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Sir Orfeo as a Story of Growth

Takami Matsuda

While *Sir Orfeo's* 'Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note' (602)¹ is almost unanimously accepted at its face value, critics are often at loss as to what exactly accounts for the charm of this particular lay. A careful look at the story shows that *Sir Orfeo* in fact has a very complex structure and theme, and its special quality owes a great deal to this complexity rather than to the lyrical naiveté of its narrative, which is only one aspect of its quality. The complexity arises more than anything else from the poet's intention to imbue the story with a Christian understanding of Orfeo's misfortune and still maintain his ultimate concern with love in this world. The story ends with the celebration of reunited love, but only after a long period of separation which forms the period of Orfeo's self-education. If we compare *Sir Orfeo* with other romances retaining a similar structure or theme, and then consider particular passages in terms of their traditional associations, we can trace the development of the poem which leads not only to the restoration of what is lost, but also to a new attitude to life by virtue of such education of a hero.

Much has been said in regard to the differences between the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* and its classical prototypes,² the most significant changes being the final recovery of Heurodis and the expanded interval between the abduction of the queen and Orfeo's entrance

into the Otherworld. Such changes allow us to see *Sir Orfeo* essentially as a romance of loss and recovery, designed for the restoration of a primary order, as opposed to a tragedy which disrupts it.³ When a mediaeval romance observes such circular structure, the possibility of death is very remote in its narrative because such unredeemable loss may shatter the expectation of a happy ending. Heurodis is not dead, but as the poet later reassures us in the description of the Otherworld garden, only *taken*. Whether such a story-pattern directly reflects some primitive Celtic belief, we cannot be too sure; however, it is not difficult to surmise that such belief must have appeared more appropriate to the poet's mind for the romance of loss and recovery, than the Christian idea of death.⁴

Since the structure as we have it now invites a comfortable 'sense of ending', it has become a popular form in a number of mediaeval romances.⁵ We see the protagonist deprived of his status, fame, beloved and so forth, as a result of some misfortune or treachery directed against him and consequently forced into exile. During the exile which lasts for some time, the protagonist faces further challenges and losses until he is left with virtually nothing. After the years of patient endurance of hardship, the restoration of the former state comes quite suddenly to him, often with some unexpected good fortune such as a chance meeting, help from a supernatural agent or a gratuitous gift. Once the fortune of the protagonist begins to turn favourable, the poet wastes no time in restoring the primary order as the story hurries toward a happy ending. While the period of suffering arouses a dramatic suspense and sympathy among the audience, making the protagonist a more likely candidate for a fortunate recovery, we sometimes see the protagonist himself go through a period of education which grants him a deeper under-

standing of his misfortune and transforms his world-view.⁶ When such education of a hero is present in the poem, not only is the emphasis on suffering balanced by the stress on a happy ending and a note of celebration, but the protagonist appears as a 'grown' figure who himself is capable of overcoming such misfortune.

Such structure may be readily discernible in the *Queste* romances such as Wolfram's *Parzival*, where the emphasis is shifted gradually from physical to spiritual recovery, or we may see it constituting the central episodes in the romances dealing with faeries, for example in *Sir Launfal* and *Ywain and Gawain*. This pattern, however, is most consciously observed in a group of romances classified by L.H. Hornstein as the 'Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda' type.⁷ The romances of this group are almost without exception a Job-like story of trial and faith, with a close resemblance to hagiography.⁸ Whether they are directly influenced by saints' lives or not, it is not difficult to see that such story-pattern should have become a favourite vehicle for mediaeval writers hoping to be both 'pleasant' and 'profitable'.⁹ As it is often difficult to maintain a balance between romance elements and a moral 'exemplum', didacticism sometimes encroaches upon the entire narrative bringing a romance closer to a saint's legend. In *Sir Isumbras*, a typical example of the above group, the reasons for the protagonist's fall and suffering are given at the outset in an explicitly Christian passage:

He seyde, 'Welcome, syr Isumbras:
Thow haste foryete what thou was,
For pryde of golde and fee.
The kynge of hevenn the gretheth so,
In yowthe or elde thou schall be wo:
Chese whedur hyt schall be.'¹⁰ (49-54)

In this example we find a crude attempt to incorporate a moral 'exemplum' into an elaborate romance.

Turning our attention to *Sir Orfeo*, we find that despite its similar structure, the elements of trial and faith do not constitute the central episode of the poem. Orfeo is not tested by some omniscient divine will superior to him but suddenly deprived of his queen by the merciless Otherworld king whose willful and unyielding power is expressed with 'a tragic inevitability' in the poem.¹¹ Equally, the despair at the loss of Heurodis motivates his *self-imposed* exile, or more precisely, retreat into the wood. *Sir Orfeo* is not a story about trial and faith, but about the loss and recovery of worldly love as distinct from religious love, and for that matter, a comparison with *Floriz and Blancheflour* makes clear further characteristics. The Middle English *Floriz and Blancheflour*, though stemming from a different tradition, has a structure similar to that of *Sir Orfeo*. The romance has a usual pattern of forced separation and a journey in search of the beloved, followed by a final reunion. While the entire narrative abounds with naive but intense expressions of joy and sorrow as in *Sir Orfeo*, there is also no indication of a divine tester and the story is, from beginning to end, simply about the love between Floriz and Blancheflour. However, while in *Sir Orfeo* the protagonist seems capable of self-education and transformation during his exile, Floriz starts out almost as *Dümmling*, and although he shows some signs of maturing during his quest, can only be reunited with his love through the mercy of Emir.

The comparison of *Sir Orfeo* with *Floriz and Blancheflour* has marked out one characteristic of the former: the presence of the education of a hero. The education, however, does not follow the usual pattern of a young protagonist instructed by some older, more

mature figure as we find, for example, in the Fair Unknown-type stories such as *Parzial* or *Lybeaus Desconus*. In the prologue, we find Orfeo already well established as a crown-bearer and a harper. In other words, the education of Orfeo is not a period of apprenticeship but a process of self-education which entails the understanding of Christian world-view and the acquisition of Boethian wisdom. In this sense, the description of the exile not only emphasizes Orfeo's isolation and nostalgia but also betrays a Christian modification of Orfeo's feeling of vanity. While the story carries Orfeo to the final recovery of Heurodis, Orfeo himself becomes more fit for such recovery through the lonely experience in the wood. The sojourn in the wilderness thus constitutes both the structural and thematic center of the poem and teaches Orfeo to see himself within a wider framework of divine love and order. The romance of Sir Orfeo becomes a story of personal growth as well as of the loss and recovery of love.

Another important characteristic of *Sir Orfeo* concerns the figure of Orfeo as a feudal king. In view of some mediaeval treatises on kingship, when Orfeo forsakes his kingdom, his conduct indeed comes close to that of the *rex inutilis* who forgets his duty in favour of more personal concern.¹² During Orfeo's absence, the people of the kingdom as represented by a steward and a beggar, anxiously await his return. The presence of this social bond, usually suppressed in *Sir Isumbras*-type romances and totally lacking in *Floriz and Blanche-flour*, elaborates the central theme of love with the secondary theme of the preservation of the kingdom. Unlike the major theme, this minor one is developed through the pattern of trial and faith imposed upon the steward, who lives up to the expectation of the king as well as of the audience and is in turn met with the return of the

grown king.

We have then a structure more complex than those found in other romances dealing with both an individual adventure and the fate of a community. Whereas in romances dealing with a personal adventure, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, its community (usually represented by the court) is a stable center of the story, from which the knight-errant departs and to which he eventually returns to mark the end of the story, in romances with 'the destruction of the kingdom' theme (of which the Morte Arthur theme is perhaps most familiar) we find some fatal flaws in the communal bond resulting in its final destruction while the hero-figure transcends the value of the failing community and rises above the final chaos, thus evading, as far as the whole narrative is concerned, the tone of utter tragedy to the last.¹³ In *Sir Orfeo*, it is instead the preservation of the kingdom corresponding to the fulfillment of Orfeo's personal adventure. The combination of the two themes, both successfully accomplished, increases the final note of celebration, and at the same time determines the path Orfeo should take as a feudal monarch when faced with personal adversity. The 'contemptu mundi' appropriate for a saint needs to be compromised here with the more practical ideals for a ruler.

We have so far pointed out several characteristics of *Sir Orfeo* in comparison with other romances. First of all, *Sir Orfeo* is a story about the separation and reunion of lovers, conforming to the pattern of loss and recovery. There is no element of trial and faith in this major theme, but only the unexplained intrusion of the Otherworld, the inevitability of which is effectively conveyed in the expressions of intense sorrow and joy. Along with this major theme, we find the secondary theme of the preservation of the kingdom in the form

of the trial of the steward's faith. At the same time, the education of a hero enables Orfeo to attain a Christian understanding of his adversity and allows us to see secular love and ideals within a wider framework. When this is achieved not only Orfeo but the entire community regains a primary stability, this time underlied by the deeper understanding of the human condition. The education of a hero introduces the element of growth into the story of loss and recovery, without sacrificing the dynamic conflict between this world and the Otherworld or the story's ultimate concern with the values of this world. As is well attested by the final note of celebration, the growth enables a deeper appreciation of the values of this world, by seeing them within a larger framework, instead of the resigning of this world in favour of heaven. The balance between the story of love and the Christian view is ingeniously maintained so that the story becomes neither too didactic as in the case of *Sir Isumbras* nor too immersed in the pursuit of worldly joy. But in what way does the growth of Orfeo as well as the entire community take place and how is the story of love finally balanced with the Christian understanding of man? To study this development, we must now turn to a more detailed reading of the poem.

The story gets going with the description of spring, a conventional exordium for the main adventure in romance.

Bifel so in þe comessing of May
 (When miri & hot is þe day,
 & o-way beþ winter-schours,
 & eueri field is ful of flours,
 & blosme breme on eueri bou3
 Ouer-al wexeþ miri anou3)
 Þis ich quen, Dame Heurodis,

Tok to maidens of priis,
 & went in an vndrentide
 To play bi an orchard-side,
 To se þe floures sprede & spring,
 & to here þe foules sing. (57-68)

While the careless overuse of the rhetorical 'descriptio temporum' tends to obscure the connection between prologue and theme, here the prologue functions as a subtle introduction to the following scene and looks forward to the later education of the hero.¹⁴ The description offers a typically idyllic background for merry-making and love, as is most appropriate for peaceful rest in a flowering orchard, but at the same time, we immediately recognize another aspect pertinent to the 'descriptio veri', the brevity and transiency of its beauty. As is clearly seen in such passages as 'Certes it es more flyttyngre than the mutabilite of floures of the somer sesoun' and 'quoniam tanquam fenum velociter arescit et sicut olera herbarum cito cadit', the traditional association of the seasons with mutability recurs in a number of mediaeval lyrics and religious writings as well as in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* where the seasons are the favourite Boethian similes for the transiency of earthly goods.¹⁵ Furthermore, we find in the mediaeval 'débat' that spring beauty achieves its full significance only when set against the harshness of winter, that is, when seen as a part of the interminable change in nature.¹⁶ Thus we are given a picture of spring which is at once a representation of idyllic beauty and peace and, as the passage's 'backward glance at winter' suggests ('o-way beþ winter-schours'),¹⁷ 'the sign and synonym' of 'all-devouring Mutability'.¹⁸ When Heurodis, unaware of this double nature, unsuspectingly falls asleep under a 'ympe-tre', we feel that she is too credulous and the

present harmony rests on the dangerous balance between the two aspects.

The sudden disruption of this quiet harmony is conveyed first through Heurodis' unexplained hysteria and changed countenance. The poet withheld the explanation to present the contrast visually, but when everything is clarified, the strong union of the lovers stands in painful contrast to the senselessness of the forced separation. Throughout the scene, the emphasis falls on the unexplained inevitability of the separation and on the relentless force of the Otherworld. The threat of the Otherworld king carries the horror of physical torture as if to correspond to the earlier description of Heurodis' changed countenance:

“Loke, dame, to-morwe þatow be
Riȝt here vnder þisy mpe-tre,
& þan þou schalt wiþ ous go,
& liue wiþ ous euer-mo;
& ȝif þou makest ous y-let,
Whar þou be, þou worst y-fet,
& to-tore þine limes al,
Þat noþing help þe no schal;
& þei þou best so to-torn,
ȝete þou worst wiþ ous y-born.” (165-174)

The threat implies no trial by a superior divine power, but the Otherworld is simply a meaningless enemy within the human realm. Orfeo's response to the scene is also expressive of the most intense feeling:

‘Allas!’ quap he, ‘For-lorn icham!
Whider wiltow go, & to wham?
Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe,
& whider y go þou schalt wiþ me.’ (127-130)

We may compare this with the equally moving lines from Marie de France :

Bele amie, si est de nus :
Ne vus sanz mei, ne jeo sanz vus.¹⁹

Although such sublimated passion is not uncommon in a more or less idealized romance-setting, in both cases the passages stand out from the rest of the story for their ability to render feeling directly into speech.²⁰ The emphasis on the inevitable separation is balanced by the strength of love, making the separation all the more painful. It becomes necessary to grasp the intensity of feeling displayed here in order to understand Orfeo's primary reason for his self-imposed exile since, in view of the excessive grief shown, Orfeo's decision is perfectly understandable as the determination to fulfill his earlier vow. As long as he cannot follow Heurodis into the Otherworld the most sensible choice is to forsake, on his part, all that is lost to Heurodis.

At this point, the poet introduces the secondary theme of the story: the preservation of the kingdom in the form of the trial of the steward's faith. The appointment of a regent places the steward, who is also grief-stricken at his lord's departure, in the same position as the king. The steward's feudal love is being tested, particularly since Orfeo may not return to claim the kingdom, while Orfeo himself endures his change of fortune in the wilderness. We have then the main theme and the sub-theme proceeding in parallel, both of which should be successful to restore complete order to the kingdom.

As noted earlier, Orfeo's exile is not forced, nor may all the

losses be attributed to the change of fortune.²¹ Orfeo's exile should thus be distinguished from those found in *Sir Isumbras*, *Emaré*, or *Octovian Imperator* which are cases of enforced exiles followed by repeated assays. As to the changes described in lines 241-262, he did not lose them but forsook them. Orfeo meets no further assays aside from the discomfort of living in the wood, which he may well have expected. The similarity which the present description shares with those in saints' lives has led some critics to seek for its analogues in the moralizing tradition and sometimes regard the exile as a period of penance.²² However, despite some apparent similarities, the exile here is almost uniquely motivated by Orfeo's personal despair and characterized by the lack of a prospective destination and a specific means of recovery.

In the description of Orfeo's self-exile, the isolation and sorrow of an exiled figure are juxtaposed with the Christian 'vanitas' theme which may be traditionally coupled with the description of a court, a feast or seasons. The passage contrasts Orfeo's present state with past comforts:

He þat hadde y-werd þe fowe & griis,
 & on bed þe purper biis
 —Now on hard heþe he liþ,
 Wiþ leues & gresse he him wriþ.
 He þat hadde had castels & tours,
 Riuer, forest, friþ wiþ flours
 —Now, þei it comenci to snewe & frese,
 Þis king mot make his bed in mese.
 He þat had y-had kniztes of priis
 Bifor him kneland, & leuedis
 —Now seþ he no-þing þat him likeþ,
 Bot wilde wormes bi him strikeþ.
 He þat had y-had plenté
 Of mete & drink, of ich deynté

—Now may he al-day digge & wrote
 Er he finde his fille of rote.
 In somer he liueþ bi wild frut,
 & berien bot gode lite;
 In winter may he noþing finde
 Bot rote, grases, & þe rinde.
 Al his bodi was oway duine
 For missays, and al to-chine. (241-262)

The use of contrastive devices prompts a comparison with a secular lyric whose subject is also the change from the past:

I Must go walke þe woed so wyld,
 & wander here & there
 in dred & dedly ffere;
 ffor where I trusted I am begyld,
 & all ffor on.

Thus am I banysshyd ffrom my blys
 by craft & false pretens,
 fautles with-out offens,
 as off return no certen ys,
 and all for ffer off on.

my bed schall be under þe grenwod tre,
 a tufft off brakes vnder my hed,
 as on ffrom Ioye were fled;
 thus from my lyff day by day I flee,
 and all ffor on.

The Ronnyng stremes shall be my drynke,
 acorns schalbe my ffode;
 nothyng may do me good,
 but when of your bewty I do thynk,
 & all ffor lowe off on.²³

The passage from *Sir Orfeo* is less personal in its tone and more conscious in the use of contrast, conveying the change from the

past in explicitly objective terms. The passage carries a strong sense of isolation experienced by the exiled figure in terms of both physical separation from the past court life and spiritual estrangement from all that used to give him joy. As amply illustrated by the exiled figures in Old English Elegies, isolation is inseparable from painful nostalgia for the past which one believes unredeemable or does not know how to recover, and the same feeling of being cut off from the past characterizes the mental state of our exiled king. The poet deliberately juxtaposes past and present and translates Orfeo's suffering into the physical discomforts of living in the wood. Not only is Orfeo 'Allone, withouten any compaignye' seeing before him only 'wilde wormes' but his isolation and nostalgia are seen rising to the physical tortures of hunger and cold standing in stark contrast to the past which, Orfeo believes, will not return. The comparison may be extended to the use of contrast in a similar context, this time in the *Seafarer*:

Hwilum ylfete song
 dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor
 ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor weras,
 mæw singende fore medodrince. (19b-22)²⁴

The feelings of isolation and nostalgia are further enhanced by the association the passage bears to the 'vanitas' theme which, when expressed in religious lyrics, often has recourse to similar contrastive devices.²⁵ While the rhetorical antithesis contrasting past and present frequently appears in lyrics, the dominant images of court life may be traditionally associated with vainglory and the vanity of such earthly joy. Since nowhere in the poem we find Orfeo described as a vainglorious king, here the association suggests the vanity of these

former comforts which quickly lost their meaning for Orfeo with the abduction of the queen. *De Misera Conditionis Humane* states the idea explicitly, but examples are not difficult to find in Middle English lyrics either :²⁶

Vanyte.

O Vanyte off vanytes & all is vanite!
lo! how þis werld is turnyd vp & downe,
Now wele, now wo, now tranquilyte,
Now werre, now pese, & now rebilyoun.
Iff þu wole daly labour fore renowne,
 ffore profete, plesure, astate, ore grete degre,
 The best þer-of schall ende in vanyte.
þit beldis þu castellus, haulys, townys & towris,
Sytis & bourges, with wallis stoute & stronge,
With plesand herbours, of chambours & of bouris,
Hangyd with Arras stoutly depe & longe,
With rych presyus stones sete A-monge,
 Ennewyd with gold, rych as it may be-
 þit schall all waste & turne to vanyte.²⁷

Similarly, lines 257-60 describing the passage of time as Orfeo saw, imply the swift change of the seasons and the related idea of mutability.²⁸ The change of seasons that may be used to signal the transiency and instability of human affairs is well attested in the following example from Lydgate:

Now briht as Phebus, now reyn, and now shynyng,
 Now silver dewh, now fressh with April flours,
How shuld man than be stedfast of lyvyng?²⁹

A similar idea may be found also in the following example:

Wyndes Rosscheþ her and henne,
 In snouȝ and reyn is non arest;

Whon þis wol stunte, ho wot or whenne,
 But only god on grounde grest?
 Þe eorþe in on is euer prest,
 Now bi-dropped, now al druyze;
 But vche gome glit forþ as a gest,
 Þis world fareþ as a Fantasye.³⁰

The above examples provide useful analogues for Orfeo's feeling of vanity as he observes the passing of years in the wilderness. Orfeo's feeling for the past is no ordinary 'Ubi Sunt' nostalgia which, by virtue of repeated rhetoric, is prone to the generalization of the past as well as of present and future, often with elegiac sweetness;³¹ rather, it is a painful experience of being radically cut off from the past and feeling the past is nothing but vanity.

However, as seen in the structure of mutability lyrics, such a feeling of vanity enables one to direct his mind to a deeper understanding of the adverse situation and then to the resignation of worldly joy for eternal bliss.³² In the equal manner, Orfeo undergoes the self-education and follows the development of religious lyrics. For example, the above lines from Lydgate end with the following exhortation to God:

Man! left vp thyn eye to the heuene,
 And pray the Lord, which is eternal,
 That sitt so ferre above the sterrys sevene,
 In his paleys moost imperyal,
 To graunt the grace heer in this liff mortal,
 Contricioun, shrifft, hoosyl at thy partyng,
 And, or thu passe, remyssioun fynal,
 Toward that lyf wher ioye is ay lastyng!

Orfeo comes to see his past not radically cut off, but that worldly joy is by nature transitory, such being the law decreed by Heaven.

Gradually Orfeo comes to see his former joy, the sudden change of fortune and his present misery as a sequence firmly bound by the law of mutability. The understanding is essentially Boethian:

Rara si constat sua forma mundo,
Si tantas variat vices,
Crede fortunis hominum caducis,
Bonis crede fugacibus.
Constat aeterna positumque lege est
Ut constet genitum nihil.³³

However, Orfeo is not led to resignation or 'contemptu mundi' but, most appropriate for romance, to the reaffirmation of the transitory beauty on earth. In this respect his understanding is analogous to Deor's calm attitude to life, which is characterized by the positive acceptance of the present and a new hope for the future.³⁴

The development of Orfeo may be illustrated in the poem by comparing two descriptions of a faery company.

He miȝt se him bisides
(Oft in hot vnder-tides)
Ȓe king o fairy wiȝ his rout
Com to hunt him al about
Wiȝ dim cri & bloweing,
& houndes also wiȝ him berking;
Ac no best ȝai no nome,
No neuer he nist whider ȝai bi-come.
& oȝer while he miȝt him se
As a gret ost bi him te,
Wele atourned, ten hundred kniȝtes,
Ich y-armed to his riȝtes,
Of cuntenaunce stout & fers,
Wiȝ mani desplaid baners,
& ich his swerd y-drawe hold
—Ac neuer he nist whider ȝai wold.
& oȝer while he seiȝe oȝer ȝing:

Kniztes & leuedis com daunceing
 In queynt atire, gisely,
 Queynt pas & softly;
 Tabours & trunpes 3ede hem bi,
 & al maner menstraci.

(281-301)

An unproductive hunt, a march without a destination, and the overall unreality of the description may well suggest that they appear only in Orfeo's dream or hallucination.³⁵ In this respect, the reading of 'dim' for 'dine' suggested by D.M. Hill deserves attention.³⁶ 'Dim' may sound more 'poetic' as A.J. Bliss says in his edition,³⁷ but the lines are certainly not intended to convey Tennysonian yearning for faeryland. Orfeo is first overwhelmed by the cacophonous clamour and rich display of glory showing his former joy and the cause of the present misery in one scene. It is only after Orfeo has sufficiently gone through the period of education that the painful experience gives way to a calmer encounter. In the picturesque description of the second *productive* hunt, a hawking scene becomes a pleasant enjoyable picture of his former life. When Orfeo is capable of this change in attitude and appreciates the beauty of life with pure joy and laughter, he can make a positive resolution to follow Heurodis into the Otherworld, forsaking the little that is left to him. Thus Orfeo comes out of the wood, the place of primieval chaos and the abode of wild beasts.³⁸ Orfeo is now once again able to appreciate the beauty of this world and find a meaning in his life but he is also aware that they are transitory by nature and such beauty itself owes much to the transiency.

The following scene accomplishes Orfeo's triumph over the Otherworld which is described as a direct antithesis to Orfeo's world. Its 'Riuers, forestes, frip wip flours' (160) do not fade as those in

Orfeo's world (246) nor is there any change of seasons, not even a natural distinction between day and night.³⁹ Although the description bears a superficial resemblance to a visionary paradise, the emphasis falls more on the horror of stasis than on eternal bliss.⁴⁰ In the description of the garden of the 'morts vivants', the poet states explicitly that these figures are not dead. Just as the frozen images on the statue of Mars in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, they remain in the world of 'meaningless eternal stasis' where both 'wele' and 'wo' stay forever unchanged.⁴¹ The Otherworld is then completely alien to mutability and to the fragile beauty it creates. When Orfeo charms the faery king with the ephemeral music of a harp and successfully recovers Heurodis, he symbolically places the value of this world of mutability above the counter-world.⁴² Although on the narrative level the recovery of Heurodis takes the form of a rash promise, the presence of Christian or Boethian elements allows us to see the recovery as a result of Orfeo's spiritual growth. Through the sojourn in the wilderness where the Boethian idea of mutability is effectively incorporated into the description of the king's isolation and nostalgia, Orfeo's appreciation of life now rests upon more secure ground. In the Boethian version of the story, such secure ground can only be in the direction of heaven:

Vos haec fabula respicit
 Quicumque in superum diem
 Mentem ducere quaeritis.
 Nam qui Tartareum in specus
 Victus lumina flexerit,
 Quidquid praecipuum trahit
 Perdit, dum videt inferos.⁴³

It is only appropriate that Boethius should affix a moral tag to direct

one's mind to the heaven since the idea of mutability is relevant only when seen in contrast to another world of permanence and stability.⁴⁴ In comparison with Boethius, the emphasis of our poem falls more on the proper understanding and appreciation of life than on the eternal bliss to which one's mind should be eventually turned. But before turning to this final destination, the poem becomes immersed in the celebration of the reunited bond of love and feudal relations.

Returning eventually to his kingdom, Orfeo is met with the faithful steward who, despite his grief, kept the kingdom in its ideal state. Welcomed by the courtiers who can say 'It nis no bot of mannes dep' (552), Orfeo's growth is seen to correspond to that of the court which has also matured during his absence. Thus toward the end both heterosexual and feudal love are rewarded and celebrated when both the protagonist and his community regain their primary order, now secured by the deeper recognition of the fragile qualities of life.

In view of the preceding discussions, *Sir Orfeo* may be read as the story of a protagonist's education and growth. The education of the hero which constitutes the thematic as well as the structural core of the entire poem draws upon the Boethian idea of mutability disguised under the moving picture of the exiled king. This aspect maintains a balance with the poem's lyrical narrative, expressive of genuine sorrow and joy, so that toward the end the note of celebration increases with growing suspense. However, the poem does not exactly end with this note of celebration and reconfirmation of life; while such a note is maintained toward the very end, in the Auchinleck version, the poet subtly hints at the future death of the king.⁴⁵

Now King Orfeo newe coround is,
 & his quen, Dame Heurodis,
 & liued long after-ward,
 & seþþen was king þe steward. (593-596)

We may rest assured that for the people who are able to say 'It nis no bot of mannes deþ', such an idea is in no way incompatible with the appreciation of love in this world. Here the idea of death does not introduce an effective but discordant note as in the end of *Ywain and Gawain*:

And so Sir Ywain and his wive
 In joy and blis þai led þaire live.
 So did Lunet and þe liown
 Until þat ded haves dreven þam down. (4023-4026)⁴⁶

In the acceptance of death as a rational outcome of this transitory world we may say that Orfeo as well as his courtiers have taken another step toward the recognition of the all-embracing order of God, and we feel that the following passage from Boethius is quite appropriate to end this romance of love:

Hic sancto populos quoque
 Iunctos foedere continet,
 Hic et coniugii sacrum
 Castis nectit amoribus,
 Hic fidis etiam sua
 Dictat iura sodalibus.
 O felix hominum genus,
 Si vestros animos amor
 Quo caelum regitur regat.⁴⁷

NOTES

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The abbreviations used in the notes follow the format of Severs' *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* Vol. I.

1. All the quotations from and references to *Sir Orfeo* are taken from the Auchinleck MS. as edited by A. J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo* (Oxford: 1966²).
2. cf. *Metamorphoses*, x. 1-111, xi. 1-84; *Georgicus*, iv. 453-527. For the possible sources of the above see G. M. H. Murphy ed. *Ovid: Metamorphoses Book XI* (Oxford: 1972) p. 43. For the transformation of the Orpheus legend and its development in the Middle Ages, see J. B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass: 1970); 'Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon' *Spec* xli (1966) 22-9. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, 'Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages' *Spec* xli (1966) 643-55. J. Burke Severs, 'The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*' in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor A. C. Baugh* ed. M. Leach, (Philadelphia: 1961), pp. 187-207.
3. cf. D. S. Brewer, 'The Nature of Romance' *Poetica* (Tokyo) ix (1978) 9-48.
4. For the possible Celtic background, see D. Allen, 'Orpheus and Orfeo: the Dead and the *Taken*' *MAE* xxxiii (1964) 102-11; C. Davis, 'Classical Threads in Orfeo' *MLR* lvi (1961) 161-6; 'Ympe Tre and Nemeton' *N&Q* ix (1962) 6-9. For an overall survey see H. R. Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, Mass: 1950).
5. J. Frappier appropriately calls the preference for a happy ending 'l'optimisme métaphysique, supranaturel' in 'Orphée et Proserpine ou la lyre et la harpe' *Mélanges offert à le Gentil* (Paris: 1973), p. 290.
6. cf. M. Manzalaoui, 'The Hero Transformed: A Theme in Later Medieval Narrative' *Etudes Anglaises* xxx (1977) 145-57; M. P. Cosman, *The Education of the Hero in Arthurian Romance* (Chapel Hill: 1965).
7. J. Burke Severs ed. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, vol. I (New Haven: 1967), pp. 120-32.
8. The point is noted by R. Woolf in *History of Literature in the English Language*, vol. I, ed. W. F. Bolton (London: 1970), pp. 267-9.
9. cf. the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, 11.9-11.
10. edited by M. Mills in *Six Middle English Romances* (London: 1973).
11. D. M. Hill, 'The Structure of *Sir Orfeo*' *MS* xxiii (1961) 140.
12. cf. L. K. Born, 'The Perfect Prince: A Study in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Ideals' *Spec* iii (1928) 470-504; E. Peters, *The Shadow King* (New Haven: 1970); E. D. Kennedy, 'Sir Orfeo as Rex Inutilis' *Annuaire Medievale* xvii (1976) 88-110.
13. cf. J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: 1965), p. 9. However, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* although Gawain's adventure comes to an end with his return to Camelot, the

entire story retains a note of continuity. See my 'The Linear View of the World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*' *Colloquia* (Keio Univ. the Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Div. of Eng. Lit., Tokyo) ii (1981) 1-23.

14. cf. R. W. V. Elliott, 'Landscape and Rhetoric in Middle English Alliterative Poetry' *Melbourne Critical Review* iv (1961) 65-76.
15. *Boece* (ed. F. N. Robinson, 1957²), III. p. 8; *De Misera Conditionis Humane* (ed. R. E. Lewis, 1978), II. 40; *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (ed. H. F. Stewart et al., 1973), I.m. 5, II. p. 2, II.m. 3, III. p. 8. Also see Lydgate's *As a Mydsomer Rose* in *The Minor Works of John Lydgate*, pt. II, ed. H. M. MacCracken, (Oxford: 1934), pp. 780-5.
16. H. Cooper, *Pastoral: Mediaeval into Renaissance* (Ipswich: 1977), p. 15.
17. F. Riddy, 'The Uses of the Past in *Sir Orfeo*' *The Yearbook of English Studies* vi (1976) 9.
18. R. Tuve, *Seasons and Months* (Cambridge: 1933/1974), p. 45.
19. *Chievrefoil*, 11. 77-8 (ed. J. Rychner, 1978).
20. cf. J. E. Stevens, *Medieval Romance* (London: 1973), pp. 29-49. The relation to a marital vow is discussed by H. Bergner, 'Sir Orfeo and the Sacred Bond of Matrimony' *RES* NS xxx (1979) 432-4.
21. cf. K. R. R. Gros Louis, 'The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile' *RES* NS xviii (1967) 245-52.
22. For example see *The Parson's Tale*, X. 344. cf. Woolf, pp. 268-9; Gros Louis, 'Self-Exile', p. 247. Woolf's view is questioned by G. Johnston, 'The Breton Lays in Middle English' in G. Turville-Petre & J. S. Martin eds. *Iceland and the Mediaeval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell* (Melbourne: 1974), pp. 160-1.
23. R. H. Robbins ed. *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford: 1955²), no. 20.
24. I. L. Gordon ed. *The Seafarer* (London: 1960). G. V. Smithers, 'Story-Patterns in Some Breton Lays' *MAE* xxii (1953) 86n notes that this is the only example of such contrast aside from *Sir Orfeo*. Physical discomforts coupled with mental sorrow are favourite images in Old English Elegies: e.g. *The Wanderer*, 11. 24-5; *Wulf and Eadwacer*, 11. 13-5.
25. Examples will be found in C. Brown ed. *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford: 1932), no. 29b, 64; *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, rev. by G. V. Smithers, (Oxford: 1957) no. 9, 25, 106, 134; *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* (Oxford: 1939), no. 151. F. Riddy (p. 10) notes that the use of the contrast describing Heurodis' changed countenance is reminiscent of the lyrics of the Passion; from the above, *Brown XIII* no. 64 and *XIV* no. 25 are such examples.
26. *De Misera*, I. 20. cf. *Brown XIV*, no. 101, *XV*, no. 151 and Old English *Vainglory*.
27. *Brown XV*, no. 151.
28. cf. *Brown XIII*, no. 7, 10, 43; *XIV*, no. 9.
29. MacCracken ed., p. 735. In the Ashmole version of the *Secretum Sece-*

lorum (ed. M. Manzalaoui, 1977, pp. 56-9) seasons stand for the synonym of the mutability of life when each season is likened to women of various ages.

30. *Brown XIV*, no. 106.
31. For the 'Ubi Sunt' formula see E. Gilson, 'de la Bible à François Villon' in *Les Idées et les Lettres* (Paris: 1955), pp. 9-38; J. J. Mogan, *Chaucer and the Theme of Mutability* (The Hague: 1969), pp. 43-6; J. E. Cross, 'Ubi Sunt Passages in Old English-Sources and Relationships' *Vetenskaps-Societetens i Lund Årsbok* (1956) 25-44.
32. This is clearly seen in the lyric entitled *Vbi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerunt* (*Brown XIII*, no. 48).
33. *De Consolatione Philosophiae* eds. H. F. Stewart et al. (London: 1973), II. m. 3: 'Earth's beauty seldom stays, but ever changes. / Go on, then: trust in the passing fortunes, / The fleeting pleasure of men! / It is decreed by firm, eternal law / Nothing comes to be can firm remain. (translation in the above edition).
34. cf. K. S. Kiernan, 'Deor: the Consolation of Anglo-Saxon Boethius' *NM* lxxix (1978) 333-40. Kiernan considers Geat and Mæðhild episode as a close analogue of Orpheus and Eurydice.
35. The scene may be compared with the sequence of 'memory, dream, and hallucination' (R. F. Leslie ed. *The Wanderer* [Manchester: 1966], p. 8) in the *Wanderer*.
36. Hill, pp. 136-7.
37. p. 53.
38. cf. Bernardus Silvestris, *Commentary on the First Six Books of Virgil's Aeneid*, eds. E. G. Schreiber & T. E. Maresca, (Lincoln, Neb: 1974), pp. 60-1; P. Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape* (Montreal: 1971), pp. 113-5.
39. Lydgate compares the changes of fortune to the natural change of day and night: ed. MacCracken, p. 809.
40. cf. B. Nolan, *Gothic Visionary Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: 1977), pp. 136-9.
41. P. R. Orton, 'Some Problems in *Sir Orfeo*' *N&Q* NS xxvii (1980) 199.
42. The importance of music and sound is noted, among others, by M. D. Bristol, 'The Structure of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*' *Papers in Language & Literature* vi (1970) 339-47; N. H. Keeble, 'The Narrative Achievement of *Sir Orfeo*' *ES* lvi (1975) 193-206.
43. *De Cons.*, III. m. 12: To you this tale refers, / Who seek to lead your mind / Into the upper day; / For he who overcome should turn back his gaze / Towards the Tartarean cave, / Whatever excellence he takes with him / He loses when he looks on those below.
44. cf. Mogan, p. 22.
45. T. B. Hanson, 'Sir Orfeo: Romance as Exemplum' *Annuaire Medievale* xiii (1972) 135-54, compares the Auchinleck with the Harley version.
46. *Ywain and Gawain* eds. A. B. Friedman & N. T. Harrington (Oxford: 1964).

47. *De Cons.*, II. m. 8: And love joins peoples too / By a sacred bond, /
And ties the knot of holy matrimony / That binds chaste lovers, /
Joins too with its law / All faithful comrades. / O happy race of men, /
If the love that rules the stars / May also rule your hearts!