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## Heurodis's Body: Reading *Sir Orfeo* with Three Significant Losses

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With a central theme of loss and reunions, the poem *Sir Orfeo* is rife with emotions, both dismal and joyous. Given that this anonymously written, Middle English lay is a retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the most obvious form of loss is Orfeo's grief surrounding his wife whom the fairies take back to fairyland. A second important loss is the kingdom's loss of its king when Orfeo exiles himself due to his grief. While I agree with Felicity Riddy's widely-accepted assertion that the way the lay is structured lends itself to the reading that these two losses hold equal importance, I would also argue that there is a third significant loss in the poem: Heurodis' loss of her sanity and bodily autonomy. While this could be considered as a mere aspect of the loss that Orfeo faces, I believe that it is more valuable to view it on its own and as a loss comparable in magnitude to the losses faced by Orfeo and the kingdom. If readers view the lay as containing three major types of loss, rather than two, not only will they notice parallels amongst these three instances but they will also feel a new emotional depth throughout the entire poem. Thus, I will first explore the emotional depth and parallel structures of Orfeo and the kingdom's losses identified by Felicity Riddy, and then consider how Heurodis' deprivation of mind and body parallels and enhances the first two.

Felicity Riddy, a scholar who specializes in medieval English and Scottish literature, notes that "the story deals with loss and restoration; not, however, with one loss as we ... are prone to assume, but with two: the husband's loss of his wife is repeated in the people's loss of their king" (Riddy, 1976, p. 7). The syntax of *Sir Orfeo* gives way to these dual narratives, with parallels emerging between the two cases of loss. A notable example of this parallel syntax is the author's use of similar language when Orfeo discovers that Heurodis is gone and when the kingdom learns that Orfeo will leave. When Heurodis is taken from him, Orfeo mourns her: "Tho was ther crying, weep and wo;" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, line 195). The author uses the same verbiage when describing the kingdom's distress when Orfeo tells them he must leave: "Tho was ther weeping in the halle, / and greet cry among hem alle" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 219-220). In both instances, the words "tho was ther" precede emotional responses. Both parties "cry" and "weep" at the news. In addition to showing the similarity between these two moments, the parallels create a stronger sense of loss throughout the whole poem. It is not just one person facing loss, but an entire kingdom.

Orfeo's and the kingdom's weeping signals an aspect of physicality in both parties' mourning. Orfeo's grief at Heurodis' departure takes on a physical form: "And oft swoned upon the ston, / And made swiche diol and swiche mon (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 197-198). The important words here are "swon" and "diol." "Swon," meaning "to swoon", denotes a physical manifestation of grief through the action of fainting or falling. "Diol," translated into modern English as "dole," is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as an archaic term meaning either "grief, sorrow, mental distress" or "physical pain or suffering" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2002). The connection to "physical pain" is significant in looking at the bodily reactions to grief. The mourning of the kingdom is also represented physically: "for wepeing speke a word with tong. / Thai kneled adoun al y-ferre" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 222-223). The mention of "tong" or "tongues" focuses on the bodily and physical aspects of weeping. Additionally, the people in the kingdom "kneled," or "kneeled," as a result of their distress, a different type of falling than swooning, but still an action that puts them on the ground (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, line 197). Although these examples of physical manifestations of grief are not permanent bodily alterations like Heurodis' self-mutilation, these actions illustrate how both Orfeo and the kingdom's mourning consume their bodies.

Further parallels between Orfeo's loss of his wife and the kingdom's loss of their king appear when the steward, who takes over for Orfeo and represents the kingdom, reacts to Orfeo's death in a way that is similar to how Orfeo reacts to Heurodis's kidnapping. The steward cries out: "Allas, wrecche, what shal I do / that have such a lord ylore?" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 548-549). This is an exclamation of sadness, using the term "allas" that was previously used by Orfeo when he cried "allas, allas!" at the idea of losing his wife (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, line 176). As Ruth Evans points out, the author's use of parallels creates a strong emotional link between the two losses (Evans, 2006, p. 200). Additionally, the author uses the word that the steward uses for loss – "ylore" – at only one other point in the lay: when Orfeo tells the kingdom that his wife is gone, saying that "for now I have my queene ylore" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, line 209). The fact that the author only uses this word in two places in the poem is significant as it signals to the reader that these are important and comparable losses. At the thought of losing his king, the steward echoes Orfeo's feelings of grief which creates an overarching sadness.

While Riddy argues that there are structural similarities between Orfeo's loss and the kingdom's loss (Riddy, 1976, p. 7), I extend her point by observing the structural similarities between these two losses as well as Heurodis' loss of her body and mind. I therefore conclude that this third loss is connected and equal to the first two. After Heurodis' fit of madness, she is emotional: "tho lay she stille at the laste, / and gan to weepe swithe faste" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 117-118). The author uses the word for then ("tho") here as well, just as he used it to lead into Orfeo's and the kingdom's grief over their respective losses. The author employs the word "weep" as well to describe Heurodis' reaction to her plight. Just as Orfeo and the kingdom had wept over

the loss they faced, Heurodis weeps over her own loss – that of her body. If the reader chooses to view this moment as Heurodis grieving her body rather than as her simply weeping over her soon-to-be destroyed marriage, it adds a greater sorrow to this scene as well as the entire poem. Not only does Orfeo lose his wife and the kingdom their queen, but Heurodis loses a piece of herself that readers can and should mourn individually from Orfeo and the kingdom's losses.

Readers should observe how time affects both Orfeo's and Heurodis's bodies when they are apart. Ten years in the wilderness take a toll on Orfeo's body: "al his body away was dwined / for misaise, and al toched" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 261-262). Orfeo's body becomes a scarred and wasted husk of what it once was. His life is no longer the easy and luxurious life it was when he had Heurodis; it is now barren and full of hardships, making his physical life and body reflect his emotional turmoil. However, the reader cannot forget that the ten years apart also affects Heurodis' body. This is visible in Orfeo's recognition of her and the fairy king's reasoning on why Orfeo cannot take Heurodis: "thou art lene, rowe, and blak, / and she is lovesom, without lak" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 459-460). Heurodis body remains "lovesom" and lacks any blemishes, a contrast to Orfeo's lean and rough body. While at first this seems preferable, the author implies that to maintain this blemish-free existence, Heurodis has not aged while in the fairyland. I argue that this implication illustrates how the fairies, specifically the fairy king, essentially stole her body from her. A natural part of identity and human existence is aging, and the fact that Heurodis has not aged in ten years sets her apart from the outside world and her husband. R. H. Nicholson mentions the trials both lovers' bodies undergo, claiming that: "Orfeo's time in the wilderness ruins his important (royal) identity, just as the visitation of the faerie court destroyed Heurodis's ... the destruction is effected poetically in terms of the courtly ideal which represents their former lives" (Nicholson, 1985, p. 177). Time destroyed *their* previous lives, not just Heurodis' life as an aspect of Orfeo's life. If readers choose to read the destruction of Heurodis' life as something to mourn over for her sake, it makes the physical differences between Orfeo and Heurodis more tragic – Orfeo's body undergoes a change that the fairies stole from Heurodis. In this case, Heurodis mourns that her body can no longer exist in the same way that Orfeo's can.

When readers view Heurodis' kidnapping as her loss of her body rather than simply Orfeo's loss of his love, it adds more sorrow to the violence of the lay. After the fairies first visit Heurodis, she behaves frantically: "she frotte hir hondes and hir feet / and cracched hir vosage – it bledde weet / ... and was ravised out of her wit" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 79-82). This violent description of Heurodis crying and tearing at her hands and feet until she bleeds may disturb readers. Ellen M. Caldwell goes as far as to call this moment a "rape" of Heurodis's mind (Caldwell, 2007, p. 294). I similarly believe that this scene should be read on its own as an attack on Heurodis' being rather than just as a precurrent to the loss that Orfeo will face. When the reader views this scene as the latter, the loss becomes more meaningful as it is not centered on Orfeo but

on Heurodis herself. Caldwell believes that Heurodis' heroism lies in this scene as Heurodis "self-mutilates" in order to maintain her loyalty to Orfeo (Caldwell, 2007, p. 291). Similarly, I would argue that Heurodis shows herself as an individual here which makes her kidnapping more impactful to the politics of the kingdom as well as to Orfeo as they have lost an autonomous consort.

Riddy believes that there cannot be a satisfying and joyous conclusion until the author concludes both Orfeo's loss plot and the kingdom's loss plotline. Riddy claims that the happy ending is not found when Orfeo is reunited with Heurodis, but when the kingdom is reunited with its king (Riddy, 1976, p. 15). There is not much fanfare when Orfeo and Heurodis reunite, however, there is a celebration when both return to their previous roles as king and queen:

Glade they were of his live ...

They brought the queene into the town,

With alle manere mistracye.

Lord, there was greet melodye:

For joye they wepte with hir ye (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 587-595)

When the kingdom learns that Orfeo is alive, the people are "glad" and weep with joy. While Orfeo is certainly happy to be reunited with his wife, the reader does not see this same exuberant reaction from him alone. To achieve a happy ending, Orfeo needed to reunite with his wife and the kingdom needed to reunite with its king.

However, the conclusion of the third storyline, Heurodis' loss of being, is integral to the happy ending as well. Before Orfeo can return home, his wife must reclaim her body. As they leave the fairy court, the author describes Orfeo as taking his wife by the hand: "his wif he took by the hond / ... so longe he hath the way ynome / To Winchester he is ycome" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 475-480). The casual showing of intimacy ("took by the hond") brings her back to her body and counteracts the mental ravishing the fairy king inflicted upon her. Only after the fairies let Heurodis go and return her body to her can she and her husband joyfully return to their kingdom. At the happy ending in the kingdom, the author describes Orfeo and Heurodis as living and aging together once more: "now Orfeo newe corouned is, / and his queene Dame Heurodis, / and lived longe after" (*Sir Orfeo*, 2018, lines 597-599). The words that stand out here are "lived long after." The author does not promise the rulers immortality, but a long life. The author implies that they will grow old together, rather than Heurodis remaining physically unchanged as she did in the fairyland. Orfeo gets his happy ending with his queen restored, the people of the kingdom get their happy ending with their king restored, and Heurodis gets her happy ending with her ability to age and exist as a human being again. Although this version of a happy ending may be an inversion of the typically valued youthful beauty, it embodies the tendency for Middle English lays to end with "happy reunions and long-lasting marriages" (Archibald, 2014, par. 19). Just as the loss becomes deeper when there are three forms rather than two, the three conclusions make for a more joyful finale. Nicholson argues

that Heurodis is denied her own place in *Sir Orfeo*, but I would argue that to read the conclusion through my analysis counteracts that notion (Nicholson, 1985, p. 161). Heurodis may not speak, but she does have her own stakes to lose and happiness to gain when she returns to her body, husband, and kingdom.

As several writers point out, *Sir Orfeo* is not set up to give an in-depth look into the psychology of its characters (Riddy, 1976, p. 11). Perhaps my suggestion that Heurodis faces her own loss may give more psychological motive to the lay than what exists. However, I suggest that viewing Heurodis as facing her own loss can be used as a narrative tool to heighten the emotions in the lay, rather than a psychological tool. Caldwell claims that viewing Heurodis as a hero who attempts to resist the fairy king strengthens the marriage unity and political sovereignty of Orfeo (Caldwell, 2007, p. 296). If one views Heurodis as her own person with her own assets to lose, it magnifies the loss faced by Orfeo and the kingdom as they have lost a valuable, individual queen and not just an accessory. Additionally, readers can sympathize with Heurodis' loss of body and mind externally from the losses faced by Orfeo and the kingdom. To feel the true depths of loss the writer establishes, readers should view *Sir Orfeo* with three major types of loss, as opposed to just two.

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