## THE WONDER TALE PATTERN OF *SIR ORFEO*

The medieval English lay of *Sir Orfeo* has a long and complex history linking it to sources and antecedents in various cultures: the Hellenistic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, its interpretation by Boethius, King Alfred's Old English translation of Boethius, the influence of Gaelic and Welsh legend, and Anglo-Norman romance narrative. Ultimately, it is the origin of the popular ballad of "King Orfeo" recorded in the Shetlands in the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. The ballad is probably a far derivation of some unknown version of *Sir Orfeo* or of the Scottish *King Orphius*, through a long process of oral transmission, and its existence is a witness to the grip and durability of the medieval lay in the mind of traditional tellers and singers. In spite of such a variety of sources, and of the fact that *Sir Orfeo* is surely the most sophisticated rendering of the myth before Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Erudices*, the story pattern of the lay is quite simple, and coincides to some extent with variants of the Orphic myth found among primitive peoples, and with widespread folktales about the hero's journey to the otherworld in quest of his beloved.[1] Most tellingly, it fits the morphology that Vladimir Propp established from a selection of one hundred Russian wonder tales.[2] It

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[1] See Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les Techniques Archaiques d1Extase* (Paris: 1957), pp. 195, 219, 281, 331, 351-352. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (1946; rpt. Berkely and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 265, 351.

[2] I have used the Spanish edition: Vladimir Propp, *Morfología del Cuento*, trans. from French by F. Díez del Corral (Madrid: Akal, 1985). The best English translation from Russian is: V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968). Following Aarne and Thompson's general classification of the types of folktales (see Thompson, op. cit., pp. 481-487), I have

is my purpose to apply a Proppian analysis to *Sir Orfeo*, so as to show both how the poem conforms to a folktale pattern, and how the pattern itself foregrounds and and clarifies many of its shades of meaning.

Needless to say, Propp's extremely influential kind of analysis has been criticized and thoroughly revised many times since it first appeared, well over sixty years ago. It had its heyday when scholars like Greimas and Todorov[1] transformed it to apply not just to wonder tales, but to all tales and even to narrative in general, and it has been apparently set aside from the critical mainstream with the disuse of structuralist poetics. Yet Propp's morphology is still found useful as it was originally conceived, regardless of the structuralist method that succeeded it. An interesting instance of compliance with Propp's original design is the way David Buchan has applied it to Child's supernatural ballads,[2] which proves that the morphology of the Russian scholar may still be tenable for tales which seem directly based on an oral tradition, such as the lays and the ballads.

Buchan's classification focuses on the action of characters, defining tale-role as "the interactive function served by a character in a narrative",[3] which is not far departed from Propp's approach and his definition of character

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decided to adopt the term "wonder tale" instead of "folktale" for the tales that the Russian call *skazka*. "Folktale", being too ample a term, would include animal tales and popular types of jokes and anecdotes that do not fit as easily into Propp's pattern, while "fairy tale" would be too narrow. Propp's *skazka* correspond more closely to what Aarne and Thompson's index classifies as "ordinary folktales", but this term is, in my opinion, rather imprecise.

1 Algirdas J. Greimas, *Sémantique Structurale* (París: Larousse, 1966). Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

2 David Buchan, "Talerole analysis and Child's supernatural ballads", *The Ballad and Oral Literature* (Harvard English Studies, 17), ed. J. Harris (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 60-77.

3 Buchan, op. cit., p. 62.

function from the point of view of its meaning in the development of plot. From a basic distinction of three taleroles, namely those of the Bespeller (who casts a magic spell), the Bespelled (who undergoes it) and Unspeller (who lifts it), Buchan establishes six "minigenres" of supernatural ballads, and then some subgroups. Thus the ballad of "King Orfeo" is a "type" of the minigenre called "Otherworld Being", and it is included in the first of its two subgroups, that of the land-based Otherworld Being who abducts a mortal to the otherworld from where he or she is, after a time, liberated (when it is water-based, its contact with the mortal ends with the death of one or the other). Finally, Buchan makes a general comment on folk literature, and especially the supernatural ballads, that we shall also find relevant to the lay of *Sir Orfeo:* "they exemplify (…) the methods by which a traditional community passes on its practical human wisdom, educates its members, and tries to mantain the mental balance of individuals and consequently the psychological equilibrium of the group".[1] It is easy to perceive just this struggle for mental balance in Sir Orfeo's sojourn in the wilderness, although this and the other nuanced episodes of the lay are totally lost in the ballad, with its reduction of the narrative to essentials. Buchan's overall classification accounts safisfactorily for the ballad; but for the lay, we should turn to a fuller pursuit of Propp's plan applied to *Sir Orfeo*, supplementing it with the main specific information and scholarship about the poem, so as to effect a comprehensive new reading on these grounds.

Variants of *Sir Orfeo* survive in three manuscripts, of which the Auchinleck MS., dated about 1330, is accepted as more reliable than the fifteenth century MSS. Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61, which may have been based on

[1] Ibid., p. 76.

some lost intermediate versions.[1] The question of sources for the Auchinleck version has been the object of a debate whose main topics are the allusions to a *lai d'Orphey* made in French and Anglo-Norman romances of the twelth and thirteenth centuries,[2] and Kittredge's rooting of the story of fairy abduction in the ninth-century Irish tale *Tormarc Etaine*,[3] a Gaelic connection that has roused eager research for other Celtic analogues of, and elements within, the lay.[4] Our present study aims at no direct contribution to this debate on sources, but assumes it as evidence of the complex process of transmission, probably of an oral nature mostly, along which the lay must have absorbed the sort of folk pattern that we are going to explore. The existence of many of the elements of this traditional pattern make *Sir Orfeo* differ radically from the Boethian, Ovidian, and Virgilian accounts of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice that were far more widespread in medieval written culture.

The only part of *Sir Orfeo* that has little bearing on the present analysis is the general prologue to the lay (lines 1-21) that precedes it in some editions, being a sort of editorial introduction that belongs to a written culture rather than to one based upon oral performance, like Propp's wonder tales or the ballads. It was presumably included in a missing folio at the beginning of the

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1 For the question of manuscripts, see *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A.J. Bliss (1954; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. ix-xv. This is still the standard edition of the work, and the one I am using for the present study.

2 In the romance of *Florence et Blancheflor*, the *Lai de l'Epine* and the *Prose Lancelot.* See Bliss, op. cit., pp. xxxi-xxxii.

3 Cf. G.L. Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", *American Journal of Philology*, VII (1886), pp. 176-202.

4 The other most important contributions are R.S. Loomis, "Sir Orfeo and Walter Map's *De Nugis*", *Modern Language Notes*, li (1936), pp. 28-30, and C. Davis, "Notes on the Sources of *Sir Orfeo*", *Modern Language Review*, XXXI (1936), pp. 354-357. For a full and more recent account of the state of the question see Burke J. Severs, "The Antecedents of Sir Orfeo", *Studies in Medieval English Literature in Honour of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: Univeristy of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), pp. 187-207.

Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*, but it is extant in the *Lay Le Freine* of the same MS. and in the other two MSS. of *Sir Orfeo*.[1] It tells us that lays were sung by the old Breton kings about marvels they heard, and then written down: "We redep oft and findep ywrite,/ And pis clerks wele it wite,/ Layes pat ben in harping/ Ben yfounde of ferli ping…" (1-4). Then it lists a number of subjects that the lays deal with, among which the "ferli ping" is the most outstanding: "And mani per bep of fairy" (10). Thus while providing general but valuable information about the lays, which Chaucer may indeed have used for *The Franklin's Tale* as Laura H. Loomis suggested,[2] the prologue plays no narrative role, and the tale itself begins, significantly, with an oral formula, "Ac herknep, lordinges…" (23), in sharp contrast with the previous "redep… ywrite" (1). The part that begins thus is precisely what corresponds to the first of Propp's functions.

Before proceeding to present our analysis under epigraphs taken from Propp's morphology, it should be remarked that he studied the wonder tale from the point of view of character, and defined this tale as a narrative development starting with a damage or lack suffered by the hero, going through a fixed sequence of intermediate character functions, and ending in a dénouement which typically leads to a wedding. What matters is the sequence, not the presence of all the functions in a single tale, which is extremely unusual. Therefore we are just going to comment on those functions that may be found in the poem, as well as those that play a significant role through their very absence. The Roman numerals mark the sequential order, and only the Presentation has no number in the sequence, because it is purely descriptive and devoid of narrative action. The main functions are called by letters of the

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[1] The relationship between the prologues of these two lays was established by Gabrielle Guillaume, "The Prologues of The Lay *Le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*", *Modern Language Notes*, XXXVI (1921), pp. 458-464.

[2] Cf. Laura H. Loomis, "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript", *Studies in Philology*, XXXVIII (1941), pp. 14-33.

Latin alphabet, whereas the Greek letters stand for the preliminary functions that prepare the main narrative action. In addition, each function has a number of variants, which are designated with numbers attached to the function letters, and only relevant ones will be noted. The letters and variant numbers are given in brackets after the definition of the function they represent.

Presentation of the hero and his initial situation (a). This first preliminary function falls into two distinct parts, the first of which (lines 23-38) was missing from the Auchinleck MS. but is supplemented in modern editions with A.J. Bliss's reconstruction from the corresponding lines in MS. Harley 3810. It deals with Sir Orfeo's wonderful skill as a harper, which will account for the role and significance that his harp will have in his subsequent adventure. It is interesting to note that, in contrast with other versions of the Orphic myth, Sir Orfeo's musical skill is no divine gift, even though he is later presented as the son of parents "? at sumtime were as godes yhold" (45), but a personal talent of his own: "Himself he lerned for to harp/ And leyd thereon his wites scharp" (29-30). In Henryson's *Orpheus and Erudices* the hero learns his musical skill ascending to the heavenly spheres, before using it in Hell to rescue his wife; in our poem the sense of harmony that medieval thinking associates with music can be viewed as a human quality that the hero possesses in himself from the start.

Once Sir Orfeo has been qualified as a human being, with his harp as the symbol of his personality, the second part of the Presentation (39-56) qualifies him in the social context as a king of Traciens, "as Winchester used to be called", as the narrator states with a peculiarly realistic touch (47-49). Just has the harp best qualifies him personally, the family bond that defines him is the love he feels for his queen Dame Heurodis, a circumstance that will also provide a logical justification for his subsequent reaction as he loses her. At this point it will be noted that, in spite of some minor faults of style and diction in the poem, it is remarkably blameless from a purely narrative point of

view. The present analysis will try to show how every single episode, and almost every detail in the narrative, has a justification in the whole. As opposed to many medieval romances, *Sir Orfeo* has been consistently praised for its narrative economy,[1] and, as we shall see, even its seemingly conventional descriptive passages aim at important dramatic effects.

I. Parting: one of the members of the family leaves the house to go for a walk ($b^3$). The narrative action begins in a seemingly conventional way, in a fine May morning, as Dame Heurodis and her maidens seek solace in a blooming spring garden (57-68). However, this idyllic description will have a narrative function to perform: it contrasts with the horror that will be shown hiding beneath the pleasant landscape, contrast being a central dramatic device throughout the poem.

II. Prohibition: some kind of taboo is imposed on the hero ($g^1$). Just as the poem contains enough cues to account for logical links of human motivation in the narrative, it refrains from explaining what today we regard as the supernatural and irrational. The taboo is not made explicit in the tale, but only its existence can explain what happens to Heurodis for falling asleep under an "ympe tre" (literally, a grafted tree, that is, a garden tree) just before noon: "in an undrentide" (65). The passage where this occurs (69-76) ends with a sense of finality: "So sche slepe til after none, /? at undertide was al ydone." Scholars have pointed out that this episode, given its consequences, must have its origin in the violation of a sacred tree or grove in druidic religion,[2] or, less convincingly, in the belief in the noon-day demon of medieval

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1 See especially N.H. Keeble, "The narrative Achievement of *Sir Orfeo*", *English Studies*, LVI (1975), pp. 193-206.

2 Constance Bullock-Davies, "'Ympe Tre' and 'Nemeton'", *Notes and Queries. New Series*, IX (1962), pp. 6-9.

mythology.[1] There are many recorded examples of the perils of sleeping outside on May Day, and also of sleeping beneath a tree, in Irish folklore and British supernatural ballads[2], bearing a closer cultural correspondence to *Sir Orfeo* than the Christianized legends of the lustful noon-day demon.

III. Transgression: the taboo is broken and the aggressor arrives ($d^1$). This basic function is put to great dramatic effect in the poem, which accounts for its relative length (77-174). First of all we have the contrast between the peaceful orchard were Heurodis had fallen asleep and her horror on awaking from her dream: she shrieks, wrings her hands and feet, scratches her eyes until they bleed, tears her beautiful dress, and is driven out of her mind. Her maidens, who didn't dare to wake her up before, now run away to the palace for help, believing her mad. The reader of the poem, like Sir Orfeo, is kept in suspense, which is another characteristic device of the poem, as to why she is in such a state, until she is sufficiently recovered from her ghastly distress to talk to her husband. When Sir Orfeo sees her, the conventional description of the courtly lady is implied forcefully by contrast in the dreadful transformation that he notices in her: her graceful quietness, her white body, her red lips, her delicate fingers and lovely eyes haven all been turned to give her the appearance of one possessed by an evil power. The use of dialogue in this episode is another quality seldom to be found in simple folktales, or even in medieval romance, as also happens with the consistent way in which things are presented through the hero's subjectivity. It is only when she is able to disclose her dream to him that we learn what has happened.

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[1] John B. Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon", *Speculum*, XLI (1966), pp. 22-29.

[2] See Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and The Taken", *Medium Ævum*, XXXIII (1964), p. 102, note 1.

Heurodis has been visited in her dreams by emissaries of the King of Fairy, and then by the King himself with an impressive company of armed knights and of damsels in white attire riding snow-white horses. Actually, the word "fairy" is not used yet; instead, the concept is hinted at through the unearthly beauty of the company, in the whiteness of the damsels, and in the crown of the King, made of a single precious stone that shines like the sun. He forces her to ride on a palfrey by his side, and shows her his kingdom. There is no suggestion that he wants to make her his mistress, as would normally happen in the ballads, in the lays of Mary de France, or in the legends about the lustful noon-day demon. The fairy king announces that she will be abducted to live with them (not "him": he speaks in plural) for ever more, and later on we are told that he already has his own queen, who is "fair and swete." In fact the fairy royal couple make the mirror effect of an otherworldly counterpart to Sir Orfeo and Heurodis. There is, therefore, no apparent motivation for the abduction, except that she has broken an ancestral taboo by sleeping under a fruit tree at noon, and so laid herself under the power of fairy. *Sir Orfeo* is not influenced by the sensuality of courtly love in this respect.[1] We are rather in "the primitive world of popular belief, a world in which men are forever surrounded and threatened by cruel and capricious beings",[2] and even more so than in the Gaelic *Tochmarc Etaine*, since in this alleged antecedent of *Sir Orfeo* the fairy prince Midir who abducts Etain from the king of Ireland is said to have been her husband in a previous existence, thus providing an actual amorous motivation for the abduction.

After taking her back to the orchard where they had found her, the King of Fairy imposes on her what Propp would consider the Inverse Prohibition ($d^2$), that is, a strong injunction, which in the present tale is complementary of

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[1] This opinion is explicitly supported by Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis in "The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile", *Review of English Studies*, XVIII (1967), pp. 248-249.

[2] Allen, op. cit., p. 110.

the Transgression: unless she returns on the following day to the same tree and at the same hour of the day, she will be found however she tries to hide herself, she will be torn to pieces, and then abducted all the same. This violent threat is counterpointed to the initial courtesy and splendorous courtliness of the visitors. It carries echoes of the ritual dismemberment in some of the cults studied by J. F. Frazer, and also of the tearing apart of Orpheus himself in some of the classical traditions.[1]

Functions IV to VII, defined respectively as Interrogatory (e), Information (z), Deceit (h) and Complicity (q), may take a prominent part in *Little Red Riding Hood*, for instance, when the heroine is interrogated by the Wolf in the forest, but they are neither present nor relevant in *Sir Orfeo*. The absence of these functions, which does not alter the fixed arrangement of the rest, might suggest that the aggressor in our tale does not need to deceive his victim, since she has already yielded herself to him by unwittingly sleeping under the tree at noon. Thus the stage is sufficiently set for the main action.

VIII. Misdeed: the aggressor harms one of the members of the family, in our case by causing the hero's wife to dissapear suddenly ($A^7$). Once again the poem appears carefully elaborated in this basic function so as to create a fully dramatized and meaningful episode. Sir Orfeo is determined to prevent Heurodis from being taken from him. He carries his weapons and "Ten hundreth kny¥htys … Wele armyd, talle men and stoute" (183-184) to the spot at which she is to await her fateful appointment. Sir Orfeo's army makes a tight

[1] According to an extended tradition (Aristophanes: *Frogs,* 1032; Ovid: *Metamorphoses* XI, 1-85; Conon: *Narrations*, 45) Orpheus was torn limb from limb by the Maenads. The motif of dismemberment, though not central to the plot of *Sir Orfeo*, is recurrent and prominent enough to suggest some archetypal significance. Frye mentions Orpheus as an example of *sparagmos*: see Northorp Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 148. The presence of this motif is also one of the elements that serve to support a psychoanalytical approach to *Sir Orfeo*. See next note.

defensive formation ("scheltrom") around the tree, but Heurodis is spirited away from among them. The very suddenness of her vanishing contrasts with Sir Orfeo's previous detailed precautions, and with the massive physical presence of his knights: "Ac ¥ete amiddes hem ful ri¥t/ ? e quen was oway y-tvi¥t,/ Wip fairi forp y-nome/ -Men wist neuer wher sche was bicome" (191-194). Here the poet uses the word "fairy" for the first time, impliying it is the word that came to the mind of Sir Orfeo and his men in the face of something that escaped *their* reason.

VIIIa. Lack: a member of he family is bereft of something, in this case his wife ($a^1$). This subfunction is contained in the previous one and, like all the rest, endowed with narrative meaning and interlocked within the sequence: "? e king into his chaumber is go,/ And oft swoned opon pe ston,/ And made swiche diol and swiche mon/ ? at nei¥e his liif was y-spent" (196-199). Sir Orfeo's sorrow is duly stressed not only because it agrees with the nature of his love as previously defined in the poem, or because it is the conventional reaction of a bereft romantic lover, but more significantly, because it will justify his subsequent behaviour, nearly amounting to madness. Mumford's Jungian reading of this lay,[1] according to which the fairy king's intrusions

[1] Marylin R. Mumford, "A Jungian Reading of *Sir Orfeo* and *Orpheus and Erudices*" *Scottish Studies*, iv (1986) (Proceedings of the IV International Conference of Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance, Stirling, 1984), pp. 291-302. Although the psychological substance of *Sir Orfeo* falls outside the scope of my study and is, therefore, only mentioned in passing, its relevance to this Proppian analysis must be noted. Propp himself was too conscientious a scholar to anticipate the last consequences of his own formalist analysis. He did not consider as his duty to decide whether, since as he thought the morphology of folktales is so uniform even in distant countries, they all derive from a common source. He preferred to leave such speculations to historians (his own contribution to this field was his *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoj skazki*, Leningrad, 1946) and psychologists. What he did suggest was that the unique source could be psychological, under a socio-historical aspect (Propp, *Morfología*, p. 141). This could help to explain why the lay *Sir Orfeo* adopted a wonder tale structure without being a folktale: in its process of oral transmission the lay might well have adapted itself to the psychological structure of wonder tales. Research into

into Sir Orfeo's kingdom represent the "violent outburst" of libidinal energy into the conscious world,[1] is not altogether distorting. The poem provides enough cues to be read as the fable of man struggling to regain his psychic balance after a disturbance in his conscious, rational life.[2]

IX. Movement of Transition: the news of the misdeed or lack spreads, the hero receives a petition or is ordered to do something, and he is either sent away or allowed to leave (B). This mediating function takes the form of a vow and a political arrangement on the part of Sir Orfeo, as soon as he realises that "ther was non amendment" (200) to his life as a king without his beloved queen. In the poem this function is closely associated with the one that follows immediately.

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the psychological meaning of myths and tales was a line of investigation that C.G. Jung popularized, and Mumford's Jungian reading is an important contribution to the understanding of *Sir Orfeo*, though somewhat forcing modern psychology on a medieval text, and simplifying it in an attempt to extend the same reading to Robert Henryson's extremely different version of the myth. Mumford actually admits that her reading is more illuminating in the case of *Sir Orfeo*. This must be because it is far closer to folk narrative than Henryson's literary work.

The psychological approach to *Sir Orfeo* may be supplemented by an interpretation based on primitive Celtic religion, as the one suggested in note 49 below.

1 Ibid., p. 296.

2 Medieval writers also tended to interpret the myth of Orpheus on what today we would regard as psychological terms, although at the time these could only take the form of moral allegory. One of the most representative views is perhaps that of William of Conches (1080-1145), who perceived it as a Platonic drama of the soul occurring between mind (Orpheus) and passion or desire (Eurydice). He was, like most medieval commentators of the myth, influenced by Boethius. For a summary of this stage in the development of the myth, see John B. Friedman, "Oraia-phonos and Eur-dike in Hell", *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 86-145. In *Sir Orfeo*, whose narrative seems little affected by moral or allegorical concerns, the most important duality suggested is not between mind and passion, or even between Opheus and Eurydice, but between the conscious and the unconscious worlds of the soul, represented by Sir Orfeo and the King of Fairy respectively.

X. Beginning of Contrary Action: the "hero-seeker" accepts a task, or, as seen here, he simply decides to act (C). Sir Orfeo announces that he will leave the court, go out into the wilderness to live among the beasts, and not see a woman any more. The pathos of the king's renunciation for love had already appeared in this Orphic tradition in the Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius,[1] but here it is charged with a sense of public responsibility that will account for the presence of the final episodes of this tale, which do not occur in any of the previous stories about Orpheus. Sir Orfeo does not forget the needs of the nation, even though he does not think he will ever return again to his kingdom. Hence his appointment of his high steward to manage the affairs of state during his absence, and his disposal that a parliament be summoned to choose another king when they receive the news of his own death. Such inclusion of parliament is certainly an addition of the English poet (not likely to have been found in the "lai d'Orphey", given its French culture and early date), and it makes perfect sense with the portrait of Sir Orfeo as a fair king. His virtue as a monarch, in turn, serves to motivate the sincere sorrow and loud weeping in his royal hall, whose members kneel before him begging him to stay.

XI. Departure: the hero leaves his house ( ). Sir Orfeo forsakes the kingdom and all his possessions, taking with him only a pilgrim's mantle ("sclavin") and his harp. It would be all too tempting to see this as the beginning of a conventional quest, since it is such a common motif both in medieval romance and in folktales like those used by Propp for his morphology. However, Sir Orfeo's sojourn in the wilderness can only be called a quest in the limited sense that, eventually, he will find the object that moved him to leave the court, that is, Heurodis, and also, perhaps, in that it can be understood, like most quests, as a movement of the hero towards self-knowledge, or as a rite of transition. But it is not a quest if that means a deliberate attempt

[1] See Severs, op. cit., p. 192.

to find the lost object. Sir Orfeo leaves his kingdom because he is hopeless, not because he hopes to find his wife. Her disappearance is felt as too final to create any firm expectation of recovery on the part of the hero, from whose point of view we should look at events in the tale. It is important to bear his hopelessness in mind in order to understand the depth of his suffering and the danger threatening his sanity, which is central to the meaning of the tale and made quite explicit in its narrative form.

XII. First Function of the Donor: the hero is submitted to a test, which will prepare him for the reception of a magic object or aid. In our particular case, the variant of this function could only be the first of ten that Propp distiguishes: the Donor submits the hero to a test ($D^1$). The presence of this function is one of the most problematic because the tale does not have a character acting as Donor, but it is worth considering, because of the questions it raises about the ultimate significance of Sir Orfeo's self-exile, and about the specific role of his harp as a magic object. The question of by what virtue Sir Orfeo will be able to find Heurodis after over ten years of hopeless self-abandonment in the wilderness, is not answered by the text itself. We ought to compare it with the question of why Heurodis was abducted for sleeping under a tree at noon, which has been discussed above: the answer can only be found in the cultural background of the work. In the case in point the answer could perhaps be found, somewhat less plausibly, in Christian, not in pagan belief. As a medieval author, the poet of *Sir Orfeo* can be safely assumed to be a Christian, and the Donor of his tale, if there is one, can be no other than God. However, the lay makes no explicit reference to Him or His divine grace, except in set exclamations such as "Lord! who may telle pe sore/ ? is king sufferd ten ¥ere and more?" (263-264). The only answer the lay provides for this rhetorical question is that same phrase: "Lord!". Indeed, one might argue that if Sir Gawain had "no one to talk to on the way but God" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (line 696: "Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyp yo karp"). Sir Orfeo is in a similar plight, for even the beasts of the forest,

who come readily to listen to his charming music, run away from him as soon as he stops harping (279-280). Yet "Lord!" may not be anything in the lay beyond the mere exclamation, without conscious religious meaning, and perhaps we should leave the entity of the Donor open to question.

Nevertheless, the motif of the sojourn in the wilderness, being common in Biblical episodes,[1] medieval hagiography and related romances, lends itself to Christian interpretations. At least one critic has argued the possibility that the ten years Sir Orfeo spends in the wilderness constitute a kind of penance, and through it, he receives a gift of grace: Heurodis is returned to him.[2] Yet a recent study of the Middle English penitential romance does not treat Sir Orfeo as one, and only alludes to it for comparison with *Sir Gowther*.[3] In fact, such mo ral readings have little bearing on *Sir Orfeo* as it has come down to us, since it does not demand them explicitly: unlike Sir Gowther and Sir Gawain, Sir Orfeo is never presented praying to God during his exile.

Saying that *Sir Orfeo* contains no explicit Christian didactism is not to deny its background of Christian lore in the medieval sense. A Boethian echo has been perceived here,[4] although this can also be proved only in a general sense: its sense of tragedy. What the lay does emphasize is that its hero goes through a profound human experience "When he pat hadde ben king wip croun/ Went so pouerlich out of toun" (235-236). The long contraposition in the poem between the comforts that he had had as a king and the misery of his life in the wilderness (241-256) is reminiscent of "De Casibus" stories about powerful men who are dashed down the Wheel of Fortune (Chaucer's

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1 See Friedman (1970), op. cit., p. 190.

2 Gros Louis (1967), op. cit., p. 247.

3 See Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 10-11, 158-161.

4 By James F. Knapp, "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*", *Modern Language Review*, XXIX(1968), pp. 263-273.

*Monk's Tale* comes readily to mind), and therefore of tragedy in the Boethian sense; furthermore, the contrasts between wealth and poverty are commonplace in the homiletic tradition. In so far as giving Sir Orfeo's misfortune a final meaning may be possible, the Boethian philosophy that had a great impact on medieval Christianity can be the most viable way of doing it. For a contemporary audience, who may or may not have been aware of the pagan superstition behind Heurodis' abduction, it is more likely to have been understood simply as a very bad stroke of misfortune, perhaps motivated by the pride of a king, and also as a dramatic illustration of "the precariousness of the human condition" in the light of Christian pessimism.[1]

The insufficiency of Sir Orfeo's attempt to defend Heurodis with his powerful army pointed to the vanity of material means against the supernatural or irrational. Subsequently the tale, like the corresponding classical legends, focuses on the redeeming power of the best human qualities. Unlike the Boethian Orpheus and his classical models, Sir Orfeo does not fail, and he is able to surmount both human frailty and fate; and, as Knapp notes, "unlike the saint, (…) Orfeo comes away from his journey with a deeper awareness, not of God, but of the fragile beauty of that human world for which he is willing to suffer so much pain".[2] As for who stands for the Donor in the lay, we shall briefly conclude in reference to the next function, that God's grace seems to have less to do with it than the hero's personal response to this perilious world, that is, his spiritual sense of integrity, which has been seen embodied in his harp,[3] as the decisive complement of his fleshly love for Heurodis.

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[1] D.M. Hill, "The Structure of *Sir Orfeo*", *Medieval Studies*, XXIII (1961), pp. 136-153.

[2] Knapp, op. cit., p. 270.

[3] See Keeble, op. cit., p. 199.

XIII. The Hero's Reaction: he passes the test ($E^1$). I think the most accurate way to understand in modern terms how Sir Orfeo passes the test is by resorting to some kind of psychological explanation. On the one hand we have to bear in mind that fine music was highly regarded both by Celtic poets and medieval scholars: the former believed it to be endowed with magic powers, while the latter conceived of the universe as composed by the Creator with four contrary elements in an harmonious arrangement, which man could try to evoke with music. Sir Orfeo's harp begins to have a significant narrative function as the only thing that preserves his conscious identity during the ordeal. On the other hand we have Hill's interpretation,[1] according to which the description of Sir Orfeo's harmonious music filling the forest (272-278) contrasts with the noisy "rout" of the King of Fairy and his hunting party that the hero could hear "Oft in hot undertides" (282), suggesting a threat of insanity in the form of hallucination. In this view Sir Orfeo would be on the brink of madness, either madness as the mental disturbance which primitive peoples explain as caused by supernatural interference, or the madness motivated by lost love, which is conventional in several romances.[2] That Sir Orfeo's visions do not feel real or rational to him is suggested by the fact that, in spite of the magnificient display of hunters and dogs, the fairy hosts he sees never take any prey (287-288); nor does the great riding host he sees at other moments seem to be going anywhere. We can easily infer that only his harping can protect him from such delirant visions.[3]

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[1] Hill, op. cit., pp. 138, 144.

[2] Ibid., pp. 152, 157.

[3] The mythological origin of these visions could perhaps be traced to the primitive conception of Odin as the German storm giant Wode leading a furious army through the sky, which represents the procession of the homeless dead. It takes the form of a Wild Hunt as it was recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 1127: "The huntsmen were black, huge, and hideous, and rode on black horses and on black he-goats, and their hounds were jet black, with eyes like saucers, and horrible. This was seen in the very deer park of the town of Petersborough, and in all the woods that stretch from that same town to Stramford, and all through the nights the monks heard them

The poem implies a mental process of gradual readjustment in the way it arrages the presentation of the hero's successive visions, which appear graded in a particular way. The next vision he has is far less disquieting than those of the hunting party hunting nothing and the wandering army: it is of a pageant of dancing knights and ladies "Queynt pas and softly" (300). But the vision that seems to mark a definite recovery in Sir Orfeo's sense of personal reality is the final one. He sees a group of lady falconers chasing their game along a river, but this time they are taking preys: "Ich faucoun his pray slou¥" (313). So far he had remained passive, but now, "perhaps encouraged because their actions are intelligible", as Owen has pointed out,[1] he is moved from suffering to action. He decides to follow the falconers, who do not appear as remote as the previous visions. Owen[2] has also perceptively noted that, by following these ladies, Sir Orfeo is actually violating the oath he had taken, ten years before, never more to see a woman, and that it is proper that his first positive movement should involve a self-release from the repressive vow. Indeed, it is as if the enchantment had been waiting for a human gesture, even a failing, to begin to dissolve itself, for only after committing this little infidelity to his pledged troth to his lost wife, is he able to see her among the falconers. Thus some psychological complexity is involved in the basic function of the hero passing the test. He passes it not simply by suffering or faith, but by being true to himself, the harper and the man, against all odds. It may be recalled that Sir Gawain's human failing is also forgiven in the end by all but himself, and it is part of his success as a humanized hero.

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sounding and winding their horns." *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. by G.N. Garmonsway (London: Dent, 1953), p. 258

1 Lewis J. Owen, "The Recognition Scene in *Sir Orfeo*", *Medium Ævum*, XL (1971), p. 31.

2 Ibidem.

Function XIV in Propp's sequence, the Hero's Reception of the Magic Object (F), has been implied in the previous discussion. His harp thus appears as the symbol of his corageous human will and resolution, and therefore as his best asset to recover his lost personal balance, a recovery he needed in order to rescue Heurodis more successfully than the Orpheus in other versions of the myth. But the most significant action of the harp belongs to functions that are still to come up in our tale.

XV. Journey Between Two Realms: the hero is led near the whereabouts of the object of his quest ($G^3$). When Sir Orfeo sees Dame Heurodis she cannot speak to him or he to her because they are still under the enchantment, but her recognition is signalled by silent tears streaming down her face (325-327), as she notices his deranged looks. After all, he has spent ten years living like a Wild Man of the Woods of medieval folklore. As the falconers notice their mutual recognition, they urge Dame Heurodis to ride away with them, but Sir Orfeo's determination to recover his wife will not be hindered by fear of death "-Of liif no dep me no reche" (342). The lady falconers become his unwilling guides as he follows them through a rock into "a fair cuntray/ As bri¥t so sonne on somers day" (351-352), whose brightness immediately recalls the noon-time heat of the garden where Heurodis was abducted, and of the moments in which Sir Orfeo had his hallucinations in the forest. The hollow hill Sir Orfeo has entered, the green plain of fairyland, and the brilliance and splendour of the fairy castle he sees are traditional in folklore.[1] The fairy realm is also described with the characteristics of many marvellous lands of romance, which, in fact, tend to be idealized versions of medieval landscapes. However, the convention has a special significance in this lay. The fairy realm seems a mirror image of Sir Orfeo's own kingdom, more

[1] Allen, op. cit., p. 102, note 1. Actually, the description of the otherworld as a place full of brigthness and light is quite widespread in medieval literature. The most outstanding example in the English context is *Pearl*. For instance, its otherworldly woods: "Wip schymeryng schene ful schrylle pai shynde."

familiar than his first troubling visions, because the land has a magnificient castle with its strong battlements, a ditch, and a porter at its gate. In spite of its material inaccessibility, it also gives a feeling of reality that can be conquered, whatever hardship this may involve for the hero. Although it impresses him as "the proude court of Paradis" (376) would (some of its details recall medieval descriptions of heaven), we know from the beginning of the lay that the music of his harp could also make one feel as in "on of pe joies of Paradis" (37). The pleasant sight of the castle, however, prepares a violent contrast with the horrors that Sir Orfeo will behold inside its walls.[1]

The fact that the hero has reached a place that he can approach on his own human terms is also shown in the way he gets into the castle. He is able to convince its porter to let him in, saying that he is a simple minstrel who wants to entertain the lord of the house. Yet the impression of reality is unsettled as soon as he is inside. The ghastly spectacle he then sees has been identified as a faithful picture of what one would expect to find in a "sid",[2] the place where the fairy kept their victims, which has substituted the Classical Hades and the Christian Hell of the more extended versions of the Orphic myth.[3] There Sir Orfeo sees those human beings as they were found when

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[1] Friedman (1970), op. cit., p.192, finds a similar contrast in some analogues of the orphic legend, such as *Barlaan and Iosaph*.

[2] See Allen, op. cit., p. 109.

[3] Constance Davies, "Classical Threads in 'Orfeo'", *Modern Language Review*, LXI (1961), pp. 161-166, tries to make a case for the classical, especially Virgilian, filiation of the description of the otherworld in the lay. But her points appear rather weak in comparison with the bulk of evidence about Celtic and folk analogues gathered by Allen, op.cit. Another theory that stands isolation is that of Bruce Mitchell, "The Fairy World of *Sir Orfeo*", *Neophilologus*, XLVIII (1964), pp. 155-159, who argues that the place described in this passage "is not particularly unpleasant", except for a few lines that might have been added by some scribe following conventions. This opinion has been expressly refuted by Allen, op.cit., pp. 103-104, and by many other scholars including Knapp, op.cit., p. 263 and A.M. Kinghorn, "Human Interest in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*", *Neophilologus*, L (1966), pp. 359-369.

they were taken by fairy, neither dead nor alive (389-390): they appear as if frozen at the moments in which people were most liable to be taken, such as suffering a violent death and dismemberment (391-392, 396-398), wives giving child-birth (399), and people who had gone mad (394), that is, suffering a kind of spiritual dismemberment which seems to have been the fate that Sir Orfeo has just managed to avoid. Finally, he notices Heurodis, still sleeping under the "ympe-tre" (407). Thus the hero has arrived at the counterpoint of the garden where the action of the tale had begun.

XVI. Combat: the hero and the aggressor face each other in a combat or competition (H). This function, which in the tales of Propp's corpus generally takes the form of a duel, competition or game, appears under a peculiar form in *Sir Orfeo*. Although in *Tochmarc Etaine* an actual competition in the form of a series of chess games takes place between the mortal and the fairy for Etain, in our tale the function is transformed more according to its Orphic core. Moreover, Sir Orfeo has no chance of equal competition against the great supernatural power that characterizes the King of Fairy in this tale, except by using his harp. When Sir Orfeo kneels before the King offering his service as a musician, the danger the hero is in appears forcibly suggested by the fairy king, as he reminds him that no-one had gone to his realm before without being sent for (421-428). What the King does not suspect is that the harp is Sir Orfeo's most powerful weapon. This role of the harp will also come as a surprise if we expect to find an actual combat of some sort in this function. Perhaps it would be less surprising if we bear in mind the parallel functional role that the hero's sword has in *Sir Gowther*,[1] another English medieval lay with structural features of folktale (in this case the source of the

[1] The comparison has been made by Hopkins, op. cit., pp. 159-160, who presents Sir Gowther's sword as the symbol of his potentiality for good and evil. In my reading Sir Orfeo's harp might be regarded as a symbol of his potentiality for good, while evil is embodied in the uncertain world he lives in, where a man's fortune may change tragically overnight.

story has been traced to an actual folktale of French origin known as "Robert the Devil"). Then the King of Fairy assents to being entertained by the humble harper that has so boldly arrived at his court.[1]

Function XVII, the Mark that the hero receives (I), has no bearing on our tale, but the one that follows it immediately is a direct consequence of the previous function of "Combat."

XVIII. Victory: the agressor is defeated (J). This is another function that appears in a modified form, without an exact correspondence with any of Propp's examples of variants for it. It rather fits the special way in which the lay presents the Combat. What happens is that Sir Orfeo plays so well that the King promises to pay him largely and "what it be" (450) ("whatever it may be"). The situation is a very common folktale motif generally known as the "Rash Promise." The person who makes the promise without considering its consequences, unwittingly submits himself to the one who has received it, as when, in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen promises to yield to Aurelius' love if he can remove the rocks from the coast of Brittany. But whereas Aurelius will renounce for noble reasons the power the rash promise provides him with, the fairy king must keep it, so as not to tarnish his own spledorous power. Thus his Rash Promise marks the moment of Sir Orfeo's victory over him. Moreover, it precludes his laying down any condition on Heurodis' release, such as the one the rulers of Hades impose on the classical Orpheus. Hence in the lay we do not find the passage in which Orpheus breaks the condition of not looking back at Eurydice before leaving the underworld and so loses her for ever, because it aims at no such tragic ending.

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[1] An alternative way of interpreting this function is to regard it as a Combat of Wits, a common motif in medieval literature. Indeed, in a sense Sir Orfeo outwits his fairy opponent by appearing as a simple minstrel. In owe this suggestion to Professor Patricia Shaw.

XIX. Reparation: the initial damage is repaired or the lack supplied for (K). The meaning of the tale in this respect has become too complex for only one of Propp's proposed variants of this function to account for it. To some extent our hero will be able to achieve Heurodis through his cunning ($K^1$) in eliciting the Rash Promise,[1] but also as a result of preceeding actions ($K^4$), that is, his capacity to pass the test of his self-exile, and also thanks to the magic object ($K^5$), his harp. None of these reasons can be singled out as unique. Besides, we have to add the outstanding topic of honour and generosity in the lay. Suspense, which is kept throughout the episode of Sir Orfeo's visit to the royal court, is enhanced by the fact that the king, contrary to expectations derived both from the Orphic myth and the motif of the Rash Promise, denies Sir Orfeo his reward. With haughty sarcasm he says that Sir Orfeo, being "lene, rowe and blac" (459), would make too sorry a couple with the lovely Heurodis. His sarcasm has a realistic justification in that Sir Orfeo's appearance would present the effects of his years in the wild living on a diet mainly of roots (255-260), an appearance that enables him to pass for a wandering minstrel, while Dame Heurodis is still peacefully asleep in her garden, as she was the moment she fell under the fairy spell. The fairy king's unexpected refusal results in an emphasis on the fact that he will not be defeated by Sir Orfeo's skill or cleverness alone. Heurodis' liberation ultimately depends on the King of Fairy's goodwill, sense of honour and generosity, which are a reflection of those of Sir Orfeo, and the qualities that *The Franklin's Tale* also expresses pointedly. Thus when the hero appeals to the King's honour to keep his promise (463-468), he receives what he asks for without grudge.

The poem underplays the potentially emotive moment of Dame Heurodis' salvation and her meeting with her husband, because this is not a dramatic climax in the tale. It simply states that "His wiif he tok bi pe hond, /And dede

[1] See previous note.

him swipe out of pat lond, /And went him out of pat stede" (473-475). It seems that his wife is of little avail to him until he becomes the king again, and she his queen. The definitive focus of the poem, contradicting expectations derived from the myth of Orpheus, but complying with the wonder tale pattern, is on the hero's return home, rather than on the rescue itself.

XX. Return: the hero comes back (¬). Modern scholars have been at pains to defend the necessity of the final section of *Sir Orfeo*,[1] in which the hero returns with his wife to Winchester and recovers his kingdom after testing the loyalty of the steward he had left in charge of it. No such section occurs in the classical myth. Most justifications of its presence are based on the structural similarity and thematic contrast between Sir Orfeo's adventure in the fairy castle, and that in his own castle, which he will also approach disguised as a poor minstrel.[2] Indeed, it is its rich play of symmetry and contrast between two worlds that gives the poem much of its psychological poignancy. Just as Sir Orfeo is faced by his fairy *alter ego* before, he faces his political one later, taking the significance of the magic adventure down to earth. The poem never repeats its themes without adding a new narrative function and significance to them, and only the harp and the threat of bodily dismemberment can be said to remain stable *leit motifs*. Our own analysis, by attending to the progressive sequence of character functions, stresses the continuous evolution of the hero, and accounts for the presence of the final

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[1] Thus Keeble, op. cit., p. 203, says that H.M. Smyser "spoke for many when he opined that the final section 'robs the poem of structural integrity.'" There is a thesis about the origin of the last section by Howard Nimchinsky, "Orfeo, Guillaume and Horn", *Romance Philology*, xxii (1968), pp. 1-14. Tracing the origin of this section to analogous episodes in *King Horn* and *Guillaume d'Anglaterre*, this critic assumes that "the testing of the steward, although it performs an artistic function within *Sir Orfeo*, is merely a superaddition to the work." Nimchinsky, op. cit., p. 11.

[2] See especially George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (1951; London: Barnes & Noble and Methuen, 1970), pp. 81-84; Bliss, op. cit., p. xliii; Hill, op. cit., p. 151.

section as responding to a basic pattern of folktale, while also valuing its posititive artistic contribution to the whole poem.

After some functions that appear in pieces of Propp's corpus with no bearing on *Sir Orfeo,* particularly the Persecution of the hero (XXI: Pr) and his being Rescued (XXII: Rs), the next function that comes up in the lay follows logically from the hero's Return.

XXIII. Arrival Incognito: the hero arrives home without being noticed ($O^1$). In Propp's examples the hero takes lodgings at the house of an artisan (a goldsmith, a taylor, a shoemaker…) and becomes his apprentice, before turning up at his own house. In *Sir Orfeo* he stays with his wife at a beggar's cottage, and in *King Orphius*, the sixteenth-century fragments of a Scottish version of the lay, they are lodged by a well-to-do citizen.[1] It is this burgess who, quite appropriately, makes the derisive comments on the contrast between the lovely queen and her grim and haggard consort, instead of the King of Fairy as in *Sir Orfeo*. As Propp often notes, each teller is free to modify these details of content, which may actually have some effect on the dramatic power of the tale, but without affecting the basic narrative pattern. In other words, while the descriptive details and attributes of characters may vary greatly from version to version, the sequence tends to resist all such modifications dictated by the memory and imagination of each teller, and as far as we can tell from the extant fragments the tale of *King Orphius*, though with a markedly different style of presentation, is the same as that of *Sir Orfeo*.

XXIV. Deceitful Pretensions: a false hero asserts lying claims (L). This dramatic circumstance does not actually occur in our tale, yet, due to its be-

[1] Cf. Marion Stewart, "King Orphius", *Scottish Studies*, xvii (1972): see lines 54-54 of her edition, and p. 152 of her commetary.

ing an extremely common motif in tales, especially in those which also contain function XXIII, it may play its own part in spite of its absence. In view of the great many examples from history, legend and popular literature of acting kings trying to usurp the throne of the rightful king while he is away, such deceitful pretensions could be expected as natural in Sir Orfeo's steward.[1] Moreover, the audience of *Sir Orfeo*, accostumed to look at the events in the tale from the point of view of its hero, may well suspect the steward of pretending to stay as king. That this is what Sir Orfeo fears is confirmed by his precautions before presenting himself back at his own court. Sir Orfeo asks the beggar for news about the kingdom. The beggar, who does not know he is the king, repeats to him a summary of the events we already know: how the queen was taken by fairy, how the king then abandoned the town, and, finally, "hou pe steward pe lond gan hold, / And oper mani pinges him told" (495-496). In short, we are left in suspense as to whether the "many other things" Sir Orfeo learns from the beggar includes any clue about the steward's actual pretensions. Thus function XIV performs its role by keeping the suspense.

XXV. Difficult Task: the hero is proposed a difficult task, or *he* proposes to perform a dangerous task (M). This entails one of the most common

[1] Many examples could be adduced to disconfirm the opinion that "the reader has no reason to suspect that the acting king might be unfaithful" (Nimchinsky, op. cit., p. 11). The episode of the hero returning home who finds someone trying to usurp his place is as old in literature of oral origin as the *Odyssey*. There are famous cases of usurping villains in the English Middle Ages, like those of John Lackland and Mortimer, which passed from history to legend and then into literature. The examples are multiplied in popular narrative, particularly in the ballads. The ballad of "The Lord of Lorn And the False Steward" (Child, 271) and plenty of other popular ballads repeat the circumstance of the usurpation, making up a whole story-type that has been called "The Fair Unknown": see David C. Fowler, *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 55. However, our definitive evidence is provided by one of the variants of the ballad of "King Orfeo" (Child, 19), in which the steward appears as Sir Orfeo's nephew, and is about to be crowned while the hero is away.

episodes of folktales according to Propp, although the tasks proposed are so varied that they defy a precise definition of content. Sir Orfeo proposes the difficult task of entering his hall in disguise to test his steward's loyalty, a dangerous mission if the steward proves false and tries to get rid of the rightful king. He borrows the beggar's rags for the purpose, and these, together with his own shrivelled appearance, make a perfect disguise. As he walks on the streets of his own town burgesses and ladies marvel at the beard of this "beggar", which by now reaches his knees (507). Incidentally, the episode is remiscent of those folktales in which a king wanders about his kingdom in disguise so as to learn about the real feelings of his subjects. Then Sir Orfeo meets the steward on the street, and begs him for mercy, introducing himself as a "harpour of hepenisse" (513). The steward welcomes him for the sake of his lost king, who was also a harper (517-518). Yet Sir Orfeo cannot know whether he is speaking truly, and how he will react once he gets to know that his king is alive and back to recover the position he has been enjoying for ten years.

XXVI. Fulfilled Task: the task is accomplished (N). At the hall the steward sits surrounded by his lords, as a king would do (in *King Orphius* the steward is actually called "king" in this episode). There are many musicians entertaining the court, including several harpers (521-513). Sir Orfeo sits still and waits until they finish their performance. Then he starts playing, and his harping naturally has the same effect it had in the forest among the animals and in the fairy castle: everyone is moved by its charm, and all eyes are turned on the man who is making such a wonderful melody. The steward, in particular, fixes his eyes on the harp, probably because its music reminds him of his lord's instrument. It is appropriate that Sir Orfeo should be recognized for his harp, the image of his best qualities. The steward then asks the harper where he got the harp and how, which is surely the question Sir Orfeo had been expecting in order to "assay" his faithfulness: "Forto asay pi gode wille" (568), as he will explain later on. In order to do so, he tells him he has

found the harp ten years before in the wilderness, by the body of a man who had been torn to pieces by lions and wolves. Here we have once again an allusion to the threat of dismemberment that is recurrent throughout the lay. This confirmation of Sir Orfeo's death would probably have made the steward effective king by the will of parliament, but his reaction clears him of any suspicion that his role might have aroused. The extreme grief the steward suffers on hearing the news of his master's death (542-549) is similar to that of Sir Orfeo when he lost Heurodis. Thus the loyalty that Sir Orfeo has learned through his own bitter experience at the personal level has now proved possible at the political level, too.

XXVII. Dénouement: the hero is recognized (Q). Sir Orfeo reveals his identity to the steward with a speech of great rhetorical finesse. He addresses the steward as a wise beggar would address him to praise his loyalty to his king (557-576). By the time he finishes his speech, all the lords know who he is. He has thus revealed himself through his wisdom and eloquence, and as a conclusion he promises the best reward for the man who has deserved to take the crown after his death. Even reading the poem as we do today, one could almost hear the sound of the harp that might have accompanied a minstrel's recitation of this emotive passage of the lay. As if his speech had held back the great happiness of the courtiers on finding their good king alive, the joy bursts out as soon as Sir Orfeo finishes talking. The steward overturns the table in an exalted gesture of joy (578), falls at the feet of his king, and then all the lords follow suit. The scene has all the emotional emphasis that was witheld when Sir Orfeo had been able to rescue his lady. They give the king a good bath, shave his beard and dress him as becomes a king (584-586). Then they bring the queen from the beggar's cottage into the town in a great procession "wip al maner menstraci" (589). A great melody celebrates the return of the royal couple (590-592), signifying the restoration of harmony.

That the steward passes the assay and proves "a trewe man" (554), instead of the false hero one would have expected, is a telling feature that distinguishes the lays of the "gentel Bretons" (as Chaucer understood them) from many folktales.[1] In fact, it precludes the presence of two characteristic functions of wonder tales: the Discovery or unmasking of the false hero or aggressor (XXVIII: X) and his Punishment (XXX: V), because the "false hero" proves true, and even the aggressor (the King of Fairy) is finally true to his rash promise, besides its being a supernatural power beyond reach. Thus the ending, though not solving altogether the threats that will always exist beyond human reason, is one of absolute reconciliation without vengeance. It celebrates the power of man's best qualities to surmount the dangers of his own *alter ego*, without the need for a scapegoat, that is, without the righteous, but wild punishment that characterizes many folktales.[2]

XXIX. Transfiguration: the hero receives a new appearance (T). This is another function whose presence in *Sir Orfeo* rouses stimulating speculation. Apart from magical transformations ($T^1$) and humorous or rational derivations of this function ($T^4$), heroes may be built a new magnificient palace to live there as princes ($T^2$), or dressed in new clothes ($T^3$). The new royal robes that Sir Orfeo is given have already been mentioned above. But perhaps the detail that suggests this function most definitely is his new coronation: "Now King Orfeo newe coround is" (593). It could mean that he is given his crown again, but it also implies being crowned anew, becoming king in a renewed fashion. The profound experience Sir Orfeo has gone through in the poem points to the latter interpretation. He does not merely receive the old crown

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[1] The point is made particularly by David V. Harrington, "Redifining the Middle English Breton Lay", *Medievalia et Humanistica. New Series*, no. 16 (1988), p. 93

[2] The ending of *Lai Le Freine* and that of "Cinderella" make a telling comparison: both have a similar underlying plot, but in the later folktale the false heroines, Cindirella's stepsisters, have their eyes picked out by doves, while nothing of the sort happens in the lay. See note 51.

he used to wear. He cannot be the same man after his personal tragedy of loss, the ordeal of his life in the wildemess, his perilious journey to fairyland and his walk on the streets of his own kingdom as a beggar.[1] He cannot be the same king either, because he must have learnt much about the frailty of human happiness, about humility, and about the great necessity and power of faithfulness and loyalty. But the poem, as usual, does not tell. It just invites its audience, us, to wonder, and it does so precisely through its underlying wonder tale pattern. As we have noted before, its narrator has been justly praised for his exceptional restraint from explicit didactism and moral comment. He simply allows the action to develop as if "of its own volition",[2] and it is this same development that plays with its many shades of meaning.

XXXI. Wedding: the hero gets married and ascends the throne. In the present case, the hero who had lost his wife has his marriage renewed ($W^2$). Sir Orfeo's coronation is together with his wife: "Now King Orfeo newe

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[1] Sir Orfeo's experience lends itself to a religious interpretation. Suffice it to quote from a study of the Celts which compares the druids with shamans of primitive cults:

> Shamans, according to Mircea Eliade, one of the leading European religious historians, came to office by vocation or appointment. In either event they needed a summons that came to them in dream, ecstasy, trance or vision. They themselves might even die in the process and then experience a return to life. It happened in this way: inner voices urged the young adept to seek the solitude of the forest; there he encountered apparitions that made him behave as if he were going mad. In a dream, he experienced his own dismemberment...
>
> When he finally left the woods, his clothes were torn, his face bleeding, the hair of his head matted. 'Only after ten days,' says a Russian ethnologist who has studied the phenomenon in Siberia, 'does he again manage to stammer out some coherent words.' What had happened was, so the experts say, nothing less than the disintegration of profane man in the 'psychic chaos' of madness and the birth of a new personality …
>
> Such phenomena would seem to reflect a pattern basic to all religions, in their primary aim of overcoming death.

Gerhard Herm, *The Celts* (1975; London: Book Club Associates / Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976), p. 153.

[2] Keeble, op. cit., p. 195

coround is, / And his quen, Dame Heurodis, /And lived long afterward" (593-595) -happily ever after, as we are tempted to add. Thus everything that has been seen to apply to his new coronation must also apply to the renewed royal marriage. Sir Orfeo and Dame Heurodis must be enriched as a royal couple through their past experience in the same measure as the hero is improved both as man and as king. Then we are told that the steward succeeded them (596), and when the harpers of "Bretaine" heard about this wonder ("marauile"), they "made herof a lay of gode likeing" (598-599). Indeed, "Gode is the lay, swete is pe note" (602), and worthy of the Bretons whose gentleness and intelligence Chaucer honoured.

* * *

The analysis of *Sir Orfeo* that now concludes has tried to show ways in which form may clarify meaning, along with ways in which form opens questions about meaning. At the level of form it has pointed out a remarkable correspondence between the structure of the lay and the basic morphology of wonder tales according to Propp's study. Thus our resulting scheme according to Propp's functions would be as follows:

$$ab^{3}(g^{1})d^{1}d^{2}A^{7}a^{1}BC\ \bar{(}D^{1})E^{1}(F)G^{3}(HJ)K\neg O^{1}(L)MNQ(X)T^{3}W^{2}$$

And Propp's overall scheme for his corpus of wonder tales:

H J
abgdezhqABC $\bar{D}$EFG I K¬Pr-PsOLQXTUW
M N

The comparison between both schemes suggests a few comments. First of all, the attested fact that the equivalent functions in the lay follow the sequence of Propp's morphology very closely. This is very important, because

what identifies the pattern is the sequence, not the presence of all the functions. Secondly, that most of the functions are actually present in the lay, which is very unusual in folktales: its pattern is closer to the archetype than that of most real folktales. Functions H-J, I, and M-N very seldom appear in the same tale, though they are not mutually exclusive (otherwise, as Propp notes, there would be three different patterns instead of one), yet in *Sir Orfeo* we have both H-J (Combat and Victory) and M-N (Difficult Task and Fulfilled Task), and in the order they are likely to adopt when both appear. Those functions whose presence may be more arguable because they appear less explicitly, or in quite a modified form, have been given in brackets. But even these functions have been seen to play a definite role in the narrative development, and to be naturally interlocked within the sequence. Thirdly, as many as half of the functions which present variants fit the first and most common of them in Propp's listing, which denotes another remarkable coincidence. Finally, the wonder tale pattern has been seen to solve the greatest critical crux regarding the structure of *Sir Orfeo*, that is, its addition of the final section to the original myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In view of the pattern, it no longer looks like a superaddition, but like a fully integrated part of the tale.

At the levels of genre, style, subject matter and meaning, we must pay attention to the interplay between folktale and romance in *Sir Orfeo*. On the one hand it presents many features that appear very commonly in folktales, such as the isolation of the hero in the forest; the praise of suffering, perseverance, courage and humility; the draw to a happy ending; the absence of explicit motivation, explanation and authorial comment, and an apparent simplicity that produces various significances and encourages multiple interpretations.[1]

[1] I owe these comments to Professor Douglas Gray and his seminar at my University in March 1992. I am thankful to him for suggesting the view of *Sir Orfeo* as a folktale, which was the starting point for the present article. The reference I make in note 48 above was also taken from his talk.

On the other hand, the English lay differs from most folktales in a number of significant ways. Its degree of detail, its careful handling of motifs, its meaningful exploitation of symmetrical episodes, and many other literary qualities relate it more closely to other great English works of the fourteenth century, including the "lay" of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*[1] than to tales of oral origin like the ballads. In spite of the probable oral elaboration of its pattern, *Sir Orfeo* is an altogether different thing from a folktale in style and detail.

There are many medieval English works containing perhaps more folktale motifs than it does, for romances abound in wicked step-parents, ill-used and isolated heroes and heroines who pass tests of endurance, false heroes who are unmasked, recognitions of true heroes, exemplary punishment of aggressors, and happy endings in weddings. Some of these stories also call themselves Breton lays, like *Emaré* (much closer to the standard lay than its elaborate analogue, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*) or *Havelock the Dane*.[2] *King Horn*, often considered as an archetypal romance, is also full of folktale motifs, including the return of the harper-king disguised as a minstrel and the exemplary punishment of the false hero (he is quartered). But most of these examples are basically romances which would have to be recycled and deprived of many episodes to fit into Propp's pattern, whereas *Sir Orfeo* does so without distortion of meaning, even if its style is that of a romance writer.

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[1] The *Gawain*-poet calls his own romance "laye" in Fit I, line 30. Smithers goes a long way in trying to prove the origin of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in some lost Breton lay. See G.V. Smithers. "Story Patterns in Some Breton Lays", *Medium Ævum*, XXII (1953), pp. 89-91.

[2] This romance is sometimes called "The Lay of Havelock" because its French source, the *Lai d'Haveloc*, calls itself "a lay made by the Bretons", probably to follow a fashion or to appeal to a larger public after the success of Marie de France's lays. See Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 100-104.

As for its meaning, it is the form of *Sir Orfeo* that has revealed it as a challenging, interrogating text. Its folktale simplicity of plot becomes a powerful literary device in the hand of a sensitive romance writer. I do not think it possible or necessary to provide a closed interpretation of it, although I have mentioned some possible answers to the questions that rise from its wonder tale pattern. The poem, being artful in style and suggestive detail, would not have left so many loose ends in its meaning if it did not expect the audience to react to them positively. Why was Heurodis abducted? How was Sir Orfeo able to find her, in other words, is there a Donor, and if so, who is he? Why is the function of combat modified the way it is? Why does the steward prove a true man instead of a false hero, and why is the aggressor not punished? How is the hero transfigured through his experience?

Scholars have disagreed in the answer to many of these questions, which proves that interpretation is, to a great extent, a personal or circumstantial matter. Therefore what I have offered can only be tentative solutions given by the wonder tale pattern, the cultural milieu of the work, and its genre, the Breton lay, which may actually be regarded as a subgenre of romance that appears peculiarly related to the folktale. Thus the abduction has been seen as perhaps best explained by popular belief of Celtic origin and also by a Boethian idea of human predicament; the Donor might be God, who rewards Sir Orfeo's suffering and abnegation but, since God's grace is not referred to in any open way, we can also consider Sir Orfeo himself as the embodiment of the highest human potentialities, of the God within Man, which is in turn symbolized by his harping; there is no combat where one would expect it, but the struggle of endurance and courage against blind fate, and there is no false hero and no punishment, because the English Breton lays are generally distinguished by their faith in the human capacity for being assayed and found as good as gold.

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