# PATTERNS OF THINKING IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCES:
## AN INTERPRETATION OF "SIR ORFEO" AND "THE WOOING OF ETAINE"

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The present article is concerned with the question of the world-view that seems to lie behind the medieval romance. According to Northrope Frye, the world-view represented by the romance is essentially dualistic and based on pairs of binary oppositions:

> The hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict, however, takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. Hence the opposite poles of the cycles of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy. The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth.
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> (Frye 1957: 187-8)

Frederic Jameson basically subscribes to this point of view claiming that the element of magic, so typical of those tales, serves to emphasize the absolute difference between the worlds of good and evil and the magic as such can be derived from thinking in terms of that difference:

> [T]he belief in good and evil is precisely a magical thought mode, this is, one which springs from a precapitalist, essentially agricultural way of life. It is defficult to imagine a conflict of magical forces which would not be marked in some way as positive and negative, or in other words, ultimately, as a struggle between good and evil, between white magic and black magic.
>
> (Jameson 1975:141)

Jameson connects this way of thinking with a feeling of nostalgia for a social order in which the main lines of social conflict did not lie within a given society, but primarily between that society and an alternative, hostile one:

> The social antagonism involved is therefore quite distinct from the conflict of two groups or classes within a given social order, as in the case of recent times, say, between labor and

capital; and the archaic character of the categories of romance (magic, good and evil, otherness) suggests that this genre expresses a nostalgia for a social order in the process of being undermined and destroyed by nascent capitalism, yet still for the moment coexisting side by side with the latter.

(Jameson 1975: 158)

It is fairly obvious, however, that the ideology of the medieval romance cannot be reduced to the purely negative formula of a reactionary nostalgia for the times irretrievably past when the warfaring noblemen felt indispensable to the communal defence. Romances can also be seen in a more positive light as an effort on the part of the aristocracy to define their role and to defend their social position in a world increasingly domainated by the centralized government and by the rising middle class who refuse to take for granted the traditional privileges of the nobility. Eugene Vance, for example, regards this genre as a highly ingenious ploy of the aristocracy to restate their dominant role in terms of a psychological or erotic combat, rather than a military or purely physical one:

> In contrast with epic, whose concerns continued to focus on political issues of an immediate sort, romance encouraged the warfaring aristocracy to project their concerns into the sphere of psychological and erotic relationships with members of their own caste, thereby invoking a kind of solepsism to protect the prestige of chivalry from the increasing obsolescence of its social functions.

(Vance 1973:566)

Consequently, the young chivalric hero of the romance wins his major victories in the fields of psychological maturation, courtly love, and good manners, becoming a paragon of self-restraint and a carrier of culture, rather than a military champion, even though he does not give up completely the latter role either:

> Indeed, we are only beginning to appreciate the effectiveness with which the aristocracy of the later Middle Ages developed an elaborate system of rituals that served at once to maintain the social hierarchy and yet to allow for change, growth, and even for mobility within that hierarchy.

(Vance 1973:565)

The growing refinement of the medieval romance, the process of which can be identified with the passage from "chanson de geste" to the late medieval romance, had to bring about also a redefinition of the romance hero's attitude towards the originally hostile, supernatural sphere of "otherness". This point is duly appreciated by Jameson:

> Romance "solves" this conceptual dilemma by producing a new kind of narrative, the "story" of something like a semic evaporation. The hostile knight, in armor, his identity unknown, exudes that insolence which marks a fundamental refusal of recognition and stamps him as a bearer of the category of evil, up to the moment when, defeated and unmasked, he asks for mercy by *telling his name*... at which point, reinserted into the unity of the social class, he becomes one more knight among others and loses all his sinister unfamiliarity.

(Jameson 1981:118—9)

Thus, what formerly was perceived as an absolute, insurmountable difference, is now overcome and assimilated in the spirit of an aristocratic class solidarity.

Indeed, there seem to be two forces operative in the romances: a defamiliarizing one, focused on the basic opposition between good and evil, and an "enfamiliarizing" one, which imposes on that opposition the moral but, above all, aesthetic concept of the aristocratic ethos. Both of these aspects of the medieval romance can of course be seen as endeavours on the part of the insecure noblemen to "justify" their social claims. First they plead that they are indispensable in the conditions of a communal crisis, as champions of righteousness, and then they pose as members of an esoteric order endowed with charismatic qualities, derived from the rituals of knighthood and courtly love, owing to which they can converse with the Otherworld and inspire a quasi-religious awe and wonder in the lower classes.

It is against this ideological backdrop that I will try to interpret two medieval tales connected with each other by some striking similarities in plot, though very different in several other repects. "The Wooing of Etaine" is a ninth century Irish legendary tale, strongly redolent of Irish pagan religion and mythology. It is basically a story

> which tells how Etain, wooed and won by Mider in the otherworld, was transformed into a brilliantly coloured fly by her rival Fuamnach, who blew her into this world, where, swallowed in a drink by an Ulster queen, she was reborn as human. Wooed once more in human shape by the king of Tara, she was ultimately won back to the otherworld by Mider as the result of a rash stake made by the king in a game of fidchell.

(Knott, Murphy 1966: 112)

Etain, who is described as "the fairest and gentlest and most beautiful woman in Eriu", (Gantz 1983: 43) eventually changes hands several times. The first to woo her seems to be Oengus, Mider's foster-son, who wins her on Mider's behalf. Transferred to Mider, she is changed into a magic fly by Fuamnach, Mider's jealous ex-wife, and in this peculiar form she comes back to Oengus. She stays with him until, driven by a magic wind sent by Fuamnach, she undergoes her first rebirth from the body of an earthly woman. In the second second section of the tale she is claimed by two brothers, Echu and Ailill. It is Echu who eventually wins her, but she manages to comfort Ailill in his love-sickness as well. In the final section it is Mider and Echu who contest her; she is won by Mider, but Echu claims her back, even though he has to content himself with Etain's daughter, who, however, is practically indistinguishable from the mother. Thus, "Etain goes from Echu to Mider, back to Echu (in the person of her daughter), back to Mider and, in some traditions, back to Echu" (Gantz 1983: 38).

It is easy to explain this astounding mutability by referring it to the mythological thinking in terms of incessant seasonal changes (cf. Gantz 1983: 38), with Etain representing the spirit of Nature, or the earth goddess, and undergoing a complex process of metamorphoses, apparent deaths and resurrections. This may be true, but in fact Etain's changeability and her capacity for quick transformation goes far beyond the stately rhythm of a typical seasonal motif. We read, for example, that:

With that, Etain sat in the chair in the centre of the house, whereupon Fuamnach struck her with a wand of scarlet rowan and turned her into a pool of water. ... The heat of the fire and the air and the seething of the ground combined to turn the pool of water that was in the centre of the house into a worm into a scarlet fly. The fly was the size of the head of the handsomest man in the land, and the sound of its voice and the beating of its wings were sweeter than pipes and harps and horns. Its eyes shone like precious stones in the dark, and its colour and fragrance could sate hunger and quench thirst in any man; moreover, a sprinkling of the drops it shed from its wings could cure every sickness and affliction and disease. This fly accompanied Mider as he travelled through his land, and listening to it and gazing upon it nourished hosts in their meetings and assemblies.

(Gantz 1983: 45)

If seems thus possible to define the nature of Etaine as the potentiality of being everything to everybody and of being everything in herself, i.e. of uniting in herself almost all possible modes of existence. She may indeed stand for the very principle, a conclusion that can be borne out by her curious connection with water.

A good key to the character of Etaine can be found in the concept of "universal interconnectedness" vs. "isolation", developed by a Swiss student of folktales, Max Lüthi. Commenting on the style of European wondertales, he says the following:

> Visible isolation and invisible universal interconnectedness can be regarded as the principal formal features of the wondertale. The isolated figures come together, invisibly connected, in a harmonius ensemble. Both aspects are mutually dependent. Only that which has no roots, and is bound by no permanent links either with the external environment or with its own self, can enter at any time into any possible relations and can just as easily break out of them. On the other hand, the isolation acquires its proper sense only through the universal interconnectedness, without which the externally isolated elements would have hung loose in relation to one another.

(Lüthi 1985: 49)*

It is clear enough, however, that, whereas in wondertales the governing principle of universal interconnectedness and isolations concerns more or less equally all characters and layers of narrations[1], in "The Wooing of Etaine" it is the central character of Etaine that is the main carrier of that principle, and all other characters are left far behind her in this respect. Etaine, as an eternal self-regenerating virgin, and a universal prostitute "nourishing hosts", belongs to everybody and to nobody, and is well above all conventional social bonds. At the same time it is also obvious that her peculiar position and her privileged status do not stem out of her own volition, she is in many ways a plaything in the hands of forces superior to her – she is being literally and metaphorically "tossed by the wind". Etaine yields in fact not only to the powers of nature and

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* All English translations of the quotations from Lüthi's book are mine.
[1] According to Lüthi: "Sichtbare Isolation, unsichtbare *Allverbundenheit*, dies darf als Grundmerkmal der Märchenform bezeichnet werden" (*cf*. Lüthi 1985: 49).

magic, but also to the rules of the patriarchal society dominated by men, who treat her as their possession, and strike deals or play games between themselves for the right of having her. However, all such arrangements are ultimately futile not because Etaine consciously eludes them, but because all characters of that tale, and particularly Etaine herself, are subject to the transcendental and capricious decrees of fate. The whole tale is thus a paramountly ironical text in that it shows a society which, while being seriously intent on setting hard and fast rules and regulations, is constantly forced to admit its impotence and helplessness in the face of the irrational forces governing the world. This sort of irony cannot be expected from typical wondertales, where all characters representing the established and immutable order are presented from the start as villains or ridiculed as "false heroes"[2]. It should not be concluded on the basis of the above that "The Wooing of Etaine" represents a higher stage of social development than the traditional wondertale. On the contrary, we may assume that the wondertale, with its keen feeling of the existence of a firmly established social order from which it proposes a temporary escape, belongs to a more advanced form of civilization than the Old Irish tale, in which the vision of universal interconnectedness and isolation, i.e. of a certain regulated anarchy, is not presented in the playful spirit typical of the wondertale, but as a menacing, though also aesthetically fascinating, reality.

Highly characteristic of almost all early medieval Irish mythological tales is a very weakly developed sense of difference between the natural world and the supernatural one. As Gantz asserts: "The Ireland of the tales comprises two worlds, "real" and "other"; but the line between them is not well demarcated" (1983: 15). Thus, in "The Wooing of Etaine" the main heroine wanders persistently between the two worlds having some obviously supernatural features and being a frequent inhabitant of the otherworld, while retaining strong links with the world of ordinary, or at least seemingly ordinary, humans. One of her lovers, Oengus, appears to be a creature of mixed origin since his mother was an earthly woman and his father, the Dagdae, has clearly a godlike status (*cf*. Gantz 1983: 39). Etaine's earthly husband, Echu, has a name meaning "horse" and he easily could have been originally a totemic deity, which could account for the facility with which he associates with the denizens of the otherworld. This state of affairs is distinctly different from that obtaining in the wondertale, where the earthly characters also mix readily with the supernatural ones, but we are never left in doubt as to who is who and to which of both worlds a given figure belongs. Another important difference is that the action of the wondertale typically takes place in an abstract nowhere land, whereas that of the mythological Irish tales normally has a partly realistic geographical

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[2] On the "false hero" or "Unheld" see Lüthi (1985: 81-2). The concept of the "false hero" corresponds to Vladimir Propp's category of the "usurper" (*cf*. Proop 1976).

setting and is full of historical, or at least quasi-historical details and names. All those traits point to the fact that the world of "The Wooing of Etaine" and analogical tales is pervaded by a far-reaching and fundamental uncertainty and indeterminacy. As opposed to the principle of easy association and dissociation observable in the wondertale, we find that in the Irish tales the very idea of association and dissociation is put into question, since there seem to be ultimately no clear rules for the attribution of any relationship.

At this point it will be useful to notice that the way the elements of magic function in such tales as "The Wooing of Etaine" is almost directly opposite to Jameson's idea of magic in what he calls "magical narratives" (*cf.* pp. 250-1 above). The magic of "The Wooing of Etaine" is certainly not meant to set apart the figures of the other-world as radically different from ordinary earthlings or even superior to them. It will be enough to observe that the characters who actually make use of magic in the Irish tale are frequently left at the mercy of the characters who apparently do not dispose of such means. Both Oengus and Mider, though they are great sorcerers and fundamentally supernatural creatures, have to agree to the conditions posed to them by the earthly, or at least half earthly, heroes, Aillil and Echu, before they are able to get hold of Etaine. Mider is even forced to give up Etaine, or at least pretend to give her up to Echu, under the military threat posed by the latter. Also the labels of "good" and "evil" can hardly be applied to the discussed narrative or to any particular characters appearing in it. It seems that "The Wooing..." successfully resists any attempt to interpret it in terms of any dualistic world-view.

Another theory that could help us approach the meaning of the Irish tale is the one proposed by Tzvetan Todorov, who distinguishes betweeen "fantastic", "uncanny" and "marvelous" narratives. According to him the truly fantastic tales are based on the effect of hesitation or uncertainty, on the part of the reader or of some characters with whom the reader can identify, whether to interpret the states of affairs presented in a given story as rational or irrational, natural or supernatural. In the "uncanny" tales, on the other hand, the irrational aspect is ultimately subsumed by the rational one and the strange facts are in the end rationally explained, while in the "marvelous" ones the laws of reason clearly do not apply. Thus, "the fantastic occupies the duration of uncertainty between the uncanny and the marvelous" (Todorov 1973: 23).

Seen from this point of view, "The Wooing..." is obviously a "marvelous" tale, but of a rather peculiar sort. We do not hesitate there about whether a given event is supernatural or not, the narrative does not allow in fact for anything like a "rational" perspective. But, at the same time, it treats magic as a matter of course, i.e. as something "rational", in the sense of "readily understandable", and not as something that calls for explanation. On the other hand, the tale in question does rely to a large extent on the effect of uncertainty and hesitation, with the difference that this effect concerns the degree to which

given characters are supernatural and, more importantly, the degree to which they are in control of magic, rather than mere tools of magic seen as an abstract and blind force synonymous with fate. It seems thus possible to distinguish between those "marvelous" narratives in which magic is simply an unaccountable disruption of a rational order, and those in which, as in "The Wooing of Etaine", magic invades, so to speak, the very core of the represented world. The former kind of stories are necessarily dualistic and, at least to some extent, anti-fatalistic-magic is there a means to undermine the fixed order of things ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" may serve here as an example), whereas the latter kind is basically monistic and fatalistic, i.e. it promotes magic, with all its astounding variability, to the position of a "fixed order of things", and a universal controlling, or rather disintegrating, factor. The classical wondertale may be interpreted as an intermediate form between the two above described kinds because it suspends the rational order in a radical way only, however, to reestablish it, in a different shape, at the end of the plot.

The other tale I propose to consider here is "Sir Orfeo", a product of a much later epoch[3], and a much closer parallel to typical medieval romances. It offers, nevertheless, a number of striking similarities with "The Wooing of Etaine" which make the analogy between the two poems worth investigating. The Middle English romance of "Sir Orfeo" has its remote roots in the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but in some ways it is much closer to the Irish tale than to the Greek myth. The figure who captures the heroine, Lady Heurodis, is not a god of the Underworld, as in the classical story, but a king of the Fairyland, who spirits Heurodis away in spite of the armed guards set up by her husband, i.e. in a way analogical to the last section of "The Wooing...", where Mider captures Etaine from among a host of her husband's warriors. Orfeo, just like Echu in the Irish tale, sets out into the wilderness and manages to fetch his wife back, having, again like Echu, picked her out from a great number of fair ladies looking exactly alike.

At this point, however, the analogy seems to break. The fairy king in "Sir Orfeo" is, first of all, clearly contrasted, and on many planes with Orfeo. The latter patently represents the forces of law and order, while the former stands for irrational violence and moral irregularity. We can see him at his most violent and threatening when he accosts the heroine in her dream when she is asleep in the orchard adjacent to her husband's castle:

> Loke, dame, to morwe thatow be  (that you)
> Right here under this ympe-tre
> And than thou shalt with us go
> And live with us ever-mo.

[3] According to W. H. French and C. B. Hale, "Sir Orfeo" was composed around the year 1325 (*cf.* French and Hale 1964:323).

| And yif thou makest us y-let, | (hindrance) |
| Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet, | |
| And to-tore thine limes all | (tear asunder) |
| That nothing help thee no shall; | |
| And they thou best so to-torn, | (although) |
| Yete thou worst with us y-born | (shall be/carried) |

11. 141-150 (Sands 1986: 190)

Thus, the intervention of the fairy king in the peaceful world of Orfeo and Lady Heurodis is felt as a dramatic crack in the established fabric of being, and not merely as an occasion for the heroine to pass from the embraces of one schematic lover to those of another. Significantly enough, the fairy king's menacing speech is focused on the motif of "tearing asunder", and there is no mention of any erotic interest on his part in the person of the heroine. On the contrary, his attitude is as cold and impersonal as possible. He is not speaking about his desire to capture Lady Heurodis; instead, he behaves as if he were speaking on behalf of some otherworldly tribunal which had passed an irrevocable sentence on the heroine. Hence his constant use of the pronoun "we" instead of "I", which is not a mere convention here as the fairy king is explicitly shown as the chief of a fairy host. The fairy king cleary represents a different world governed by its own rules and logic, however incomprehensible and frightful they could be, and any mediation between his world and that of Orfeo and his wife seems hardly possible.

The heroine's reaction to the fairy king's words also deserves some attention. She is almost literally frightened out of her wits:

| Ac as sone as she gan awake, | |
| She crid and lothly bere gan make; | (horrible/outcry) |
| She froted hir honden and hir feet | (rubbed) |
| And crached hir visage – it bled wete. | (scratched/wet) |
| Hir riche robe hie all to-rett | (tore to pieces) |
| And was reveysed out of hir wit. | (driven) |

11. 53-58 (Sands 1986: 188)

Heurodis's reaction is in fact closely mimetic in relation to the fairy king's threats; she executes on her beautiful robe the action of tearing to pieces which the fairy king is ready to perform on her body. Her madness consists exactly in being "torn apart", at least spiritually, between the two worlds which claim her allegiance. On the one hand, she is clinging to the secure and apparently immutable reality created by her husband, but on the other, she has already at least partly accepted the law of gratuitous violence which seems to typify the world of the fairies. Madness and despair are shown here as a direct result of the experience of irreducible otherness.

The incapacity of Lady Heurodis to withstand in a dignified way the threats of the fairy king is compounded by Sir Orfeo's show of incompetence in his way of handling the crisis. He hopes to discourage the fairy king and to safeguard his wife by a display of military power and he bids his soldiers to form a ring around the queen, which of course is to no avail considering the fairies' command of powerful magic (cf. 11. 158-69). Orfeo's reliance on military fortifications is clearly alluded to in one of the first lines of the poem: "This king sojournd in Traciens, That was a cite of noble defens;" (11. 23,4). Orfeo, in keeping with the mythological tradition of Orpheus, is not only a king, but also a musician of genius. His music, however, is only an additional means to build a secluded and fortified paradise (cf. 11. 19-21). Orfeo's little paradise, like the Biblical Garden of Eden, is characterized by exclusiveness, isolation, and by the childlessness of the loving couple who inhabit it. Also true to the Biblical tradition, Orfeo's paradise is lost and destroyed because it does not stand the trial of confrontation with the outer world. That other world in both cases manifests itself in connection with an orchard tree (cf. p. 255 above), and it exposes the weakness and helplessness of the protagonists.

Eventually Orfeo manages to regain his private paradise, albeit in a changed form, but in order to achieve his aim he has to take recourse to very unconventional measures. Unlike his Irish counterpart from "The Wooing...", he does not persist in using the physical force to wrest out his wife from the fairies, and unlike his classical Greek namesake, he does not even set out with a clear purpose to recover the lost queen. His decision looks, on the face of it, like an act of despair resembling the hysterical distraction of Lady Heurodis – he leaves his castle to spend the rest of his life in wilderness and among wild animals (cf. 11. 188-90). And yet his madness, like Hamlet's madness, "has a method in it". Incidentally, it may be interesting to notice that Orfeo's predicament is in some ways analogical to that of the Danish prince. His well-ordered universe is also ruined by an intervention of a visitor from the Otherworld, and he also has every reason to feel that "the time is out of joint". Orfeo in the wilderness leads a life starkly contrasted with his comfortable life among the "joys of Paradis" (1. 21):

| Nothing he fint that him is ais, | (finds/comfort) |
| Bot he ever liveth in gret malais. | (distress) |
| He that hadde y-werd the fowe and gris | |
| And on bed the purper bis, | (linen) |
| Now on hard hethe he lith | (lies) |
| With leves and gresse he him writh. | |

11. 215-20 (Sands 1986: 192)

Nonetheless, it is exactly in this state of abject misery and of apparently aimless roaming in the woods that he is able to establish vital contacts, first with

animals, than with fairies among whom he finally finds his wife. Throughout that time he seems to have altogether forgotten about his royal and aristocratic distinction and appears solely in his original capacity of a minstrel:

| | |
|---|---|
| And when the weder was clere and bright, | (weather) |
| He took his harp to him well right | |
| And harped at his owhen wille; | |
| Into alle the wode the soun gan shille | (resound) |
| That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth | |
| For joye abouten him they teth. | (gather) |
| And alle the foules that ther were | (birds) |
| Come and sete on ich a brere | |
| To here his harping afine, | |
| So mich melody was therin | (much) |
| And when he his harping lete wold, | (cease) |
| No best by him abide nold. | |

11. 245-55 (Sands 1986: 193)

We can see that Orfeo's harping brings him no immediate profit. It does not even do much to relieve his loneliness, although it certainly introduces an element of order and even harmony into the hero's irregular existence. But that order and harmony seems to bear close resemblance to the concept of "art for art's sake", and there appears to be no rationale behind it.

Immediately after the scene of Orfeo's concerts for wild animals, we are presented with the even more singular visions of two fairy cavalcades. One of them is led by a fairy king, who is most probably to be identified with Heurodis' supernatural abductor, even though, like Orfeo himself, he appears now in a very different capacity:

| | |
|---|---|
| Oft in hot undertides | |
| The King o fairy with his rout | (fairyland/troop) |
| Com to hunt him all about | |
| With dim cry and bloweing | (faint) |
| And houndes also with him berking. | |
| Ac no best they no nome | (take) |
| No never he nist wheder they bicome. | |

11. 258-64 (Sands 1968: 193)

The task of the fairy king and his spectral host turns out to be a sort of "hunting for hunting's sake" and its futility is even more pronounced than that of Orfeo's harping – the fairy hunters catch no prey and the writer emphasizes twice (cf. 11. 264, 272) that there was no way to find out their purpose or destination. We clearly have to conclude that Orfeo has found himself in a world governed by radically different principles from the ones that prevailed in his rationally organized kingdom, and that, moreover, he has, at least partly, adapted himself to those new conditions. The preternatural world of the enchanted wilderness in "Sir Orfeo" may easily remind us of the already familiar principle of universal interconnectedness and isolation, which Lüthi

has discovered as the founding concept of the wondertale (cf. p. 252 above). The apparent purposelessness is part and parcel of the playful spirit reigning the wondertale. As Lüthi puts it:

> It is as if the wondertale wanted to reassure us: Even when you do not know yourself whence you are coming and whither you are going, or what powers have a hold on you and how they do it, or even what sort of interrelations you are involved in – you can still be sure that you find yourself in a world of meaningful relations.
>
> (Lüthi 1985: 86)

During his stay in the wilderness Orfeo enters, as it were, another dimension, a sphere of pure potentiality, where nothing seems real but everything seems possible. The unreality of this world and its lack of a clear sense of purpose are of course indispensable for this peculiar atmosphere of infinite possibility to arise. In the wondertale the laws of causality are mocked in an open and direct way. To quote Lüthi again:

> It is exactly because of the hero's following his own purposes that he saves others, often without ever thinking of doing so. On the other hand, he may be helping others, without thinking about his own interest – but it is precisely in this way that he finds the solution to his problems. The hero has sometimes to cut off the head of his helper, the white horse – and in this way he removes the evil spell from the fair prince enchanted into a horse. The king's daughter throws the king of frogs against the wall so as to kill him – but this precisely turns out to be the only way to bring about his liberation.
>
> (Lüthi 1985: 61)

We should not expect to meet with such obvious paradoxes as the ones adduced above in "Sir Orfeo". The hero of this romance does not find himself directly at cross-purposes with the anonymous forces ruling the world, but in order to achieve his goal he has to compromise with the spirit of a playful purposelessness, which is a roundabout way that proves to be the only right way. This roundabout way is significantly enough the way of art and magic, both of which are known to function by proposing unexpected connections between apparently disparate objects. As opposed to the wondertale, where things happen in a swift and effortless way, Orfeo has to pay a high price for establishing an intimate contact with the world of magic. The price includes humiliation, social debasement, and physical suffering. Again unlike the wondertale hero, Orfeo does not start from the position of an underdog, but he is constrained to assume this position before he can succeed. As in the case of the wondertale hero, however, we cannot talk of Orfeo's being fully conscious of the implications of the decisions he is taking. We can safely say that if Orfeo had this sort of consciousness and went to the woods as a part of a carefully premeditated plan, he would have lost much of his credibility and attraction in the eyes of the reader.

One of the most touching scenes of the poem is the meeting, unexpected for both sides, between Orfeo and his wife. The latter appears in another fairy cavalcade as one of female fairies, all alike, hunting with the help of female falcons:

He aros and thider gan te.                  (approach)
To a levedy he was y-come,
Biheld and hath wele undernome            (perceived)
And seth by all thing that it is            (sees)
His owhen queen, Dam Herodis.
Yern he biheld hir, and she him eke,        (eagerly/also)
As neither to other a word no speke.        (but)
For messais that she on him seighe,         (sorrow/saw)
That had been so riche and so heighe,       (exalted)
The teres fell out of her eighe.            (eye)
The other levedis this y-seighe
And maked hir oway to ride;
She most with him no lenger abide.

11. 294-306 (Sands 1986: 194)

This silent scene of mutual recognition is strikingly different from the first scene in which we saw Orfeo and Heurodis together, and in which Orfeo was trying to soothe his wife's extreme distress (cf. 11. 75-106). While the former scene is filled with loud vociferations and urgent pleading, now no word is uttered, and while formery the focus was on the king's taking pity on his wife, now the situation is reversed and queen is weeping over her husband's miserable state.

All those transformations are but symptoms of a major semiotic reversal consisting in the fact that in the second part of the poem, beginning with Orfeo's going to the woods, it is the earthly protagonist who apparently represents a strange force intruding upon the established and idealized order of the fairyland. Contrary to Frye's statement quoted at the beginning of the present work (cf. p. 249 above), it is now the world of the supernatural enemy that seems to stand for "spring, order, vigor, and youth", while the hero is shown as haggard, miserable, and worn out. Lady Heurodis appears now as a fully fledged member of the society of fairies belonging to an apparently self-sufficient company of fairy women, or even fairy queens. The effect of reversal is further strengthened by the splendid vision of the fairy king's "court of paradise", to which Orfeo finally arrives:

He com into a fair cuntray,
As bright so sonne on somers day,
Smothe and plain and all grene,
Hille no dale was ther non y-sene.
Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,         (saw)
Riche and real and wonder heighe.         (regal/wondrous)
All the utmast wall                        (outer)
Was clere and shine as cristal             (bright)

11. 327-34 (Sands 1986: 194,5)

The invocation of a paradisiac imagery, characterized by immobility and timelessness, and the clear emphasis on the fairy castle's defensive character, and on its self-contained exclusiveness, make the above description closely parallel to the way Orfeo's own palace is described in the initial section of the poem. The fairy king's shiny abode seems to represent an idealization of Orfeo's imperfect and easily penetrable paradise, and it is also contrasted with the enchanted wilderness occupying the middle ground between the realms of the two rival kings of the poem. From a sphere of ontological indeterminancy and pure possibility we are thus emerging into a stronghold of crystal clear certainty and smoothness which does not even tolerate any natural, i.e. uncontrolled, eminence in the landscape.

In fact, however, the fairy castle disappoints to some extent the expectations created by its introductory description[4]. We catch a glimpse of the castle's full significance in the strange and profoundly disquieting scene of Orfeo's visit to the "ghastly courtyard" inside the castle walls:

Than he gan bihold about all
And seighe liggeand within the wall        (lying)
Of folk that were thider y-brought
And thought dede and nare nought.
Sum stode withouten hade                   (head)
And sum non armes nade,
And sum thurch the body hadde wounde       (through)
And sum lay wode, y-bounde,                (mad)
And sum armed on hors sete,
And sum astrangled as they ete,
And sum were in water adreint,             (drowned)
And sum with fire all forshreint.          (shriveled)
Wives ther lay on childe-bedde,
Sum ded and sum awedde;                    (insane)
And wonder fele ther lay besides,          (very/many)
Right as they slepe her undertides.
Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,
With fairy thider y-come.

11. 363-80 (Sands 1986: 195,6)

The effect evoked by this scene is comparable to the discovery of the proverbial "skeleton in the cupboard" in an exquisite house. Indeed we are having to do here with a comprehensive collection of such "seletons", or rather of half-dead victims of the fairy king, most of whom still show some signs of life. The vision of the "ghastly courtyard" in "Sir Orfeo" contains a list of situations and instances that can be subsumed under the heading: states of transition between life and death[5]. The occupation of the fairy king and his spectral host seems to consist in arresting and petrifying their victims' existence at the moment of such a transitional state, and in transporting them to the fairy castle, where

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[4] In fact the images of paradise seem to be regularly connected and closely associated with visions of hell (cf. Aziza, Olivieri, Sotrick 1978:109).

[5] The folkloristic roots of this scene are discussed at length in Dorothy Allen (1964).

they continue their uncanny vegetation with, apparently, no prospects of release, either in the direction of life or death.

The position of Lady Heurodis in this context is somewhat exceptional. She is also one of the fairies' victims, and Orfeo duly finds her in the "ghastly courtyard", and she is sleeping there under a tree, i.e. she finds herself, like the other victims, in the same situation in which she was first accosted by the fairies (cf. 11. 381-4). She also was, after all, caught and taken by the fairies at the moment of an existential indeterminacy. Her sleeping at the noontide can be seen as mixing the order of day with that of night, and the tree under which she is sleeping is significantly described as an "ympe-tre" (11. 463-83), i.e. a grafted tree, which unites two discordant natures within itself[6]. She may be seen then, almost like her Irish counterpart, Etaine, as a symbol of ontological transgression, of going beyond the customary rules of association. On the other hand, unlike other victims of the fairies, Heurodis does not find herself accidentally in the zone of ontological doubt, but enters it deliberately, or at least half-deliberately, for the sake of pleasure it could offer. Therefore, perhaps, she is given a privileged place in the world of fairies and can even join the fairy cavalcades.

The fairy castle displays thus both the features of a paradise and of an inferno. Both aspects, however, can be reconciled with each other on ther basis of such common elements as immobility and a levelling of differences. We seem to be confronted here with the concept of a fundamental unity of the contrasting postures of self-affirmation, in the fairy king's display of power, and self-denial, or rather "self-erasure", in the vision of the "ghastly courtyard".

Worthy of our attention is also the way in which Orfeo manages to get back his wife and bring about the happy ending. He succeeds, in conformity with the classical tradition, with the help of his magical harp and his consummate artistry. The king and his entourage are so bewitched by Orfeo's playing that the king is inclined to grant him whatsoever reward he may wish. In this way the hero actually turns the tables on his supernatural enemy, and shows himself capable of disarming him with his "magic" in much the same way as he let himself be disarmed by the fairy king's magic in the scene of Lady Heurodis' abduction. To make this analogy more obvious the fairy king is showed to back out of his promise, just as Orfeo tried to cancel the validity of his wife's promise. The king of the fairyland paradoxically points to Orfeo's strangeness and to his being outside the pale of the cultivated society,

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[6] The ontologically mixed and ambiguous character of "Sir Orfeo" is also emphasized by Pamela Gradon: "[I]n ... "Sir Orfeo" we find the natural interpenetrated with the supernatural, so that we cannot always tell which is which" (Gradon 1971: 237).

which, allegedly, would make the union between Orfeo and Heurodis unseemly and absurd:

"Nay," quath the King, "that nought nere!
A sorry couple of you it were,          (ill-matched)
For thou art lene, rowe, and black      (rough)
And she is lovesum withouten lack.      (blemish)
A lothlich thing it were forthy         (therefore)
To seen hir in thy company."
                11. 433-38 (Sands 1986:197)

The fairy king's social snobbery and exclusiveness has a strangely cynical overtone since we see here the king talking as if he knew nothing of the misfortunes he himself caused to Orfeo and his captured wife. We may of course assume that he could not recognize Orfeo under his guise of a poor ministrel, or that he just chose to pretend so, but even more plausible seems to be the explanation that the fairyland in "Sir Orfeo" is, as a "court of paradise", a land of forgetting, of no memory, whereas its infernal aspects make it look like a land of eternal memory and no forgetting. In both cases the feeling of a difference between the past and the present is obliterated, and only that part of the past is perceived as real which actually exists in the time present, i.e. in a sort of "total present". A similar effect of temporal reduction and forgetfulness about the past may be observed, on a much larger scale, in the wondertale, where it is a logical consequence of the working of the principle of universal interconnectedness and isolation (cf. Lüthi 1985:56-60). The fairy king's apparent forgetting about the promise he gave to Sir Orfeo a moment ago may be regarded an example of the same phenomenon. Orfeo's move at this point is naturally to assert the difference between the king's present and past words, and to remind him, rather harshly, of his promise:

"O sir," he said, "gentil King,
Yete were it a wele fouler thing        (much)
To here a lesing of thy mouthe!         (lie)
So, sir, as ye said nouthe,             (just now)
What I wold asky, have I shold,
And nedes thou most thy word hold."     (by necessity)
                11. 439-44 (Sands 1986: 197)

This protestation is enough to overrule the king's objections and to guarantee the final success of Orfeo's undertaking. He may superficially look like a wild man in comparison with the elegantly dressed king of fairies, but it is he in reality who is a carrier of culture, for he shows a "serious" attitude towards time, and he can both perceive and act upon the difference between the past and the present.

The hero's return home with the newly recovered wife is presented in a way reminding one of the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. Orfeo continues to appear

in a minstrel's disguise, and he puts the steward, whom he left behind as his deputy, through a severe test, by telling of Orfeo's alleged violent death in the wilderness. Only having seen the steward's sincere distress does the King decide to disclose his identity, though even at that time Orfeo casts off his mask unwillingly, and uses an oblique, conditional way of speaking: "Lo, Steward, herkne now this thing! Yif ich were Orfeo the King" (11. 532-34), letting the steward guess the truth, rather than revealing it directly. Characteristically enough, the first words with which the king addressses the steward in his freshly regained royal capacity contain the promise that the steward shall be made himself the king after Orfeo's death (cf. 11. 546-48). All those facts indicate that our hero has no intention to treat his adventure with the fairy king as a mere incident, a ripple on the sea of his bliss. On the contrary, he decides to perpetuate some of the indirect results of the fairy king's intervention, while removing the direct ones. Instead of reverting to the appearances of eternal glory which typified his former reign, he is now reconciling himself to a sort of conditional, self-limiting monarchy, in which the principle of succession in the family line has been replaced by succession based on a historically contingent principle of merit[7].

Summing up this account of the hero's adventures, we may say that Orfeo goes through three crucial encounters: with his wife in the enchanted wilderness, with the fairy king in the fairyland, and finally with the steward after coming home. All of those encounters may be termed as "nostalgic" and "reactionary" in the sense that they hark back to a past state of affairs, and they result in a partial restoration of the past. But all of them are also based on careful negotiations (even if in the "negotiations" between Orfeo and his wife no word is spoken) and they emphasize the irreducible difference between both sides and the virtual impossibility of a full restoration of the past. From this point of view, we may call "Sir Orfeo" an "antiwondertale" bearing in mind that in classical wondertales the hero, having undergone a period of hardships, usually not only recoups his original losses, but is also given an additional reward (e.g. the hand of a princess) which allows him to rise to a much more eminent position than his original one. In "Sir Orfeo", on the other hand, the protagonist manages finally to retain his former position, but only at the price of realizing and recognizing his limitations. Symptoms of this phenomenon could already be seen in Orfeo's act of summoning a parliament before his departure to the wilderness and of delegating his powers to the steward, for which he seems to need the lords' consent. It is also to the parliament that Orfeo gives the right to elect a new king in case of his failing to return (cf.

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[7] R. H. Nicholson suggests that the steward in "Sir Orfeo" represents actually the absent child or children of the protagonist, for it is he who: "reaps the benefit which normally is theirs by the customary romantic resolution of all sexual and social difficulties" (Nicholson 1985:176).

11.180-94). We observe then a consistent contraction of the king's power, rather than its expansion.

"Sir Orfeo" may also be seen as an attempt to define and to defend the limits of the self, conceived of as a seperate quality, against the encroachments of absolutist visions of reality. The first half of the 14th century, when the poem was created, witnessed a great revival of philosophical nominalism, associated with the name of an Englishman, William Ockham. According to Adolf Kliszewicz, the nominalists attacked the "realistic" main stream of medieval thought consisting in looking at the world from the point of view of quality, which entailed a hierarchical classification of "forms" or "qualities", leading up to the highest "quality" of God. Nominalism, with its denial of the reality of general terms, strove to replace the medieval, realistic scholastics with the view that the world is first of all based on quantitative relations, and that all the elaborate hierarchies of "forms" are fictions which in reality crumble into an infinite multitude of particular objects and phenomena, which behave in keeping with some inexorable and ultimately incomprehensible laws (cf. Kliszewicz 1927: 58-60). It follows that also the notion of the self, as an autonomous and complex whole, may undergo the reductionist drive of nominalism and become dissolved in a vast ontological continuum (cf. also Gilson 1987:435-44). The example set by the protagonist of "Sir Orfeo" seems to consist in steering a middle course between a rigid belief in one's self (shown by Orfeo at the beginning of the poem) and a far-reaching forgetfulness of one's self in an atomized world of similar entities (a phenomenon exemplified in the poem by the cavalcade of hardly distinguishable fairy ladies, and by the monotonous list of reified, half-human creatures in the vision of the "ghastly courtyard"). Orfeo's thrice repeated gesture of "reminding about the past" can also be seen as a defensive strategy directed against the nominalist tendency to question or deny the relationship between cause and effect (cf. Gilson 1987:441-2), which may entail a uniform, undiversified vision of time. Nominalist *par excellence* is of course also the often mentioned here principle of universal interconnectedness vs. isolation, with which both Orfeo and Heurodis may be seen to compromise (cf. p. 258, 259, 262 above), but to which they never completely yield. Naturally, I do not suggest that the anonymous author of "Sir Orfeo" must have necessarily been directly influenced by the debate between realists and nominalists, but only that he may have, wittingly or unwittingly, reflected the intellectual atmosphere of his day.

By way of conclusion I would like to paraphrase the statement by Vance (cf. p. 250 above) and say that we are only beginning to appreciate the intellectual complexity of medieval magic narratives, and the effectiveness with which they defended the interests of the chivalric class. The best of them, such as "Sir Orfeo", "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", the romances by Chretien de Troyes, or "Tristan" by Gottfried von Strasburg, manage to avoid the pitfall

of a simplistic eulogy of aristocratic standards and values, and put those values to a rigorous test. Neither of the two tales analyzed here projects a vision of an ideal hero who would be equally successful in the fields of war, love, magic and good manners. Both of them put to question the very notion of worldly success, especially if it can be defined in terms of possession. Indeed, the gesture of appropriation, of making something or somebody one's property, is in "Sir Orfeo" and "The Wooing of Etaine" invariably connected with the rise of a powerful rival, whether it be a fairy king or a jealous wife. In both tales the world of fixed relationships withdraws into a zone of incomplete presence and of continuos disguise, from which there is no return, as in "The Wooing...", or the return is achievable only with greatest difficulty and is never complete, as in "Sir Orfeo". To suggest that those tales put forward a dualistic view of the world, based on a simple contrast between good and evil, or that they fail to problematize the social relations withn the represented world (cf. pp. 249-51), could certainly be rated as a gross oversimplification.

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