

*SIR ORFEO: THE OTHERWORLD VS. FAITHFUL HUMAN  
LOVE*

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The fourteenth-century English lay *Sir Orfeo* incorporates three major changes from the classical Orpheus myth: the substitution of the Otherworld or Fairyland for the classical Hades, the introduction of the motif of the loyal steward, and the happy ending. The myth of Orpheus, in Ovid and Virgil a tale of the inevitability of death, has in *Sir Orfeo* the happy ending expected in a fairy tale or a romance. Eurydice's death is reinterpreted as her being "taken" by the fairies, and the story shows the triumph of love over the mysterious power of the Otherworld. The story exalts faithful human love of two kinds: that of Orfeo and Heurodis, and that of Orfeo and his loyal steward. The tension of the poem grows out of the contrast between the loyal love of Sir Orfeo and the heartlessness of the people of Faerie, who maintain a frightening and inexplicable relationship to humankind.

King Orfeo is married to Queen Heurodis, who puts herself in the fairies' power by falling asleep under a grafted tree. While she seems, to her mortal handmaidens, to be lying asleep, she is actually seized by the fairy king and rides with him to his castle. He tells her that the next day he will come to take her away forever, threatening that the fairies will tear her limb from limb if she resists. When Heurodis awakes, she is temporarily afflicted with a magically-induced madness, in which she tears and mutilates herself. She then warns Orfeo, who brings a thousand knights to the tree next day to protect her, but Heurodis vanishes from their midst. Orfeo, leaving his kingdom in the care of his steward, roams the wilderness for ten years, sorrowing for her. At last he sees her in the fairy hunt, and, determined not to lose her again, Orfeo follows her through a rock into Fairyland. He wins her back from the fairy king, who promises him anything he asks in return for his marvellous harp-playing. He then returns in disguise to his castle to test the faithfulness of his steward by pretending that Orfeo is dead. The steward's grief convinces Orfeo of his loyalty, and he makes the steward his heir. Orfeo and Heurodis are recrowned, and they reign happily together.

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Instead of the tragic gloom of the classical story, we have a happy ending. But the brightness is threatening. The Otherworld is a dangerous place, and the fairies frightening people. Their attitude to mortals seems arbitrary: they abduct them and then ignore them. Inside Fairyland, the people stolen by magic lie in the state in which they left the mortal world—some without arms or head, some mad, some drowned or dead in childbirth.<sup>1</sup> We have no inkling of the fairies' motivation. Although the fairy king goes to considerable trouble to abduct Heurodis, once he has taken her, he simply adds her to his collection of enchanted mortals. Orfeo finds him sharing his throne with the fairy queen while Heurodis lies nearby, still asleep under the grafted tree.

This inexplicable attitude is typical of fairy behavior, and Fairyland itself contains similar disconcerting and contradictory elements. The beauty of the Otherworld, the fairy king's shining jewel crown, the bright level plain, crystal palace, the pillars of gold, the precious stones that shine with their own light—are inseparable from the threat of the unknown. Whereas in the classical myth the threat is death, which comes to everyone, in *Sir Orfeo* it is an enchantment more frightening, because less understood, a fate alien to humanity.

In *Sir Orfeo*, this heartless Otherworld is strongly contrasted with faithful human love and mutual trust. The most moving moments in the poem show the unshakable love of Orfeo and Heurodis. When Heurodis tells Orfeo that she must leave him, her sorrow is compelling:

Allas, mi lord Sir Orfeo,  
Seththen we first to-gider were  
Ones wroth never we nere,  
Bot ever ich have y-loved the  
As mi liif, and so thou me. (120-124)

Orfeo's response emphasizes the bond of marriage and his determination to do anything rather than break that bond:

Whider thou gost, ichil with the,  
And whider I go, thou shalt with me. (128-129)

The echo of the words of Ruth to Naomi strengthens the impression of faithfulness. Ten years later, when Orfeo encounters his wife in

the fairy hunt, we see that this bond has not been broken. A long look of recognition passes between them, and this look enables Orfeo to dare even the dangers of the Otherworld to regain her.

The second instance of mutual love and trust is that of Orfeo and his steward. The steward shows his love for Orfeo by his unfeigned grief at hearing of his supposed death, even though that death might enable the steward to become king in Orfeo's stead. Orfeo keeps faith by honoring the steward beyond his rank, making him his heir. Our respect for Orfeo is increased by his trustworthiness, both as a husband and as a master. His faithful human love is contrasted with the fairy king's arbitrary exercise of power.

The story contains several unexpected problems. First, as already stated, the fairies' motive for abducting Heurodis is not known. The fairy king does not abduct her for love, which an audience of romances might reasonably expect, and which happens in the stories of Guinevere's abduction to the Otherworld in Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* and in the Old Irish tale of *The Wooing of Etain*, a tale often cited as an analogue of *Sir Orfeo*. But in folklore, people are not necessarily abducted for love.<sup>2</sup> Children, of course, are taken as changelings. Young men may be taken not only as paramours, but to fight battles for the Otherworldly people, like Pwyll in the *Mabinogion* or Cuchulainn in *The Wasting-Sickness of Cuchulainn*. Young women are taken as midwives, or wetnurses to fairy children. Anyone may be taken who lingers in a place where the fairies pass by. In the case of Heurodis, just sleeping under an ympe-tree at noon in May is enough.

It seems even stranger that the fairy king would let Heurodis escape him so easily. To Orfeo's request that he might take with him the lady "That slepeth under the ympe-tre" (456), the king makes the rather frivolous objection that Orfeo is "lene, rowe, and blac"—an unfit match for Heurodis, who is "lvsun withouten lac" (459-460). The king does not seem to regret her going, or even to recognize Orfeo as her husband. (Of course, we don't know what he knows, really.)<sup>3</sup> The dramatic effect at this most important moment seems lessened by his ready acquiescence. The poet passes lightly over the climax of the story. There are various reasons for this. First, of course, in a fairy tale all difficulties are instantly overcome once the hero has fulfilled the necessary conditions—and Orfeo has obtained the king's promise to give him whatever he asks for. As soon as the king makes the rash promise, we know that

Orfeo has won. We might expect, however, a less generous reaction on the king's part on finding that he has been tricked. In the ballad of Tam Lin, for instance, when the fairy queen realizes she has lost Tam Lin by the cleverness of his mortal lover, she says that if she had known this would happen, she would have taken out his two eyes and "put in twa een o tree" (Child #39). This king, on the other hand, either doesn't care or thinks it is a point of honor not to seem to care that he has lost in the battle of wits with Sir Orfeo: "The king seyde, 'Seththen it is so, / Take her bi the hond and go; / Of her ichil thatow be blithe'" (469-471).

Actually, it is very fitting that the king should not care. The whole poem emphasizes the heartlessness and arbitrariness of the fairies in order to contrast it with the strong emotions and trustworthiness of humanity. In folktales like "Jami Freel"<sup>4</sup> and ballads such as "Tam Lin," the hero or heroine is clever enough to trick the fairies out of possession of the loved ones, but it is the strength of their love which provides the staying power to keep them. In "The Stolen Bairn and the Sidhe," a twentieth-century analogue of *Sir Orfeo* collected in Moray Firth, a young woman whose child is stolen goes to the Sidhe to win him back with a harp made from a bone she has found on the shore and strung with her own hair.<sup>5</sup> The Sidhe are enchanted by her music *because* of its sorrowful emotion. They are incapable of emotion of their own, and are entranced by this powerful feeling which they are unable to experience without mortal help. The harp music retains its emotional quality even when it is played by the fairy king, since the harp itself was made from the girl's hair, a symbol of the sacrifice she was willing to make for her child. Like this mother, Orfeo is stronger than the fairy king because of his love, and that is why he wins. The fairies are enchanted by Orfeo's music, but have no empathy with the emotion which evokes the music. They have therefore no way of holding Heurodis once her husband has won her back. This scene marks a major contrast with Ovid's treatment of the story, since in the *Metamorphoses* Orpheus wins back Eurydice by evoking pity from Pluto and Persephone, due to their remembrance of their own love.

However unemotional the fairy king's reaction may be to Heurodis's departure, we expect a more dramatic reaction on the part of Heurodis herself. *Sir Orfeo*, like a ballad, leaves a great deal unsaid, and some of the most important moments are understated or merely summarized. A ballad tends to highlight some emotional

moments with dialogue and merely summarize others. In *Sir Orfeo*, there are two beautifully highlighted emotional scenes. The first is that already quoted in which Heurodis tells Orfeo that they must part. Her sorrow at leaving him, and his denial of the possibility of their separation, give the reader a vivid understanding of the closeness of their marriage and their despair at losing each other. The later scene in which Orfeo sees Heurodis in the fairy hunt is equally effective:

Yern he bi-held hir, and sche him eke,  
Ac noither to other a word no speke.  
For messais that sche on him seighe  
That had ben so riche and so heighe  
The teres fel out of her eighe. (323-327)

Here they *cannot* speak to each other, but Heurodis weeps as she sees Orfeo in his suffering and poverty. After the careful building up of Heurodis's character and the strength of their mutual attachment, the reader would at least expect Heurodis to speak when Orfeo rescues her, or on the way home. We expect a joyful reunion scene, but we get only "His wiif he tok bi the hond / And dede him swithe out of that lond. . ." (473-4). We never hear Heurodis's reaction. Instead, the emphasis shifts to the steward, who has never before appeared in person, Orfeo simply having named him as his tentative heir before setting out for the wilderness. Although we know that Orfeo and Heurodis are going to live happily ever after, we feel that their story was broken off too abruptly, and a new interest which we were not really prepared for takes its place.

Because a lay is supposed to be, by definition, more compact and more focused than a romance, this introduction of what seems a new subject at the end is disconcerting. An audience accustomed to both lays and romances, however, would not find the shift odd, or even consider it a complete change of subject. The theme of the poem is faithfulness and lasting love—and it is not limited to passionate, courtly love. The first part (lines 1-476) concerns Orfeo's and Heurodis's love, and contains two scenes which show its intensity. After her rescue, the poem shifts to a variation on the same theme, the steward's and Orfeo's mutual love and loyalty (lines 477-604). There is a dramatic dialogue corresponding to that between Orfeo and Heurodis in part one, in which Orfeo

tells a tale of his own death to the steward, and the steward swoons for sorrow. Then follows the joyful recognition. The tale, therefore, is one of two different relationships, both honorable and stable, and both rewarded in the end. Romances sometimes seem to the modern reader diffuse, rambling, and repetitive works, in which many extraneous characters and episodes, seemingly unrelated to the main plot, are introduced without apology. To the mind accustomed to romances, however, these episodes *are* related. They show the same theme with variations, or the same plot device with different characters and a different effect. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart*, for instance, while the main plot concerns Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere, he rescues various irrelevant damsels in minor episodes along the way. Two different examples of loyalty and faithfulness would seem to a medieval audience to fit easily together in the same tale, even if the character in the second example were hardly introduced in the first part.

The tale is held together by the character of King Orfeo, seen first as the lover and beloved of Heurodis and then as the good master of a faithful servant. If Orfeo is such a completely admirable character, however, what becomes of his duty to his kingdom? His personal love for Heurodis seems to fill all his mind, and he abandons his kingdom without compunction to mourn for her in the wilderness. This irresponsible attitude seems out of character. If we look at other examples of mortal encounters with the Otherworld, however, we find that Orfeo's actions cannot be construed as irresponsible. In Celtic tales, a connection with the Otherworld is the mark of a king or a hero of royal blood. A journey to the Otherworld can be in itself a testing of kingship. In *The Adventures of Cormac*, for instance, the king of the *sid* takes away Cormac's wife and children into the Otherworld on purpose to draw Cormac there and test his "prince's truth."<sup>6</sup> Cormac is to tell three truths, which are tested by a magic cup. His wife and children are then returned to him, and the king of the *sid* then says that his whole purpose was to become friends with Cormac, thus cementing the bond between their families and their two worlds. It is interesting that in *Sir Orfeo* the winning of Heurodis also depends on the issue of Prince's Truth. Orfeo wins Heurodis by insisting that the fairy king hold to his royal word. When the king objects that it would be a "lothlich thing" for Heurodis to be seen in Orfeo's company, Orfeo responds, "O sir . . . gentil king, yete were it a fouler thing / To hear a lesing of thy mouth. / So sir, as ye seyde

nouthe, / What ich wold aski, have I schold, / And nedes thou must thi word hold" (463-468). In *The Phantom's Frenzy*, a tale of Cormac's grandfather Conn the Hundred-Fighter, Conn is brought into the Otherworld to have his own kingship validated by gifts from the king of the *sid* and a fairy woman who represents the Sovereignty of Ireland. It is essential in King Arthur's court for heroes like Sir Gawain to venture beyond the boundaries of the natural world to be tested by Otherworldly people like Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight. In this way the reputation of the court is continually reaffirmed. Also, although Orfeo's relationship with Heurodis is an intensely personal one, as his queen she is essential to his status as king. In *The Wooing of Etain*, Eochaid Airem's subjects do not consider him a real king until he is married, so that in order to maintain the political order he must find a wife. It is a mark of the favor of the Otherworld that the wife he finds comes from the *sid*. A good king must retain this favor in order to keep his kingdom prosperous, as is clearly shown in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, in which Conaire Mor, the descendant of Etain, is the perfect king until he loses the favor of the *sid*, but then his kingdom is destroyed. So Orfeo's kingdom and Heurodis may be inextricably linked, and he may need her, as he needs to have dared the dangers of the Otherworld, in order to be a true king.

In *Sir Orfeo*, the classical myth has been reworked both in mood and in its ultimate meaning. Instead of gloomy Dis, we have the bright but strange beauty of Fairyland. Instead of a myth which tells us that human happiness is fleeting, we have a tale that celebrates the triumph of love over the mysterious forces of the Otherworld. While Ovid's Orpheus is overwhelmed by an emotion which is moving but exasperating, Orfeo is restrained but dependable.<sup>7</sup> He does not appeal to the fairy king's sympathies, but tricks him into a rash promise. He wins the bargain with no conditions attached. When he and Heurodis leave Fairyland hand in hand, there is no need to look back.

In each story, the look marks the supreme moment. The rash love of Orpheus enables him to reach the Underworld but tempts him to look back. Sir Orfeo's love is steadfast. After ten years of waiting, he is finally vouchsafed the sight of Heurodis. One look passes between them, and that look draws him to follow her to the Otherworld and regain her without making any mistakes. The two parts of the story, the rescue of his wife and the testing of his steward, are drawn together by Orfeo's character, faithful,

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dependable, and able to bring about a happy restoration of both his marriage and his kingdom.

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Notes

1. Mitchell suggests that this gruesome passage is an interpolation, but Knapp points out that the fairy Otherworld is definitely hostile.
2. More information on people taken by the fairies is to be found in Allen, 102-111.
3. Grimaldi suggests that the fairy king abducts Heurodis on purpose to test him, not only as a "willful and capricious exertion of his powers to interfere in human affairs" (152).
4. "Jamie Freel and the Young Lady: A Donegal Tale." In W. B. Yeats, *Irish Folk and Fairy Tales*. New York: Dorset Press, n.d.
5. In Nic Leodhas. The story is called a *Sqeulachdan* from Cromarty on Moray Firth.
6. *The Adventures of Cormac, The Phantom's Frenzy, The Wooing of Etain, and The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* may be found in Cross and Slover.
7. Anderson finds Ovid's Orpheus "weirdly incompetent" (46). I find his criticism of Orpheus overly harsh, but there is no denying that Orpheus "muffed it."

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