, Henryson's version appears to be both more 'Classical' than *Sir Orfeo* and to offer a straightforward allegorical interpretation in the form of its closing *Moralitas*. Upon closer inspection, however, it reveals a distinct artistic agenda and expression of blended influences. Rhiannon Purdie contends that "it seems not unlikely that Henryson did, after all, allow the ghost of the very different romance tradition of Orfeo/Orphius to flit through his classical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, and that ghost can be most convincingly identified with *King Orphius*" (33).

King Orphius, an early Scots Romance which survives only fragmentarily in NRS MS RH 13/35 (sixteenth century) and transcriptions by David Laing (1793–1878), is particularly worth pausing over in this comparative context. First, it bears mentioning that the surviving versions display "near-identical narratives but scarcely a shared line," a feature which Purdie suggests is "best explained by the continuous minor re-composition that is a feature of oral transmission" (26). Equally noteworthy is the fact that *King Orphius* contains narrative departures that are highly reminiscent of those seen in *Sir Orfeo*, and while the two exhibit significant differences, it is ultimately Purdie's view that the *King Orphius* poet likely knew a lost version that also preceded the versions of *Sir Orfeo* which survive (23–27). From there, connections can additionally be drawn to Henryson's *Orpheus* and *Eurydice*. Indeed, the element of Henryson's Orpheus being told about the first loss of Eurydice by a maid does not find its corollary in the Classical texts nor even in *Sir Orfeo*, but in *King Orphius* (Purdie 31–33).

It is particularly important to bring forward these observations about probable influence from the Romance Orpheus because of the manner in which Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* interacts with and displays its Classical influences. The poem's seemingly fastidious presentation in this regard is such that individual elements can be isolated and, as it were, sourced. Whereas *Sir Orfeo* identified and positioned itself within a more blended general context, Henryson dispels any possible doubt concerning source material for his poem by referencing two writers by name at the beginning of the poem's concluding *Moralitas*. On lines 415–424,

Henryson ‘cites’ Boethius and the *Consolation of Philosophy*, as well as the commentary on it produced by the English Dominican friar Nicholas Trivet (c. 1258–1328) as part of his conscientious backward glance.

The poem and Henryson’s broader oeuvre also bear a relationship to the works of Chaucer, who himself was influenced by Trivet’s commentary. Regarding the figure of Orpheus specifically, Chaucer’s use of the figure is limited and somewhat tangential. Chaucer’s *Boece* translation naturally includes the relevant metrum. *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Merchant’s Tale* contain passing references to Orpheus as the archetypal musician.⁹ *Troilus and Criseyde* references the reunion of Orpheus and Eurydice after death depicted also in Ovid: “That highte Elisos, shal we been yfeere, / As Orpheus and Erudice, his feere” (IV, ll. 790–791). In addition to these minor instances, Phillipa Hardman further identifies how *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight’s Tale* both allude to Boethian passages on love, and Hardman argues that they indirectly recall the story of Orpheus: “Chaucer seems to have seen and used in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice a narrative type of tragic love, and through this, perhaps, a more universal pattern of human tragedy” (554).

If Chaucer’s Orpheus is tied to a “more universal pattern of human tragedy,” then Henryson’s reflective engagement with the figure and metatextuality of Orpheus is even more multidimensional. The juggling of narrative, referential, and allegorical influences produces an altogether distinct presentation. While the *Moralitas* in Henryson’s poem does closely follow Trivet’s commentary, Henryson’s version can hardly be called pure historicization or a flat allegorical presentation. Quite to the contrary, the role of the musician and artist figure is painstakingly foregrounded by descriptions of Orpheus’s playing and by a particular passage on lines 226–243:

Thair leirit he tonis proportionat
As duplare, triplare, and emetricus,

⁹ “Ne Orpheus, god of melodye” *The Book of the Duchess*, l. 569; “Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe / That sowned bothe wel and sharpe / Orpheus ful craftely” *The House of Fame*, ll. 1201–1203; “Biforn hem stooede instrumentz of swich soun / That Orpheus, ne of Thebes Amphioun, / Ne maden nevere swich a melodye” *The Merchant’s Tale*, ll. 1715–1717.

Emolius and eik the quadruplait,
 Epogdeus rycht hard and curius.
 Of all thir sex sweit and delicious,
 Rycht consonant, fyfe hevinly symphonys
 Componyt ar, as clerkis can devyse.
 First diatasserone full sweit iwis
 And dyapasone semple and dowplait
 And dyapente componyt with the dys,
 Thir makis fyfe of thre multiplicat.
 This mirry musik and mellefluat
 Compleit and full of nummeris od and evin
 Is causit be the moving of the hevin.
 Of sik musik to wryt I do bot doit,
 Thairfoir of this mater a stray I lay
 For in my lyfe I cowth nevir sing a noit,

Here, Henryson elucidates musical theory, employs complex terminology, and then coyly disavows any musical ability. Beyond characterizing Orpheus, it also backhandedly draws attention to Henryson's own artistry.

Orpheus, moreover, is rendered as a psychologically complex and emotionally rich figure, one who is enraged ("inflammit all in yre" l. 120) and tearfully overwrought with grief by the loss of Eurydice ("Thair wes na solace mycht his sobbing ses / Bot cryit ay with cairis cauld and kene" ll. 151–152). John Marlin writes that "unlike many of his predecessors, [Henryson] sensitively amplifies the humanity and pathos of Orpheus's plight"; so much so that it results in "[d]issonance between tale and allegory" (137–138). The humanizing characterization seems to clash with or impinge upon the didactic utility of the *Moralitas*. Marlin's ultimate view is that the *Moralitas* exhibits features of irony as it itself "is colored by the concerns of a subjective narrator" (148), and he is not alone in perceiving a dissonance. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis too observes that "Henryson's allegory is so elaborate that his moral is not very powerful, and the fact that he separates it from the body of his poem has made critics feel it is gratuitously tacked on" (654).

Tellingly, both commentators further proceed to propose a connection between this dissonance and the shifting intellectual landscape of Henryson's period. On one hand, Marlin suggests generally that,

“[p]erhaps here Henryson reflects the anxieties of his own age, a period of intellectual turmoil, wherein long-standing scientific, political, and religious certainties were in question, and wherein faith in an overarching intellectual order that dissolved all contradictions had long been on the wane” (149). On the other hand, Gros Louis points to the “changing attitude towards allegory, the increasing interest in the classical as distinct from the mediaeval” (649), and gradually changing attitudes toward the moralization of mythology, which “without the strong clerical force that was behind it in the Middle Ages, becomes a kind of Renaissance parlor game” (655). Gros Louis further characterizes Henryson’s poem and writes that it “combines the two traditions of Orpheus in medieval literature with prevailing attitudes and trends, and with Henryson’s own interests, is old, yet unique; new, yet traditional” (654–655).

The dissonance is best encapsulated by the presentations of the backward glance first in the tale and then in the *Moralitas*.

Thus Orpheus, with inwart lufe repleit,
 So blindit was with grit effectioun,
 Pensyfe in hart apone his lady sweit,
 Remembrit nocht his hard conditioun.
 Quhat will ye moir, in schort conclusioun,
 He blent bakwart and Pluto come annone
 And onto hell with hir agane is gone.
 Allace it was grete hartsare for to heir
 Of Orpheus the weping and the wo
 How his lady that he had bocht so deir
 Bot for a luk so sone wes tane him fro.
 (ll. 387–397)

Bot ilk man suld be wyse and warly se
 That he bakwart cast nocht his myndis e
 Gifand consent and delectatioun
 Of fleschly lust for the affectioun,
 For thane gois bakwart to the syn agane,
 Our appetyte as it befoir was, slane
 In wardly lust and vane prosperite,
 And makis ressoun wedow for to be.
 (ll. 620–627)

The moral interpretation of the backward glance is distanced from its narrative rendering by more than two hundred lines of verse, and even prior to the beginning of the *Moralitas* on line 415 Orpheus is afforded a dozen lines of closing lament, all of which diminish or at least alter its impact (Gros Louis 653). Even before he is stricken with grief, the Orpheus of the tale seems emotionally driven at the juncture of the backwards glance in a way that calls into question his identification as “ressoun” (l. 627) or “the pairte intellective / Of manis saule and undirstanding” (ll. 428–429) in the *Moralitas*. No less intriguingly, the action of the backwards glance itself seems to be in counterpoint. Where the *Moralitas* gives warning against an active casting back of the mind’s eye (“he bakwart cast nocht his myndis e”), the tale presents not an intentional choice but an altogether more passive occurrence. Thinking of Eurydice, Orpheus “Remembrit nocht his hard conditioun.” The artist-lover simply forgets.

Again, the adjusted presentation sheds light on the individual version’s surrounding literary atmosphere and time period. Henryson’s Orpheus is defined as the capital-A Artist and recast as psychologically complex in his humanizing characterization. These aspects, coupled with the treatment of allegory and Classical sources, seem indicatively appropriate. Henryson’s lifetime straddles the conventional dividing lines of the Medieval and Early Modern, just as his work destabilizes the very legitimacy of such hard and fast periodization. As Friedman comments, “Henryson is among the last of the truly medieval English writers,” and “[a]lthough his death date brings him well into the period of the English Renaissance, his literary technique, subject matter, and didactic bent mark him as a man with his face to the past” (195). Like the other poets and works considered here, Henryson as an artist faces to the past, and the complex anatomy of his Orpheus speaks to its period, not in terms of *either/or* but in terms of *both/and*.

Taken together, all of the examples raised have repeatedly demonstrated that a fuller understanding of the Orpheus myth’s development helps both to clarify and meaningfully contextualize divergences witnessed in individual accounts of the narrative. There is critical value in appreciating a poet’s backward glance toward the myth’s

continuity. It is not my intention, however, solely to assert the importance of continuity at the cost of disregarding or downplaying other possible connections, such as those between *Sir Orfeo* and Romance or Celtic traditions, or between the writing of Henryson and Chaucer, etc. As indeed, I have also presented the perspective that discrepancies can be productively viewed as particular treatments from within a broader intertextual tradition. The different Orpheus narratives' varied emphases and strategies themselves prove to be revealing in terms of a specific text's environment of production.

Bound up in associative significance and yet at the same time highly malleable, the figure of Orpheus has recurringly been a character onto which dissimilar artists can project. Poets and performers retelling the tale must, in a sense, become their own subject. A *revival* of the character for their audience by varied means of modification, adaptation, and intertextual interaction compels artists also to *look back* in order to retrieve the narrative from an extensive mythic tradition.

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