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Orfeo facing Orpheus. Cultural Aspects and Implications of the Sir Orpheus Theme Development

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Table of Contents

Foreword	5
1. Orpheus and Eurydice: a cultural heritage	9
1.1. The Orpheus myth. From its archaic origin to Virgil and Ovid.....	10
1.2. Orpheus and his Christian interpretation.....	27
1.3. Boethius, Lady Philosophy and Orpheus in late antiquity.....	34
2. The transmission and reception of a myth: the traditions behind <i>Sir Orfeo</i>	40
2.1. The Orpheus myth from late antiquity to medieval England.....	42
2.2. The vernacular reception of the Orpheus myth in England: King Alfred's Old English <i>Boethius</i>	51
2.3. Anglo-Norman literature and the influence from France.....	61
3. The Middle English <i>Sir Orfeo</i>	74
3.1. <i>Sir Orfeo</i> as a moral, folkloric and romance tale.....	76
3.2. Heurodis' new image and Eurydice's redemption.....	90
3.3. Anglo-Saxon culture, English identity, and <i>Sir Orfeo</i> : the case of the Auchinleck manuscript.....	102
Conclusions	121
Riassunto	125
Bibliography	137

Webliography.....146

Foreword

The study of the transmission of culture in medieval England is not an easy task. Medieval England was often considered on the receiving end of cultural transmission and, if truth be told, the perception of the British island was that of a marginal area compared to other European territories. The Mediterranean basin was the heart of the cultural development, and, therefore, European literature adhered to models and themes coming from its southern region, first of all Italy. Obviously, England had its own cultural heritage, but it had a relatively minor prestige in the international context. It was a prevalent Germanic culture, often affected by the cultural influence of the mainland.

The Mediterranean area was undoubtedly the centre of propagation of medieval culture, but it is also interesting to analyse what kind of shapes these cultures took in the receiving countries. In fact, the transmission and assimilation of culture is never passive. There is always a degree of adaptation, following the needs of the target audience. Therefore, the reception of different traditions and their assimilation the English cultural heritage may represent an innovative development for popular themes outside their centres of circulation.

Among the narratives of medieval England, the Middle English lay *Sir Orfeo* stands as one of the most interesting and peculiar texts showing the active reception and elaboration of culture. Far from being just a regular lay, the *Orfeo* poem embodies ten centuries of cultural transmission, a transmission that begins in classical Rome and then passes across the Middle Ages. In this thesis, I have decided to unravel the process that led to the composition of *Sir Orfeo*, a poem rooted in more than one cultural tradition.

Sir Orfeo's story is clearly based on the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. However, the turn taken by the events in the Middle English poem shows an innovative

elaboration of the classical material. In chapter one, I analyse the three major sources of transmission of the Orpheus myth in the Middle Ages, namely Virgil's *Georgics*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Each of these classical works gave a different interpretation to the Orpheus myth, from Virgil's inscription of the myth in his view of perfect society, to Ovid's satirical retelling of Virgil's tale and Boethius's philosophical reading of Orpheus' journey. Boethius' free interpretation of the Orpheus myth started a series of further elaborations of the story in Christian writings that marked the reception of Orpheus and Eurydice's tale throughout the Middle Ages. In chapter two, the analysis focuses on the actual transmission of the Orpheus myth in England. The educational environment played an important role in the transmission of classical culture in general, and the authority of authors like Virgil and Ovid surely helped the Orpheus myth not to disappear over the centuries. However, the fruition of the classics was limited to the few educated people who knew Latin, while the *Orfeo* poem clearly shows elements of the popular tradition. In this case, King Alfred the Great's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Old English, may have helped the spread of the Orpheus myth among a medieval English audience. But French culture, brought by the Normans after their Conquest of England in 1066, exerted the most prominent influence on the *Orfeo* poem's composition so far. Chapter three, then, analyses directly the elements of the poem, those closer to the classical version and those more distant from it. Classical, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and romance influences find a place in this medieval retelling of the Orpheus myth, giving *Sir Orfeo* as many interpretations as the traditions that interacts with the tale.

By tracing back the process of *Sir Orfeo*'s composition, this thesis brings together almost ten centuries of European history. In doing so, it underlines the many aspects of the *Orfeo* poem from a historical, cultural and literary point of view. Far from being a comprehensive study on the matter, this thesis tries to gather some of *Sir Orfeo*'s main

features in relation to all the different traditions that interacted with the myth throughout the Middle Ages. Which tradition was the most influential in the poem composition? Which is *Sir Orfeo's* role in medieval England? Throughout my analysis, I try to find an answer to these questions. With the awareness, however, that an unambiguous answer may not be found.

1. Orpheus and Eurydice: a cultural heritage

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is one of the most striking yet sad tales of all classical mythology. Its beauty reveals itself in aspects that, over the centuries, made Orpheus' tale one of the most malleable myths for further elaborations. From its classical origin, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice went through a series of interpretations that made its themes change in meaning, making it one of the richest sources for medieval allegory. It is interesting to notice how the Christian discourse influenced each reading of the myth. Christian Apologetics surely played a role in the reception and transmission of the Orpheus material, but as the myth began to stray from its patristic boundaries we bear witness to an extremely original use of the tale in the European literary tradition.

A fine example of the elaboration of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth is the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*. As John Anthony Burrow and Thorlac Turvill-Petre explain, *Sir Orfeo* was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in the South Midlands.¹ There are three extant texts of *Sir Orfeo*, the earliest (1330-40) contained in the Auchinleck manuscript, one of the most important English manuscripts of the period, apparently produced in London. It is a large collection of romances and religious poems and by being part of such a collection *Sir Orfeo* already suggests some sort of distance from its classical origins.² The story has been reinterpreted as a Celtic folk-tale: the abductor of Heurodis (Eurydice) is the Fairy king who takes her to his kingdom in Fairyland rather than Hades.³ This elaboration clearly distances the poem from the classical tradition and is proof of an original reception of the myth during the Middle

¹ Burrow, John Anthony, Turville-Petre, Thorlac, eds, *A Book of Middle English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 112.

² Burrow, Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, p. 112.

³ Burrow, Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, p. 113.

Ages at least in England. This reinterpretation may originate from the different aim of the poem in the English medieval context and society but also from the decisive role played by Latin culture throughout the Middle Ages.

This chapter examines the relationship that binds the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, its classical origins and its first elaborations, fundamental to understand the mechanism that led to the innovative themes of *Sir Orfeo* during the Middle Ages.

1.1 The Orpheus myth: from its archaic origins to Virgil and Ovid

The musician Orpheus is probably one of the most famous figures of Greek and Roman mythology. In some versions of the myth, he is depicted as the son of Apollo and the muse Calliope, guardian deity of music and poetry, in others of the Thracian King Oeagrus.⁴ Legends agree unanimously in recognizing Orpheus' main feature in his ability as a lyre player and in his bewitching voice, capable of enchanting all living creatures, even trees and rocks. Among the myths narrating Orpheus' accomplishments, the most famous is probably the one regarding his love for the nymph Eurydice. Soon after her marriage with Orpheus, Eurydice dies bitten by a poisonous snake: Orpheus, grieving for the loss of his wife, decides to look for her in the netherworld. Thanks to his music, he manages to reach the Sovereigns of the Dead, Pluto and Persephone, begging for Eurydice to be brought back to life. The gods, moved by the musician's grieving song, allow Eurydice to follow her husband among the livings, provided that he will not turn to see whether she is following him until they reach the upper world. But as soon as he surfaces to the light, Orpheus cannot avoid looking back at Eurydice, who immediately disappears in front of him. Having returned to Thrace, his native country, Orpheus is torn to pieces by the Maenads, jealous of his incurable love for

⁴ Grant, Michael, Hazel, John, *Dizionario della Mitologia Classica*, Milano: Mondadori, 1993, p. 234.

Eurydice.⁵ All the elaborations of the orphic tale share this common plot, but some elements of the myth withstood various changes over the centuries, each of them linked to the specific meanings that the different authors wanted them to convey.

The three versions of the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice best known to the Middle Ages are in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 10-11, Virgil's *Georgics*, Book 4, and Book 3 of *The Consolation of Philosophy* by the sixth-century scholar Boethius,⁶ who moralized the story as a warning against the perils of looking back on the pleasures of the world⁷. Virgil's everlasting authority in the academic environment ensured with his *Georgics* the survival of the tale, but the use of the myth made by Boethius shows that already in the last decades of the Roman Empire, the Christian belief had re-shaped to a certain extent some of the classics for its own ideological purpose. This is certainly one of the primary reasons for the spreading of the myth as a Christian tale throughout the Empire, but its role in the later medieval literary tradition also derives from the greater influence of Ovid and its works. In particular, the *Metamorphoses* was one of the principal sources of inspiration for literary imagery, thanks to its classical legacy and vivid images. In many cases, the protagonists of the myths changed their meaning, or rather Christian rhetoric shaped what they came to represent, turning them into allegories frequently used in medieval culture.

The classical past always influenced deeply the European literary culture. Classical antecedents were sources both of inspiration and of admiration for medieval scholars, whose ambition was to acquire authority and literary dignity through the emulation of

⁵ Grant, Hazel, *Dizionario della Mitologia Classica*, p. 235.

⁶ Publius Ovidius Naso (43 b.C. – 17 A.D.). Roman poet noted especially for his *Ars amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*. His poem *Metamorphoses* had immense influence both thanks to its imaginative interpretations of Classical myth and as a supreme stylistic example of poetry; Publius Vergilius Maro (70 b.C. – 19 b.C.). Roman poet, best known for his *Bucolics*, the *Georgics* and his national epic work, the *Aeneid* (from c. 30 B.C; unfinished at his death); Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (470/475 A.D – 524 A.D). Roman scholar, Christian philosopher, and statesman, author of the celebrated *De consolatione philosophiae*, or *Consolation of Philosophy*, a largely Neoplatonic work in which the pursuit of wisdom and the love of God are described as the true sources of human happiness. <<https://www.britannica.com/>> [accessed 10 August 2020].

⁷ Burrow, Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, p. 113

classical works.⁸ The classics' authority exerted such an influence that the importance of a mythical past became a crucial point to all cultural dimensions. In particular, literature and history became somewhat intertwined and most medieval reigns sought in their supposed classical origins a form of power legitimacy and prestige. Classical characters became models for political and moral behaviour, entering the political and religious frame. In England, Troy and Rome were at once points of genealogical origin and sources of pride.⁹ The restoration of a classical past after the Anglo-Saxon conquest testifies that myths and legends of the Greek and Roman tradition still circulated in Europe unforgotten. Interest in the classics, however, is characterized by original interpretations due to the mix of the different elements belonging to the new medieval tradition. In this cultural environment, the Orpheus and Eurydice myth underwent a series of interpretations that reshaped it into a typical medieval tale in England. To discern which elements changed over time and which readings were applied to the Orpheus myth, it is useful to frame the development of the tale through its classical dimension first.

It is certain that the popularity of Orpheus and Eurydice dates back to Ancient Greece and it later spread to Rome. A strong relationship existed between Greek and Latin cultures since their first contacts and, as a proof of this extremely close connection, today it is impossible to study Latin literature without having the Greek tradition as a reference point.¹⁰ Latin literary culture grew and flourished immensely under the impulse of the Hellenistic tradition. The entire literary, philosophical and scientific cultural heritage elaborated by Greek civilization between the seventh and fourth century b.C. merged in Rome, starting a process that shared knowledge among the

⁸ Baswell, Christopher, "England's Antiquities: Middle English Literature and the Classical Past", in Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture*, Oxford; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 232.

⁹ Baswell, Christopher, "England's Antiquities: Middle English Literature and the Classical Past", p. 232.

¹⁰ Flocchini, Nicola, Guidotti Bacci, Piera, Falchetti Franco, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, Milano: Bompiani Editore, 1994, p.24.

Mediterranean territories. Latin intellectuals played an undeniable process of “functional assimilation” towards Greek literature, transferring in Latin culture as much useful knowledge as possible for the Roman ruling class.¹¹ Latin writers and poets drew largely from the ancient Greek cultural heritage so that, from the second century b.C., scholars considered elements such as mythical events and figures, literary genre conventions and metrical forms a basic part of their culture. They did not seem foreign concepts but were rather perceived as a deeply personal and familiar heritage from which to take inspiration for forms and contents, making them functional to another message. The reference to Greek texts is often quite evident: the Latin poets usually did not hide their inspiration models. On the contrary, the poets wanted them to be clear and recognizable, since adhering to the convention of the Greek tradition allowed the text to gain literary dignity and value. For the Latin poet, drawing from Greek culture meant connecting to a common Mediterranean literary tradition.¹² Therefore, it is impossible to set aside the likely Greek origins of the tale, since they play a fundamental role in the reception of the myth in Rome and, later on, in medieval Europe.

David Sansone tries to outline the development of the myth during the fifth century b.C., a period in which there is proof of the circulation of the Orpheus myth in more than a text.¹³ It is important to bear in mind, though, that no such thing as an “original” version of the myth is known to have survived in written form today. In her article, Alessandra Petrina points out that the most ancient sources of the myth are now lost.¹⁴ Of the entire classical tradition only few works have been transmitted and, mostly, in fragmentary conditions. This lack of documentation together with the typical oral origin of Greek and Roman myths are what made tales such as Orpheus and Eurydice so

¹¹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p.25.

¹² Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 26.

¹³ Sansone, David, “Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century”, *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 36 (1985), pp. 53.

¹⁴ Petrina, Alessandra, “Robert Henryson’s Orpheus and Eurydice and its Sources”, *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2008), p. 200.

malleable to re-elaborate. There existed in the fifth-century Orphic writings as well as stories about Orpheus circulating in oral tradition, fostered primarily by those who thought of themselves as followers of Orpheus.¹⁵ These stories contained an account of Orpheus' journey to the underworld and referred to his ability to influence the nether powers with his song.¹⁶ It is likely that at the beginning only one version existed of the myth concerning Orpheus and Eurydice and, according to that version, Orpheus was unsuccessful in his attempt to resurrect his lover. But it seems also to be pretty general accepted that two distinct versions of the Orpheus' story may have been developed at first: one, usually regarded as an earlier version, in which the musician successfully recovered his wife from Hades, and another according to which he failed to restore Eurydice to the world of the living.¹⁷ Even if there is no proof of such a version in written form except for a Greek relief, it may be that the original theme of *Sir Orfeo*, of the good king saving his queen, was not as innovative as it is thought. It is undeniable however, that the tragic version of the myth had much more success over time, as it was the only version that survived in writings.

As a proof of the circulation of Orpheus' tale, Sansone alludes to two literary works, often believed to be the basis for the "unhappy" version of the myth.¹⁸ Petrina argues, however, that the story is nowhere as fully narrated as it is in Virgil and Ovid.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, there are only two titles of fifth-century dramas dealing with the Orpheus' subject matter, namely Aeschylus' *Bassarides* and Aristias of Phlius'

¹⁵ Orphism, or Orphic religion, is a Hellenistic mystery religion, thought to have been based on the teachings and songs of the legendary Greek musician Orpheus. No consistent description of such a religion can be constructed from historical evidence. Most scholars agree that by the 5th century BC there was at least an Orphic movement, with travelling priests who offered teaching and initiation, based on a body of legend and doctrine said to have been founded by Orpheus. </<https://www.britannica.com/>> [accessed 10 August 2020].

¹⁶ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 55.

¹⁷ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 62.

¹⁸ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 55.

¹⁹ Petrina, Alessandra, "Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice and its Sources", p. 200.

Orpheus.²⁰ There is no evidence that Orpheus's wife was the subject of Aeschylus' play or that Aristias was the one to introduce the tragic ending to the story. But little is known of this playwright and less about his play. It is not even known whether *Orpheus* was a tragedy or a satyr-play. Sources about Aristias' life and production are blurred, but he seem to have been roughly contemporary with Sophocles, whose first production was in the year 468. All that is known is that a play named *Orpheus* already existed in this period of ancient Greece.²¹ For Aristias' play, where Orpheus probably does not succeed in recovering Eurydice, Sansone suggests an interesting interpretation of the singer's loss of his wife. Greek mythology overflows with episodes concerning heroic quests deep down to the realm of the dead. Thanks to these descents, the hero can prove his worth and great courage, gaining his immortal place in the cultural literary tradition. In this case, Orpheus may have lost Eurydice not because he turned to look at her precipitately, but because the gods frustrated his quest: he, being merely a mean-spirited lyre player, simply did not deserve a reward, which others had sought more valorously.²² Evidence for the theme of the second loss of Eurydice, however, are ambiguous until Virgil's use of the myth, who may have been the one to introduce it rather than a Hellenistic poet. Other important sources for the unsuccessful journey of Orpheus are to be found in Plato's *Symposium*, Euripides' *Alcestis* and Isocrates' *Busiris*.²³ Plato's Orpheus focuses on the wider theme of Eros' ability to inspire courage, which results in the gods showing their benevolence in rewarding those who

²⁰ The *Bassarides*, or *Bassarids*, is a play by the Athenian dramatist Aeschylus. It is part of the *Lycurgeia*, a lost tetralogy concerning the Thracian Lycurgus' conflict with Dionysus and his aftermath. The four plays that made up the *Lycurgeia* survive only in fragments quoted by ancient authors, and the reconstruction of much of their content is a matter of conjecture. In the *Edoni*, Dionysus presumably arrived in Thrace where King Lycurgus attempted to suppress the worship of the new god. The second play, the *Bassarids*, is supposed to have treated the death of Orpheus at the hands of Thracian women in the thrall of Dionysus. Very little is known of the third play, the *Youths*, but in all likelihood it should have culminated in the acceptance of the cult of Dionysus in Thrace <<https://www.britannica.com/>> [accessed 10 August 2020].

²¹ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 55.

²² Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 55.

²³ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 55.

make sacrifices for love. Of the three stories narrated in this part of the *Symposium*, only Alcestis' sacrifice for her husband²⁴ and Achilles' death for love are granted honour by the gods: they dismiss Orpheus for his unwillingness to die for his love.²⁵ In some lines of his play, Euripides hints at the Orpheus' myth and his experience in the underworld again in relation of Alcestis's sacrifice and her husband's sorrow. This mention, however, does not prove that Euripides knew of an account in which Orpheus successfully resurrected his wife. Admetus' words when lamenting his wife's death²⁶ only indicate that Orpheus was thought to have tried to rescue someone from the underworld, and the same applies to Isocrates' play²⁷. Therefore, it is possible to suppose the existence a tragedian, identified by Sansone with Aristias, who could have introduced Orpheus' unsuccessful attempt to rescue his Eurydice, if not the figure of Eurydice entirely. It is possible to suppose, however, the existence of an elaboration of the myth that also provided a happy conclusion to the tale, maybe during the Hellenistic period. Hellenistic poets, who probably could not know at first hand, if at all, the work of this minor fifth-century tragedian, made for the first time Orpheus' quest successful, as the theme of these poets could have been the power of song and the invincibility of love.²⁸ In all likelihood, these are the premises that may have laid the ground to the reception of the Orpheus myth in the Roman Empire.

As already mentioned before, two of the main sources of the reception of the myth during the Middle Ages were from the Augustan period, namely Virgil's *Georgics* and

²⁴ Alcestis, in Greek legend, the beautiful daughter of Pelias, king of Iolcos. She is the heroine of the eponymous play by the dramatist Euripides (c. 484–406 BCE). According to legend, the god Apollo helped Admetus, son of the king of Pherae, to harness a lion and a boar to a chariot in order to win Alcestis's hand. When Apollo learned that Admetus had not long to live, he persuaded the Fates, the goddesses who determine human destiny, to prolong his life. The Fates imposed the condition that someone else die in Admetus's stead, which Alcestis, a loyal wife, consented to do. The warrior Heracles rescued Alcestis by wrestling at her grave with Death < <https://www.britannica.com/> > [accessed 10 August 2020].

²⁵ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 56.

²⁶ «If I had Orpheus' powers of enchantment, I would go to the underworld and persuade Persephone and her husband to restore you to life». (Euripides, *Alcestis*, 375-376, in David Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century").

²⁷ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 59.

²⁸ Sansone, "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century", p. 62.

Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. These two works differ in some details from the Greek tradition and, at the same time, from each other both in terms of contents and of the influence exerted on later generations of poets, but are an essential basis to understand most medieval cultural production. The *Georgics* (29 b.C.) is one of the most important poems written by Virgil. In its four Books, Virgil tries to order the agricultural norms of the time while using them as a manifesto for the Augustan restoration program, which aspiration was to evoke the most ancient and authentic values of Roman society, that find their utmost expression in the agricultural dimension.²⁹ More specifically, hard work and effort are absolute values, which should be preserved as the means to let any civilization prosper. The agricultural instructions are, however, only the framework for the poet's deep exploration of larger matters as Charles Segal suggests³⁰. Segal explains that:

“The alternation between creativeness and destructiveness, gentleness and force, the pessimistic sense of human sinfulness and the hope for regeneration, the positive and negative possibilities for human civilization against the flawed backdrop of human history and the elemental violence of nature's powers, an existence bound to the rhythm of nature and the respect owed to the ancient traditional gods are only some of the themes expressed in the poem.”³¹

Virgil makes use of the Orpheus and Eurydice's myth in Book 4 of the *Georgics*, where the main theme is apiculture. The image of the bees serves as a metaphor and an example for describing an ideal community based on selflessness and hard work, where the dangerous drives of passions cannot harm the order given by nature. Virgil examines every aspect of the bees' activities, suggesting a hypothetical farmer how to raise them and tend to the bee-yard. In doing so, he gives his readers a brief symbolic image of what Augustan society should be. But the bees' activity is not without any risk. If, by chance, the hive is destroyed, it is possible to acquire new bees through a

²⁹ Flocchini, Nicola, Guidotti Bacci, Piera, Falchetti Franco, *Letteratura Latina Volume II*, Milano: Bompiani Editore, 1994, p. 382.

³⁰ Segal, Charles, “Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology”, *Transaction and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 103 (1972), p. 307.

³¹ Segal, “Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization”, p. 307.

sacrifice, as in the case of the shepherd Aristaeus.³² Here Virgil introduces some original elements to his poem, namely the bee-keeper Aristaeus and all the characters related to him, whose story forms the conceptual frame that introduces the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with which Virgil ends the *Georgics*: Aristaeus loses his bees as a punishment for causing the accidental death of Eurydice.³³ The divination of Proteus, a marine god, reveals to Aristaeus the struggle of Orpheus in Hades to bring back Eurydice from the dead and his failure. Proteus' final foretelling underlie the necessity of a sacrifice to Orpheus and Eurydice's souls. This is the only way in which Aristaeus can have back his bees.

In the last part of Book 4, Virgil ties together two myths, the myth of Aristaeus and that of Orpheus and Eurydice, making one the narrative frame of the other. Both Aristaeus and Orpheus have in common a struggle against the powers of Death, but the opposition of these two myths assumes also an ideological meaning, suggesting two poetry and life models, a winning and a losing one: Aristaeus, by following faithfully the gods' precepts, saves his bees. Orpheus, however, does not respect their will and fails his quest.³⁴ The gods of the *Georgics* do not tolerate men disobeying their precepts and reward the humble Aristaeus, observant of those values such as justice and hard work that Virgil places as a basis for Octavian Augustus' empire. However, justice is not always perfect. Virgil recognizes a striking difference between justice as it ought to be and the actual human justice.³⁵ Some fine examples are Eurydice's death despite her youth, Orpheus' loss of his wife and Aristaeus' loss of his bees. Of the three characters, only the bee-keeper is granted his bees back from the gods despite being the primary

³² Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 307.

³³ Petrina, "Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice and Its Sources", p. 200.

³⁴ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume II*, p. 392.

³⁵ Horne, "Georgic Justice", *Vergilius*, 64 (2018), p. 123.

reason for Eurydice's death. The frame story of Aristaeus, Horne suggests, might stand as a warning that "this is a world with no justice, but only mercy".³⁶

To determine the effects of the association of the Aristaeus and Orpheus episode with the account of the bees, Segal draws attention on the relation between the unity of Book 4 and the entire poem. The meaning of the Fourth Georgic lies behind the practical advises of bee-keeping. In their similar and yet different relation with men's community, the bees represent an idealized society.³⁷ Bees, however, have their own peculiarities that make them different from any human community. Since their main goal is productivity, all of their actions are seen in terms of production. Passion is not allowed in their life, but only work. Therefore, the bees live accordingly to their function in the natural world, accepting their fate in the circle of life.³⁸ Nevertheless, Orpheus' tragedy in the second half of the Book, as Segal clarifies, represent the tragedy of civilization as a whole. Unlike the bees, Virgil's man cannot reconcile himself to the conditions of life set by nature, nor accept a fundamental part of his existence like death. Orpheus challenges death itself, but cannot defeat it because of his lingering passions. Yet he does not accept death, considering the laws of nature brutal and unjust.

Orpheus' sufferings seems to reflect the sufferance of the human condition on earth, and hence suggest new interpretations of the myth.³⁹ Segal describes Aristaeus as an agricultural man, a man that lives following the rules of nature while tending to the bees he rears. In a way, Aristaeus represents the fundamental values that Virgil highlights in the *Georgics*: he completes the purposes of nature and is helped by natural powers in return. On the other hand, Orpheus is distinctly human. In his case, Virgil does not mention any divine lineage nor aid. However, this sharp contrast between the two

³⁶ Horne, "Georgic Justice", p. 123.

³⁷ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 310.

³⁸ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 310.

³⁹ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 311.

characters may help to find an explanation for the conclusion of the Orpheus' section and of the *Georgics* as a whole.⁴⁰ On the opposition of these two figures, Sansone recognizes the centre of one of the recurrent themes of the poem, namely the interaction between man's control over nature and nature's independence.⁴¹ With Aristaeus and Orpheus' tale, the poem culminates in the contrast between work and wonder, practical advice and poetical description, labor and beauty. Of the two heroes, one is a shepherd while the other is a musician. As a polar opposite to Aristaeus, Orpheus interacts differently with the natural world. Unlike Aristaeus, he is not in close contact with nature itself, since his role as a poet is to express the beauty of the world through his compositions.⁴² This aspect suggests Orpheus's different understanding of the world from that of Aristaeus, since the Thracian musician expresses the relation between man and nature from the point of view of nature.⁴³

Segal affirms that Orpheus is not as innocent as he seems to be in the myth. Indeed, Orpheus' activeness and restlessness may be considered the cause of his deepest unhappiness. Orpheus makes demands that go against the laws of nature and seek the fulfillment of his personal human need, of what Segal describes as "the passionate and individualistic love from which Aristaeus' bees, nature most efficient creatures, are singularly free".⁴⁴ Through the contrast with Aristaeus, Orpheus is linked with the bees of the first half of the Book. However, Orpheus' love does not follow the natural aim of reproduction. He loves without the aim of procreation, a peculiarly human form of love that is unknown to the bees. Thus, since Orpheus's love does not fulfill the laws of nature, Virgil sentences him to a sorrowful life. For this reason, Astel clarifies that:

⁴⁰ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 312.

⁴¹ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 316.

⁴² Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 316.

⁴³ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 317.

⁴⁴ Segal, "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization", p. 318.

“Virgil attributes the responsibility for Eurydice’s death not to Orpheus, but to an undefined, cruel outside force, the sudden madness that seizes him unexpectedly at the threshold of the underworld, that *dementia* and *furor* relatable to the madness of love.”⁴⁵

Neither Aristaeus nor Orpheus, however, represent a good example for the right relation with nature. Therefore, Virgil condemns the both of them for their own wrongdoing. In Virgil’s eyes, Orpheus’ rejection of any physical contact after the final loss of Eurydice represents the total rejection of procreation, and not a romantic way to honour Eurydice’s death. Indeed, Virgil’s disapproval of Orpheus’s behaviour may be represented by the Maenads, who tear Orpheus apart after refusing their attentions in the final passage of the tale. The women do not simply murder Orpheus but seems to perform a sort of religious act, a rite to restore nature’s laws. They represent the brutality and horrifying elemental force with which nature can reclaim its cycle to be respected.⁴⁶ Neither Aristaeus nor Orpheus, then, can be considered as a relatable model of behaviour for man’s interaction with nature, suggesting that an ideal relation might lie in a balance between the two of them. Therefore, Virgil’s Orpheus cannot be considered just a narrative digression from Book 4, since it shows a deep connection with the *Georgics*’ main themes. In Segal opinion, the Orpheus myth is necessary to the conclusion of the poem, since:

“it ties together the delicate and complicated relationship between human activism and nature’s resistance, between human destructiveness and nature’s creativeness, between man’s power over nature and nature’s power over man. In a deeper analysis, what the Orpheus-Aristaeus episode might suggest is that human life, framed between the figures of Orpheus and Aristaeus, may be essentially tragic.”⁴⁷

Virgil’s Orpheus and Eurydice is conceptually different from Ovid’s tale in his *Metamorphosis*, one of the fundamental medieval sources for the reception of the Orpheus myth. The *Metamorphosis* stands as proof of Ovid’s poetry maturity: there he tells over two-thousand mythological legends, having as a common theme

⁴⁵ Astel, Ann W., *Job, Boethius and Epic Truth*, London: Cornell University Press, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Segal, “Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization”, p. 319.

⁴⁷ Segal, “Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Virgil on Nature and Civilization”, p. 320.

“transfigurations” of human beings, animals, objects and gods.⁴⁸ Ovid narrates the great and small myths of the ancient tradition, pondering on the misery and flaws of the human soul and on the misfortune caused by the greatest human weakness, namely love. In doing so, the poet rejects the great poetry models of the past like Homer, Apollonius, and Virgil.⁴⁹ It is clear, then, that Ovid took a different direction when writing the *Metamorphosis* if compared to Virgil’s political and educational aim of the *Georgics*. It could be argued, then, that by distancing himself from the poetic tradition Ovid’s intention was of lessening the stern dimension of mythological epic, giving a more relaxing pace to his tales. By doing so, some of the myths lost their dignified tone, being often perceived as satirical elaborations of the traditional “high ethos” of classical tradition.⁵⁰

The purpose of the poet was to write a universal story of mankind through a specific aspect, namely the metamorphosis.⁵¹ In this large collection of myths, there are also a number of different episodes not strictly relevant to the metamorphosis motif but that Ovid inserts in the poem because of their extraordinary events, like that of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is difficult to find a connection between each myth and it is even more difficult to state whether Ovid took inspiration for them in any of his contemporary poets or predecessors. However, the poet’s original manipulation of the traditional Greek and Roman material and the new shape he gave it in Augustan culture is undeniable.

Considering the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is possible to hypothesize the direct influence of Virgil’s *Georgics* on Ovid, but the atmosphere given to the tale in the *Metamorphosis* results completely different. Firstly, Ovid does not insert the story in a wider political frame. Aristaeus and, above all, his bees are not present in Ovid’s

⁴⁸ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume II*, p. 604.

⁴⁹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume II*, p. 605.

⁵⁰ Tarrant, “Ovid and Ancient Literary History”, p. 19.

⁵¹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume II*, p. 605.

collection of myths, nor the moral implications they represent. Secondly, the poet adds to his elaboration of the orphic tale other myths, making the musician an active character in the *Metamorphosis* narration flow. Orpheus' tale embraces not only the hero's grief but also other episodes in line with the mood of the tale, such as the myths of Iphis and of Pygmalion.⁵² Some scholars agree in recognizing in Orpheus an alter-ego or spokesman for Ovid, so that his own story and the myths he tells acquire a special role in relation to the themes and the structure of the *Metamorphosis*.⁵³ Indeed, Ovid saw Orpheus' potential as a further storytelling device, capable not only to link tales but also to expand them.

As already mentioned before, there is little doubt that Ovid deliberately cut the ties with Virgil's Orpheus, turning the dignified myth into lower terms.⁵⁴ Once again, Charles Segal, together with other scholars, supports this opinion on the content of the *Metamorphosis* as a whole and, more in the specific, of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.⁵⁵ In Segal's analysis, a signal of Ovid's divergence from Virgil in the treatment of Orpheus's myth is its lack of "tragic ethos". This choice probably originated from a deliberate intention to challenge Virgil's style and improve his own. In the Orpheus episode, it is not only the heroic style and the solemnity of tragic suffering that Ovid tries to challenge, but also the self-importance of sacrifice and devotion to a vast and transcendental purpose. Yet, Ovid's innovative style cannot be reduced to a satirical interpretation of the classical mythology since, as Segal explains, "the complexity of the *Metamorphosis* lies in no small part in this double-barreled attack on heroic seriousness".⁵⁶ When retelling Virgil's austere tragic tale of Orpheus, Ovid does so reading the myth through the lenses of the fantastic and rhetorical atmosphere of the

⁵² Petrina, "Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice and Its Sources", p. 200.

⁵³ Thomas, M. D. "Ovid's Orpheus: Immortal Lovers, Immortal Poets." *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*, 40 (1998), pp. 99.

⁵⁴ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p.474.

⁵⁵ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 474.

⁵⁶ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 476.

Metamorphosis, risking sometimes to run into the grotesque. Yet, that grotesqueness may be an essential part of Ovid's revolt against Augustan heroic seriousness.

By setting his tales in a fantastic world, Ovid allows human weaknesses to stand out evidently.⁵⁷ Ovid knows that passion often leads to chaos, yet erotic love is not a destructive power, as it tends to be in Virgil. In Virgil's Orpheus, passions trigger tragedy: men disobey the unstoppable laws of nature and suffer accordingly. In this case, Aristaeus and Orpheus are complementary figures: one is devoted to productive work and to the continuity of the species upon which his reputation as a farmer depends, the other is a poet, devoted to his emotional sphere and passion.⁵⁸ The two figures, however, have one thing in common: they both pay for yielding to passions. Aristaeus loses his bees after his amorous pursuit of Eurydice causes her death and Orpheus loses Eurydice forever when his love leads him to yield to his passions and glance back to his beloved still in Hades. Virgil seems to be sympathetic toward Orpheus, but at the same time makes it clear that his passion is to blame and his suffering merited. The cosmic order is a major theme in the *Georgics*, and Orpheus' story itself is part of a larger frame that reflects that order, together with the eternal cycle of death and rebirth associated to the loss and recovery of Aristaeus' bees. The presence of a stable, inflexible world order gives Virgil's Orpheus its tragic quality, since to violate this order is to draw suffering. On the other hand, Ovid's world is very different. No strict divine order rules over human life. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis* it is possible to find capricious and unstable divine powers, highly susceptible to emotions and capable of both terrible punishments and of miraculous blessings.⁵⁹

Whereas in Virgil's *Georgics* Orpheus was condemned for his inclination to passionate love, Ovid emphasizes the strength of Orpheus' feelings. He also develops a more

⁵⁷ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 475.

⁵⁸ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 475.

⁵⁹ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 476.

complex private life for Orpheus: after Eurydice's death, Ovid's Orpheus does not merely reject women as Virgil's character does, but turns instead to homosexual love affairs. Hence, Ovid breaks down the finality of Virgil's tale as the *Metamorphosis* allows the erotic life of Orpheus to continue, albeit on a different path from before.⁶⁰ Segal recognizes that the homosexual adventures of Ovid's Orpheus must have a necessary structural function, as some scholars have pointed out. Not only they link the tale with the following stories of Cyparissus and Hyacinthus, but Orpheus' homosexual adventures may be seen also as an ironical comment on Orpheus's utter devotion to his Eurydice.⁶¹ Ovid's Orpheus, then, represents a parody of the tragic lover that sacrifices everything for love, except his own sexual life. Ovid thereby introduces a realistic note and a humanizing correction to Virgil's characters from the very beginning. Not only Orpheus, but even Eurydice receives a more human representation: instead of Virgil's mysteriously doomed nymph, Ovid introduces a new Eurydice, who meets her death accidentally. By omitting Aristaeus and thereby making Eurydice's death purely accidental, Ovid eliminates Virgil's complex moral scheme of crime and retribution. He also focuses the attention on Orpheus, while Eurydice remains just a background figure.⁶² Ovid portrays Orpheus not as a formidable hero gifted with supernatural powers, but also as a human man, fighting only with his love and his art.

Another point debated by Segal is Ovid's breaking down of Virgil's portrayal of death, clearly visible in the case of Eurydice's demise. In Virgil, she quickly disappears like smoke, leaving Orpheus reaching for empty air. After Eurydice's final death, Virgil's Orpheus wanders in the wilderness, lamenting his lost love and his death at the hands of the Maenads follows at once.⁶³ Virgil's context suggests the continued passion and emotional violence of Orpheus: he fails to recognize the absolute laws of death, and

⁶⁰ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 477.

⁶¹ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 478.

⁶² Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 478.

⁶³ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 482.

thus he continues to lament his loss as a refusal by cruel gods. Though Ovid closely follows Virgil in his account of Eurydice's loss, he presents his turning around not as dictated by passion or folly, but as the concern of a lover for the weakness of his beloved. In Virgil, Eurydice is the one who stretches out her arms toward her lover, while in Ovid it is Orpheus to reach for Eurydice. Both poets have Orpheus reach for the empty air, but in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid sympathies clearly with Orpheus.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Eurydice is the character that claims the audience's sympathy in Virgil's retelling of the myth, since she is the one that pay the price for Orpheus' lack of self-control. Ovid's Eurydice, however, reacts in a very gentle way: she understands that the failure of her spouse is a sad proof of his feelings.⁶⁵ In these terms, the general effect of Ovid's interpretation of Eurydice's final loss is to transfer sympathy from Eurydice to Orpheus. Ovid's Orpheus wins over the reader, as he wins over the gods, by a touching declaration of his utter subjection to love. In this respect, Ovid's tale is exactly the opposite of Virgil's. He presents the triumph of imagination, emotionality and interior life over external reality. As a poet and as a lover, Orpheus reflects the two elements that for Ovid form the actual basis for human happiness, namely love and art.

In concluding his story, Ovid follows the Virgilian version: Orpheus fails. Yet, Ovid manages to suggest a possibility for Orpheus's success. Ovid ends his Orpheus with the happy glances of lovers: instead of a tragic loss or epic monumentality, he concludes with a small, personal, intimate gesture between husband and wife. Yet the reunion of the two lovers has a less happy side, as it can happen only with Orpheus' final descent to the netherworld. As it vindicates the power of love, it also shows that love can be fulfilled only in a world beyond that of the living.⁶⁶ In Ovid's world love and not law, is the measure of existence. It may be for this closer attachment to human nature that the

⁶⁴ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 483.

⁶⁵ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 486.

⁶⁶ Segal, "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology", p. 490.

Metamorphosis had such a great influence on later literary tradition. Its colorful images and vivid sceneries certainly played a great role in the reception of the poem, so that Ovid's visual sense came to represent a fertile source not only for later poets, but also for painters and sculptors.⁶⁷ The fairytale-like atmosphere and the fusion of poetry and figurative art are the main qualities of the *Metamorphosis* that granted the poem a special place in literary tradition also during the High Middle Ages, when the reception and transmission of the classics was strongly related to their value as literary models.

1.2 Orpheus and his Christian interpretation

Interestingly, Christianity was one of the means through which at the beginning of the Middle Ages people knew about the Orpheus myth. Up to now, a number of studies have highlighted the importance of Christianity in the fruition of classical culture and, as a consequence, of the Orpheus and Eurydice's myth. The influence of Christianity on the literary tradition is of no secondary importance, as this new religion almost reshaped most of the Latin cultural heritage. As Christianity became more influential through the Roman Empire, its followers assimilated the Greek and Latin cultural legacy as a basis to build their own cultural tradition, as well as to assert Christianity's authority. From philosophy to art, Christianity borrowed a series of classical elements that acquired new meaning within the Christian dimension. The Church Fathers' aim was to purge pagan learning of what was considered superfluous and pernicious, so that classical knowledge could be placed at the service of Christianity's true message.⁶⁸ This operation influenced deeply the fruition of Latin authors for centuries, since their works crystallized within the Christian thought. The messages contained in Latin authors'

⁶⁷ Hardie, Philip, "Introduction. The Cambridge Companion to Ovid", in Philip Hardie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Curtius, Ernst Robert, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 39.

writings were read through the lenses of Christianity, losing most of their original meaning in favour of an essentially Christian interpretation. The teachings of Christian Apologetics permeated both the theological and the philosophical dimension, but also exerted their influence on the reception of ancient literature. If classical tales and symbols were used to connect Christianity to a wider and well-established tradition, classical authors could not be simply labelled as pagan. Thus, Christianity's conflict concerning the role of pagan knowledge did not result in a simple rejection of the entire Greco-Roman cultural heritage. Instead, the Church came to terms with it to a certain extent and even turned to it for support, as Jean Seznec explains.⁶⁹

One of the characteristics of early Christian culture was the tendency to establish a parallelism between pagan wisdom and the wisdom of the Bible.⁷⁰ Due to their cultural value, Latin authors entered Christian rhetoric, sometime being regarded as prophets whose writings concealed God's true messages. Indeed, Virgil was one of the Latin authors that acquired a special position in early medieval culture thanks to this parallelism. The scholar Julia Dyson Hejduk indicates in the Latin poet and his *Bucolics*⁷¹ one of the most important bridges between the Greco-Roman classics and the Christian thought.⁷² Seznec adds that the medieval imagination transformed Virgil into a kind of sorcerer or mage, since he was thought to have had intuitive foreknowledge of the Christian messages.⁷³ Fourth- and fifth-century Church Fathers read Virgil's

⁶⁹ Seznec, Jean, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, translated from the French by Barbara F. Sessions, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 46.

⁷⁰ Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, p. 16.

⁷¹ The *Bucolics*, form the Latin *Bucolica*, also known as *The Eclogues* from the Latin *Ecloga*. It is a collection of ten pastoral poems by the Roman poet Virgil and Virgil's first major work, published in 37 b.C. The haunting and enigmatic verses on rustic subjects provided the inspiration for the whole European tradition of pastoral poetry, but their political element and their commentary on the recent turbulent period of Roman history also made them very popular in their own time < <https://www.britannica.com/>> [accessed 10 August 2020].

⁷² Dyson Hejduk, Julia, "Was Vergil Reading the Bible? Original Sin and Astonishing Acrostic in the Orpheus and Eurydice", *Vergilius* 64 (2018), p. 76.

⁷³ Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, p. 16.

Eclogue 4, with its prediction of the birth of a miraculous boy who would bring a new golden age, as a pagan prophecy of the birth of Christ. Given the political and cultural context in which Virgil wrote the *Bucolics*, the image of a boy as a bringer of peace and wealth referred in all likelihood to the emperor Augustus. However, the prophecy's resemblance to the ones of the Old Testament is undeniable. It is also possible that Virgil knew parts of the Old Testament to a certain extent, and took its images as a reference for his works. The Christian interpretation of Virgil granted the Latin author and its works everlasting authority in literature. Given Virgil's position within the medieval cultural dimension as a poet and as a prophet, it is no surprise that the *Georgics* may have been the main source of the Orpheus myth during the Middle Ages. The unilateral inclusion of Latin authors into the Christian dimension influenced not only the use made of their works, but also their reception and transmission. The importance given to Virgil by Christianity certainly marked the reception of his works, and his version of Orpheus and Eurydice with it. Through the scholarly and religious environments, thus, an exchange began to develop between Christian religion and Latin culture that was fated to leave a mark on the later cultural production. The main feature of this cultural exchange resulted in an original interpretation of the classical tradition, whose myths began to be read as religious metaphors, useful to lay the foundations for the Christian faith. Christian scholars began to produce works written especially in defense of their new religion, supporting the image of the Christian community and rejecting the accusations directed towards its members on a political, juridical and philosophical level.⁷⁴ By tracing back the origin of Christianity to classical tradition, early Christian Apologetics tried to demonstrate its legitimacy since, in Church Fathers' opinion, pagan myths were actually foreshadowing Christian teachings.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Strumenti e Percorsi*, p. 222.

⁷⁵Dyson Hejduk, "Was Vergil Reading the Bible? Original Sin and Astonishing Acrostic in the Orpheus and Eurydice", p. 76.

As concerns the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, Orpheus was known obviously for his attempt to bring his lover back from the underworld, but the myth entered the Christian dimension essentially thanks to a Christian interpretation of Orpheus' actions as a musician. The seventeenth century archeologist Antonio Bosio drew attention on the Christian Fathers' writings on Orpheus, where he is often depicted more as a preacher than a musician.⁷⁶ With the power of his music, Orpheus did not only soothe wild beasts but he also instructed men: by singing of false gods, he influenced negatively his listeners, which were then deflected from God's true messages. According to Christian Fathers then, during a journey to Egypt, Orpheus read Moses' writings in the Old Testament and admitted his religious errors. From that moment onwards, Orpheus decided to compose songs to the only true God, namely the Christian God.⁷⁷ Christian Fathers may have taken advantage of Orpheus' Christian interpretation to appeal to a Latin audience, whose familiarity with the classical myth could have led to an active recognition of the similarities between the two religions. If a character as famous and important as Orpheus confessed his belief in the One God, then it would help pagans to relate to his choice.⁷⁸

The union between classical and Christian elements appears obvious in early Christian art. In frescos found in Roman houses and Christian catacombs, the vivid imagery of classical mythology began to acquire different meanings as figures from the Latin tradition were re-shaped to adhere to Christian messages.⁷⁹ Among these figures, the scholar Janet Huskinson recognizes that of Orpheus charming the beasts perhaps as the

⁷⁶ Bosio, Antonio, *Roma Sotterranea: opera postuma*, Michelangelo e Pietro Vincenzo Fratelli de' Rossi, 1632, p. 629.

⁷⁷ Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea: opera postuma*, p. 629.

⁷⁸ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 10.

⁷⁹ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 11.

best known and recurring pagan mythological figure occurring in early Christian art.⁸⁰ It is important to analyze Orpheus' role in early Christian art, since art represents an extremely wide means of communication, especially in a period where education was not to be taken for granted. Images reach their observers more directly than words, and, in all likelihood, Orpheus' inclusion in the Christian artistic dimension helped the myth's transmission outside the literary environment. The use of the Orpheus tale in early Christian art allowed illiterate people to enter in contact with the myth and to internalize it without knowing its classical sources. Orpheus' parallelism with the biblical figure of the Good Shepherd certainly promoted the reception of the myth, playing an important role in preventing the myth from disappearing in the passage from polytheism to Christianity.

Once again, Bosio suggests a link between Orpheus' use in early Christian art and its interpretation in the Christian Fathers' writings. The first Christians may have used Orpheus in their artistic expression as a reminder of the Thracian musician's pagan past, of his preaching of pagan gods and of his final conversion to Christianity.⁸¹ Another explanation for the use of the figure of Orpheus in Christian art may be the lack of a specifically Christian iconography, which may have led Christian followers to select the Orpheus myth from pagan imagery to become part of their new cultural heritage.⁸² For the most part, the use of the Orpheus' myth in early Christian art is to be found in catacombs, Christian cemeteries where the oppressed Christians chose to perform their rituals in secret. This situation may suggest that the purpose of mythological figures in early Christian art, like that of Orpheus, may have been related to the need to conceal the representations of Christian elements from a hostile world.⁸³

⁸⁰ Huskinson, Janet, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 42 (1974), p. 69.

⁸¹ Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea: opera postuma*, p. 630.

⁸² Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 71.

⁸³ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 71.

In its composition, Orpheus' representation does not distance itself too much from the classical tradition.⁸⁴ Orpheus is usually portrayed seated on a rock with the lyre resting on his left knee and the plectrum in his right hand. Orpheus' ability is to soothe, and this characteristic must have reminded early Christian artists of Christ's qualities as a ruler of heaven and bringer of peace on earth.⁸⁵ In later representations, Orpheus' posture changes slightly. Both his arms are outstretched and he holds the lyre in both hands. The most important change, however, is in the type of animals that surround him. Creatures that are more docile, such as sheep and doves, replace the classical wild beasts tamed by the Thracian poet. Sometimes it is possible to find also peacocks. The introduction of sheep and doves does provide some positive indication as to the significance of Orpheus in these scenes.⁸⁶ In all likelihood, these animals all represent strong Christian elements, as the peacock symbolizes immortality in Greek and Roman tradition and Christian funerary art. Huskinson claims that obviously the Christians must have had a particular reason for selecting this one episode from the many myths that had funerary significance in pagan art, for linking it with biblical scenes and for altering its iconography.⁸⁷ The addition of Christian elements in Orpheus' representation clearly shows the parallelism between Orpheus and the figure of Christ.⁸⁸ Specifically, of all the Christian figures of the Bible, Christians saw a striking resemblance between Orpheus and the Good Shepherd, who tends to his herd as Christ tends to his worshippers. In this case, the tame animals listening to Orpheus' song may represent men who have submitted to the word of God, enjoying the music of Christ in a pastoral paradise.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 70.

⁸⁵ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 11.

⁸⁶ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 71.

⁸⁷ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 72.

⁸⁸ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 14.

⁸⁹ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 72.

In addition to early Christian art, certain writings of early Christian literature may lead to a more fruitful explanation of why the Christian tradition chose Orpheus as one of its characteristic figures.⁹⁰ In his attempt to strengthen Christianity as the only true religion, Clement of Alexandria used the Orpheus myth as a way to convert the pagans: he drew Orpheus closer to the Christian faith and associated him with Christ, but made sure to show Christ's superiority as the only God.⁹¹ Saint Augustine is even stricter than Clement towards Orpheus. Orpheus was allowed a glimpse of truth but melded his former paganism with his new monotheism, thus deceiving his audience by still relating to pagan idols and gods. Thus, having only a premonition of the truth is not enough, actions must show the true extent of man's faith. For this reason, Orpheus cannot be considered as a figure to admire. However, both Clement of Alexandria and later Eusebius of Caesarea link Orpheus and Christ in their powers of song. Huskinson underlines how Clement draws an elaborate contrast between the two singers and their songs: Orpheus' music is misleading and enslaves men to a life of vice, while the song of God subdues the wild passions of man and leads him to salvation.⁹² Thus, Orpheus is made a failure compared to Christ's success. Orpheus is depicted as a Dionysian figure, one who inspires sacrilegious actions, as in the Maenads who tear him limb from limb. As Orpheus was once seen as a civilizer, he is now rendered unworthy of this description compared to Christ.⁹³ Eusebius, on the other hand, uses a more conciliatory tone when comparing Orpheus and Christ. Writing almost a century after Clement of Alexandria, when the attitude towards pagan culture was less stern, Eusebius uses

⁹⁰ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 71.

⁹¹ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 15.

⁹² Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 72.

⁹³ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 15.

classical images to demonstrate Christianity's superiority, as well as references for Christians living in a pagan society.⁹⁴

Even though Orpheus can charm nature with his songs, the savior of the world can soothe men's souls, while bringing harmony on earth touching the strings of the human heart.⁹⁵

The Christian rhetorical tradition ensured to a certain extent the survival of Greek and Latin culture in the Middle Ages. As concerns the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, it entered the Christian discourse at first mostly by representing Orpheus as a positive representation of Christ, then as a negative model both in art and in philosophy. Independently of its reading, the use of the Orpheus myth testifies that there was no interruption in the transmission of the tale over time. In the early Christian period, the *Georgics* seems to be the main source for the transmission of the myth as Virgil himself gained authority even in the religious dimension, in addition to the influence he already had as a stylistic literary model. Another important interpretation of the Orpheus myth is to be found in Boethius' philosophical treatise *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the last of the three main classical sources of Orpheus and Eurydice's tale analyzed in this chapter.

1.3 Boethius, Lady Philosophy and Orpheus in late antiquity

Latin scholar and Christian philosopher, Boethius was one of the most important personalities of his time. His *Consolation of Philosophy* represents a bridge between Christian and Latin culture, embodying these two souls of late antiquity in one text. The *Consolation* was a role model for medieval philosophers and scholars, who recognized Boethius' work as one of the fundamental writings of the Middle Ages. Boethius'

⁹⁴ Collier, "An Exploration into the Reception of Orpheus in the Early Christian Period and the Christian Middle Ages", p. 25.

⁹⁵ Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art", p. 72.

Consolation was so influent that its principles circulated for centuries in Europe, shaping its philosophical, literary, and artistic landscape. In his work, Boethius advances a bold interpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, mixing both the classical version of the tale and its philosophical interpretation thanks to his studies of Christian and classical philosophy.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* is a philosophical treatise on the role of fortune, of death and of moral values in human life, composed both in prose and verses. Here Boethius faces theological issues with the help of Greek philosophy, trying to find proofs to his considerations on human life through philosophical principles.⁹⁶ The Orpheus myth becomes the perfect metaphor to convey the author's philosophical and theological messages. That of Orpheus and Eurydice is not just a myth but represents Boethius' deeper consideration on human existence.

The writing of the *Consolation* is closely related to its author's life: Boethius wrote it during his imprisonment in Pavia, waiting to be executed. Being one of the counsellors of King Theodoric the Great, Boethius was deeply involved with politics of his time. It was a period of great religious and political tension, caused by the broken relationship between the Ostrogoth reign and Constantinople, whose ambition was to take back the western territories of the empire from the goths. In the last years of his reign, Theodoric charged him with treason. In his moral and spiritual dejection, Boethius wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where he entrusted to philosophy the task of comforting him from the tragic turn his life underwent and give him courage to face death.⁹⁷ In the *Consolation*, Boethius ponders on individual human events, inscribing them in a universal consideration on fortune's precariousness, on happiness, on the concept of evil

⁹⁶ Flocchini, Nicola, Guidotti Bacci, Piera, Falchetti Franco, *Letteratura Latina Volume III*, Milano: Bompiani, 1994, p. 876.

⁹⁷ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume III*, p. 877.

and on the connection between free will and divine prescience.⁹⁸ Boethius gives human shape to philosophy who, according to the allegorical taste of the time, shows herself to him as a “venerable woman”. Her role is that of comforting Boethius, and to show him that true happiness consists only in the Supreme Good, namely God. God prescience does not cancel but respects human free will, the first cause of evil in the world.⁹⁹

As already mentioned before, philosophy plays an irreplaceable role in the composition of the *Consolation* and, of course, in Boethius’ interpretation of the Orpheus myth. His models were the great Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, supreme authorities of the Hellenistic philosophical school.¹⁰⁰ Boethius applied the methods he acquired from the study of Plato and Aristotle to find answers to important existential problems harmonizing classical philosophy with Christian theology, since he was a Christian but also a theologian and a writer on Christian doctrine himself.¹⁰¹ The *Consolation* does not deal directly with problems of Christian theology, but can be interpreted as the work of a Christian theologian who holds fast the distinction between reason and faith. The conclusion at which Boethius arrives is at one with the conclusion of Theology, though expressed in terms of Philosophy: reason cannot prove something that contradicts faith.¹⁰²

The Orpheus and Eurydice myth appears at the end of Book 3 as a song performed by Lady Philosophy. She concludes her speech on the existence of the Supreme Good stating that as good can manifest in the world so does evil, according to Fortune’s impersonal force and then, she introduces the Orpheus and Eurydice episode.¹⁰³ Boethius’ choice to rely on this specific tale of classical mythology could be explained

⁹⁸Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume III*, p. 877.

⁹⁹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina Volume III*, p. 877.

¹⁰⁰ Rand, Edward Kennard, “The Composition of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 15(1904), p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Rand, “The Composition of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*”, p. 27.

¹⁰² Rand, “The Composition of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*”, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Rand, “The Composition of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*”, p. 14.

by the role bestowed upon Orpheus by early Christian rhetoric, or by the influence that Virgil already exerted in the literary scene as a poetic model, but the scholar Ann W. Astel suggests a more personal explanation. Indeed, it is possible to propose a parallelism between Boethius' philosophical journey and Orpheus' descent to Hades. Boethius depicts the story of his own unfair imprisonment as a heroic descent to the underworld comparable to that of the Thracian musician. Boethius' epic journey progresses throughout the *Consolation* in contrasting images of darkness and light, clouds and stars, night and day, descent and ascent, like that of Orpheus. Boethius' journey, however, ends with a victory of the mind over the body and its passions¹⁰⁴. Lady Philosophy's own descent into Boethius' cell may represent an example for a successful return to the surface, in contrast to the literary model of Orpheus and Eurydice: midway through the *Consolation*, the weeping Boethius sees himself reflected in the sorrowful Orpheus, suggesting a relation between Orpheus' backward glance at Eurydice and his own upward glance at Lady Philosophy. As a figure related to death and darkness, the fallen Eurydice anticipates the ascent of Lady Philosophy herself. Eurydice's features change depending on how Orpheus looks at her: through the tale, at the same time she is depicted both as a temptress and as a guiding figure.¹⁰⁵ Thus, along opposed narrative lines of descent and ascent, Boethius introduces Eurydice both as a negative and as a positive female character, recalling sometimes Lady Philosophy's beneficial action on him. Compared to Virgil and Ovid's character, Boethius' Eurydice acquires new qualities and meaning. She is not a passive character anymore but starts to have a role in her own story.

Boethius' version of the Orpheus myth preserve the tone of the tragic classical love story. The myth's conclusion, however, is used to convey the central moral lesson of the

Consolation of Philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ Astel, Ann W., *Job, Boethius and Epic Truth*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ Astel, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, p. 128.

William Hand Browne describes the boethian myth as:

“representing the complementary yet destructive union of morality and love: Orpheus represents the man who has lost the sublime contemplation and serene life of high philosophy by looking back to the things of earth.”¹⁰⁶

This interpretation is part of the poem’s larger analysis of the paradoxical necessity of attaching oneself to earthly things, and then detaching oneself from them and give expression to the human pain that comes from these two contrary movements of love, as Astel suggests. The Orpheus episode also suggests the association between love and sadness, a feeling of distress caused by sorrow of physical separation. Boethius may suggest that the only solution from this grief is the endurance of human life’s vicissitudes. As Astel explains:

“in the midst of darkness, one must seek the light; in the face of loss, one must recall the love that is lasting and thus, unite one’s human affections with the divine love of the Supreme Good. Death is not an end then, but a means to an end.”¹⁰⁷

Boethius’ Orpheus cannot perceive the eternal purpose behind the temporal end of death. In Hades, Orpheus moves the gods to release Eurydice, but he himself loses her through the forbidden backward glance: in Boethius’ interpretation, the Thracian musician fails to lead his own mind into the light, still tied down by his earthly desires. Boethius’ Orpheus combines in his person the archetypal lover who is attracted to the Supreme Good but is unable to reach his final goal without the aid of philosophical instructions.¹⁰⁸ As a lover and musician, Orpheus stands in contrast to the philosopher whose mind, free from earthly desire, is able to reach the truth. Boethius sees himself mirrored in Orpheus and in his inability to control completely his passions. Boethius lacks the freedom to leave behind his own grief: as Orpheus looks back in Hades, turning his eyes away from heavenly light, Boethius’ eyes are beclouded by the mist of earthly issues. His mind tends to go into the shadows of grief rather than move forward. Lady Philosophy, however, responds to Boethius’ sorrow by inviting him to succeed

¹⁰⁶ Hand Browne, William, “The Transformation of a Legend”, *The Sewanee Review* 18, (1990), p. 407.

¹⁰⁷ Astel, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁸ Astel, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, p. 59.

where Orpheus failed, by leaving behind his earthly concerns and face the Supreme Good.

Boethius' journey from his spiritual darkness to the light, accepting his own fate with the help of philosophy and faith, had such a great success after its publication that the *Consolation's* concepts reverberated even outside of the Latin cultural dimension. Indeed, the *Consolation of Philosophy* represents one of the main sources for reception and transmission of the tale in the Anglo-Saxon territories. One of the causes that may have led to the innovative composition of *Sir Orfeo* could have been the medieval translation of the *Consolation* into Old English, making the treatise, and Orpheus and Eurydice's myth with it, accessible to people learned enough to read but who did not study Latin. The widened fruition of Boethius' work may have also influenced the production of medieval poets and bards, who saw the narrative potential of the Orpheus tale and decided to use it in their works.

Although Virgil's *Georgics* stands in all likelihood as the major source of the first transmission of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in the Middle Ages, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* played an important role in the reception of the myth in medieval England and Europe before Ovid's revival in academic studies. How the Orpheus tale moved in its reception over Europe and with which consequences will be analyzed in chapter two of this thesis, which will consider all the elements that may have played a role in *Sir Orfeo's* composition.

2. The transmission and reception of a myth: the traditions behind

Sir Orfeo

As part of a great cultural heritage, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice kept circulating throughout Europe for centuries. However, the reception of the Orpheus myth outside the classical Latin culture's territories resulted in a lively experimentation of which the medieval poem *Sir Orfeo* is one of the finest examples. Its main themes were still love and loss, but then were added other elements typical of medieval English lore, an addition that may have originated from the popular fantasy motif that was sung in medieval courts at the time of the composition of *Sir Orfeo*. The classical cultural heritage certainly played an important role in the transmission of the myth, but it is possible to hypothesize the influence of other factors that may have led to the medieval interpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale. As Rita Copeland states, the corpus of important Middle English writings rarely seems to yield unmediated connections with antiquity.¹⁰⁹ The transmission of knowledge during the Middle Ages involved multilateral commerce in texts, commentaries, fresh elaborations and ideas. Indeed, the act of transmission could be perceived as a sort of transformation and as a creative act of reception.¹¹⁰ Thus, many different factors are to take into account when exploring the transmission and reception of textual culture, and that is the case for the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.

Firstly, the classics' authority in the educational environment is to take into consideration when analyzing the classical myths' transmission to the Middle Ages,

¹⁰⁹ Copeland, Rita, "Introduction. England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", in Rita Copeland, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature Volume I*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Wisnovsky, Robert, Wallis, Faith, Fumo, Jamie C., Fraenkel, Carlos, "Introduction. Vehicles of Transmission, Translation and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture", *Cursor Mundi*, 4 (2011), p. 1.

with education as one of the dimensions where Latin authors mostly exerted their influence. Through education, the influence of the Latin authors increased in the monastic scriptoria, where the flourishing activity of the amanuenses allowed a number of classical texts to be copied and then studied. This operation granted the survival of classical texts together with their transmission. As concerns the reception of the Orpheus tale in England, the monastic commentary tradition probably played an important role in the transmission of the myth, since monks used both Virgil's and Ovid's writings as schoolbooks. Secondly, the role of Christianity in the reception of texts should not be forgotten. In particular, Christian commentary tradition on classical works and their original interpretation of mythological imagery surely helped to shape most of the medieval thought.

To understand the process that led to the composition of *Sir Orfeo*, it is important to consider its target audience too. An innovative mix of elements characterizes the poem. Some of them are unrelated to the classical tradition, suggesting that the reception and transmission of knowledge was not a passive activity but involved to a certain extent also the cultural heritage of the receiving end. In this case, another possible source for the medieval elaboration of the Orpheus' tale in England is King Alfred the Great's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* into Old English. King Alfred's elaboration of the Orpheus material shows how different cultures could add elements, approaches and expectations to the cultural legacy that derived from the Mediterranean basin, which were then absorbed into something new. This is certainly the case for the reception of Latin culture in Anglo-Saxon and Celtic territories, the cultural environments that should be analyzed to find the roots of the *Sir Orfeo* elaboration.¹¹¹

All these factors represent the premises that may have influenced the *Sir Orfeo* poet. In the previous chapter, I listed the principal sources that may have laid the foundations for

¹¹¹ Wisnovsky, Wallis, Fumo, Fraenkel, "Introduction. Vehicles of Transmission, Translation and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture", p. 3.

the transmission of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale. Chapter two tries to analyze the conditions that allowed the myth to find its place in medieval English cultural tradition. It is not even certain whether the poem was an original work or its author simply transcribed it from oral to written form. In this chapter, I try to ponder which conditions had more weight in the transmission of the myth and its transformation in the innovative *Sir Orfeo*.

2. 1 *The Orpheus myth from late antiquity to medieval England*

To analyze the transmission of the Orpheus myth means to analyze the more general transmission of the classics. Medieval textual culture was characterized by a dynamic process of transmission, translation and transformation of culture.¹¹² This process was firmly rooted into the classical world, whose tradition shaped the cultural, social, economic and political dimension of the early Middle Ages.¹¹³ Behind this cultural mix there were the Greek and the Latin culture, two fundamental sources of inspiration for the Middle Ages.¹¹⁴ The classical textual heritage left a great mark upon medieval imagination: every medieval culture took the Greco-Roman legacy as a reference in search of authority and legitimacy, and its authors with it.¹¹⁵ But different traditions read the classics through their own parameters, giving sometimes innovative interpretations to them.

As concerns the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and its Middle English counterpart *Sir Orfeo*, it is clear that the classical origins of the tale played an important role in the

¹¹² Wisnovsky, Wallis, Fumo, Fraenkel, "Introduction. Vehicles of Transmission, Translation and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture", p. 1.

¹¹³ Clark, James G., "Introduction: Ovid in the Middle Ages", in James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, Kathryn L. McKinley, ed., *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Wisnovsky, Wallis, Fumo, Fraenkel, "Introduction. Vehicles of Transmission, Translation and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture", p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Clark, "Introduction: Ovid in the Middle Ages", p. 1.

poem's composition.¹¹⁶ Since its author is unknown, it is no simple task to establish how the myth reached its audience in medieval England and which were the conditions that altered its classical plot in such a way. How did the *Sir Orfeo* poet know of the Orpheus tale? Did he intentionally combine various elements from different traditions or did he just transcribe a text that underwent a cultural elaboration through the oral tradition first? Those are just some of the questions that rise with the analysis of the myth's reception. It is obvious that the medieval elaboration of the Orpheus tale must have involved the knowledge of the classical myth in England to a certain extent, but the circulation of Latin texts in early medieval England is not to be taken for granted. For this reason, the study of the transmission of classical texts during the Middle Ages may be of help in tracing back *Sir Orfeo*'s composition process.

As already mentioned before, classical authors were a fundamental reference for all medieval literary production. In Chapter one of this thesis, I analyzed the three main sources for the reception of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in the Middle Ages, namely Virgil's *Georgics*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. It is not possible to take into consideration the Greek roots of the myth since the knowledge of Greek was already in decline by the fourth century A.D. The western Middle Ages knew of Greek antiquity only through its Latinized reception.¹¹⁷ In addition, the study of Greek regained authority in Europe only one century after the probable inscription of the poem in the Auchinleck manuscript. For this reason, it is hardly probable for the *Sir Orfeo* to have a direct connection with the myth's Greek origins. In all likelihood, the *Orfeo* author may have known of the Orpheus myth thanks to a Latin version of the tale, but it is difficult to assert whether it was Virgil's *Georgics* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that inspired the composition of the Middle English poem. To

¹¹⁶ Copeland, "Introduction. England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", p. 4.

¹¹⁷ Copeland, "Introduction. England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", p. 3.

find an answer to this question, it is necessary to trace back how the reception of the classics was ensured in medieval society. It is important to underline that not all the classical authors' writings have been transmitted to the Middle Ages. The transmission of the classics involved a series of factors that have their roots in the Latin tradition itself. The fragility of the writing materials used in ancient times, together with the changing political and religious balance at the end of the Empire, did not ensure the survival of texts. Those who actually could and had a desire for reading in the Roman Empire were very few, but private collections of texts were well known, as well as public libraries. The introduction of public libraries was of fundamental importance for the preservation of texts and for their transmission but not every work could gain access to the library: only those considered worth preserving were granted a place in it. Works were chosen not only for their artistic value but also for their alignment with the dominant ideology, so that the close relation between literature and politics also played an important role in determining which kind of texts to produce and, consequentially, which ones to preserve.¹¹⁸ It can thus be suggested, that what survived of the classic literary tradition through the Middle Ages was just a little part of what was produced at the time, as the actual writing production in Rome was probably broader. Although measures were taken to preserve those writings, only few of them succeeded in being actually transmitted.

A decisive dimension for the circulation and transmission of classical texts during the early Middle Ages in Europe was education. In medieval schools, Latin authors were used as "Classics" to read and comment: from easy sentences with didactic purpose to further literature to emulate, the educational system provided students texts of classical authors considered as models to follow.¹¹⁹ In Copland's opinion, the classical works studied in schools formed the medieval literary taste not only because they were basic

¹¹⁸ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 10.

elements of the schoolroom, but because they represented the first experience of literature for students learning Latin. In Copeland's opinion, "schoolmasters valued them for their emotional effects and boys absorbed them as entertainment and as inspiration".¹²⁰ The selection of texts was not casual, though. The medieval scholastic curriculum was strongly influenced by the Latin tradition. Among the most influential classical textbooks for the Middle Ages, the *Quadruga* by the grammarian Arusianus Messius certainly played a fundamental role in shaping medieval education. Arusianus selected whom, in his personal opinion, among all the Latin authors, were the best models to follow for each subject. He included only Virgil, Terence, Cicero and Sallust, respectively the exponents of the epic and dramatic poetry, of oratory and historiography¹²¹. When approaching higher level of education, the Latin educator and rhetorician Quintilian suggested another studying scheme: Virgil was considered the principal epic poet worth of being studied together with Tibullus and Propertius, followed by Ovid for elegiac poetry. Horace was chosen as an example for satire, Accius and Pacuvius for tragic poetry while Plautus and Terence represent the best examples for comedy. For prose writing, Cicero was considered the model but also Sallust and Livius again were recommended as the best historians.¹²² Quintilianus' study model had such a great impact on the educational system that, with the exception of tragic writings, all the works suggested by the Latin rhetorician survived the downfall of the Roman Empire to a certain extent, continuously transmitted throughout the Middle Ages.¹²³

Some classical texts, generally much shorter, are to be found in other later writers' works in the form of quotations. In this case, classical authors' quotes were used to

¹²⁰ Copeland, "Introduction. England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", p. 6.

¹²¹ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 10.

¹²² Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 11.

¹²³ Flocchini, Guidotti Bacci, Falchetti, *Letteratura Latina – Percorsi e Strumenti*, p. 11.

criticize a rival writer, to report different opinions or to confirm the author's own thesis, to provide documentary evidence to linguistic phenomena, as in the case of grammarians, or to refer to the ancient tradition for information. Given their authority, using classical authors to support one's opinion meant giving authority to the writing as well. This is the only way through which few fragments of important classical texts reached their medieval readers. It is possible, then, that the Orpheus myth first spread through Europe thanks to the study of classical authors in school. However, education was not granted for everyone in the Middle Ages. Only people who could actually afford an education would know of such texts, reducing the range of individuals who could have known the Orpheus myth and then elaborated it.

In the early medieval English context, the position of classical authors is less clear. Undoubtedly, they were regarded as literary authorities to admire, but for Anglo-Saxon England, as James Willoughby states, evidence of the status of such writers is hard to come by. Evidences of classical texts, or portions of them, transmitted through Anglo-Saxon manuscripts from the early Middle Ages are very few, and none of them remains in England.¹²⁴ However, the study of influential Latin authors such as Virgil must have developed with the settlement of Christian monasteries in England after the seventh-century conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. James G. Clark describes the monasteries as active centres of classical studies in medieval Europe.¹²⁵ At the same time, a process of recovery of all those classical writings, considered essential texts for individual education, began in early medieval monasteries. It was in the monastic scriptoria of northern Italy and western France that fragments of classical authors were glossed, commented, copied and recast in the forms that would determine their reception

¹²⁴ Willoughby, James, "The Transmission and Circulation of Classical Literature: Libraries and Florilegia", in Rita Copeland, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature Volume I*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 97.

¹²⁵ Clark, James G., "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", in James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, Kathryn L. McKinley, ed., *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 177.

throughout the medieval centuries.¹²⁶ The recovery of some works belonging to masters of Roman poetry and prose like Virgil, Horace, Persius and Juvenal can be credited to the monastic recovery of classical texts. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monasteries were also important centres of propagation for the spread of classical enthusiasm in European cloisters.¹²⁷ Certainly, the monastic education that developed in England during the course of the seventh century must have included the reading of the pagan poets.¹²⁸ However, it is still not clear which books were exactly available in seventh- and eighth-centuries England. One of the most popular texts that was thought to hold a close connection with the classics in the early Middle Ages was Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. In his text, Isidore cited and commented a number of classical authors' works, making the *Etymologiae* one of the primary sources for the medieval study of the classics. Indeed, the transmission of the *Etymologiae* to Anglo-Saxon England may have occurred via Ireland and then spread in Anglo-Saxon territories.¹²⁹ There is evidence that testifies the presence of classical texts in Canterbury monastic schools, and in Wessex in general. The classics were studied not merely as models for metrical composition, but also for what they could share about the world of pagan antiquity. Of special interest to teachers and students were the figures of Greco-Roman mythology, while poets collected and used books to gain information about the gods, heroes and marvellous events found in pagan literature that then could become the source material for a new literary production.¹³⁰ Still, the access to the Latin literary heritage would

¹²⁶ Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", p. 177.

¹²⁷ Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", p. 177.

¹²⁸ Herren, Michael W., "The Transmission and Reception of Greco-Roman Mythology in Anglo-Saxon England, 670-800", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 27 (1998), p. 87.

¹²⁹ Herren, "The Transmission and Reception of Greco-Roman Mythology in Anglo-Saxon England, 670-800", p. 90.

¹³⁰ Herren, "The Transmission and Reception of Greco-Roman Mythology in Anglo-Saxon England, 670-800", p. 103.

have been limited only to a tiny number of churchmen with highly developed literary skills.¹³¹

The decline of learning and literacy after the fall of the western Roman empire, together with the deep social and intellectual changes that characterized the early medieval centuries, made the transmission of texts very precarious, but classical authors continued strongly to assert their influence throughout the Middle Ages. However, classical authors' authority in the literary field was so important that certain poets could even sum a given period of Medieval Latin poetry as the dominant model. For example, in the eighth and ninth centuries, poets celebrated the saints through heroic hexameter, according to Virgil's metrical and stylistic model. When the church was perceived as corrupted in the tenth and eleventh centuries, poets took inspiration from Horace's satiric verses.¹³² In this case, Virgil always had a special place in the cultural environment of scholarly tradition: considered an irreplaceable figure for the academic curriculum, Virgil was an essential author for a poet's development.

In all likelihood, medieval scholars knew of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth mainly thanks to the study of Virgil's *Georgics*. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was a fundamental source for the spread of the myth as well, but the story of Ovid's reception through the Middle Ages makes it difficult to establish whether the poem already circulated in early medieval England and, moreover, had an actual influence on the composition of *Sir Orfeo*. If scribes had ensured the transmission of Virgil to a certain extent, Ovid appeared only of secondary interest and the transmission of his texts was intermittent at first.¹³³ As the scholar John Richmond explains, the history of the transmission of

¹³¹ Herren, "The Transmission and Reception of Greco-Roman Mythology in Anglo-Saxon England, 670-800", p. 88.

¹³² Wheeler, Stephen, "Before the 'aetas Ovidiana': Mapping the Early Reception of Ovidian Elegy", *Hermathena*, 117 (2005), p. 10.

¹³³ Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", p. 177.

Ovid's works in the centuries after their publication is wrapped in obscurity.¹³⁴ No papyrus of Ovid survives. In the case of the *Metamorphosis*, Ovid claimed to have burned his unrevised writings as he went to exile, but some copies must have survived in Rome, since the poem was widely known and very popular for the first few centuries of its existence. Moreover, the popularity of the *Metamorphoses* is testified by many quotations, which provide evidences of the poem's reception in the centuries following its publication.¹³⁵ Numerous authors cited the *Metamorphoses* in their works, sometimes praising Ovid's playfulness and wit, sometimes criticizing Ovid frivolous style.¹³⁶ In the Christian context, many of the early Christian Fathers condemned the pagan poet's excesses, while others were fascinated enough by classical literature, like St. Jerome, or wanted to borrow edifying material from classical authors, like St. Augustine, to ensure parts of Ovid's works to be included in their writings.¹³⁷ The reception of Ovid's works in medieval monasteries, then, slowly increased the influence that the Latin author could exert on medieval culture, since from the ninth century onward Ovid's works were well established at least in Benedictine monasteries.¹³⁸ However, Clark describes the transmission of Ovid's works among educated men as still fragmentary in Anglo-Saxon England. As concerns the *Metamorphoses*, and the Orpheus myth with it, the seventh-century bishop Adhelm of Malmesbury perhaps knew passages of the poem well enough to echo them in his prose, and a generation later Bede the Venerable knew parts of Book 1 of the poem, but probably through

¹³⁴ Richmond, John, "Manuscript Tradition and the Transmission of Ovid's Works", in Barbara Weiden Boyd, ed., *Brill's Companion to Ovid*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 444.

¹³⁵ Keith, Alison, Rupp, Stephen, "After Ovid: Classical, Medieval, and Early Modern Reception of the *Metamorphoses*", in Alison Keith, Stephen Rupp, eds, *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007, p. 15.

¹³⁶ Keith, Rupp, "After Ovid: Classical, Medieval, and Early Modern Reception of the *Metamorphoses*", p. 22.

¹³⁷ Walsh, "Ovid and his Influence", *University Review*, 2 (1961), p. 34.

¹³⁸ Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", p. 177.

Isidore's *Etymologiae*.¹³⁹ It is too early, then, to hypothesize a direct knowledge of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in the Anglo-Saxon context through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The study of Ovid began slowly to regain popularity in the eleventh century, a period of political and intellectual recovery in Europe. Thanks to the attention given to Ovid on the mainland during the Carolingian Renaissance, almost all his surviving works began to be sought out, copied and studied.¹⁴⁰ With his introduction into the medieval educational curriculum, Ovid became a model for metrical and stylistic composition: in the early ninth century, his poetry was taught in medieval classrooms, and by the latter half of the eleventh century, he became one of the fundamental Latin authors studied in Europe.¹⁴¹ Ovid's popularity soon became so great that the following two hundred years were defined the *Aetas Ovidiana*, as he emerged as the classical poet most worthy of imitation, surpassing even Virgil in popularity.

Had the myth already undergone some significant modification before Ovid regained popularity in medieval England? It is not certain whether Ovid was less read than Virgil during the period where Orpheus and Eurydice entered a process bound to change some important elements of the myth. Clearly, Ovid did not receive the same amount of attention in the scholarly environment. Probably, the obscurity of the poet was due to the fall of the Roman Empire, or his earlier exile due to the somewhat satirical and extremely licentious contents of his work. With such premises, it may be possible to identify in the *Georgics* the primary source for the spread of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in the written tradition during the early Middle Ages.

However, the spread of the Orpheus myth through manuscripts would be possible only among an educated audience, those who could actually read its Latin sources and

¹³⁹ Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries: The Evidence from Late Medieval England", p. 177.

¹⁴⁰ Richmond, "Manuscript Tradition and the Transmission of Ovid's Works", p. 450.

¹⁴¹ Wheeler, "Before the 'Aetas Ovidiana': Mapping the Early Reception of Ovidian Elegy", p.14.

understand them, namely a medieval elite. Although the Orpheus myth's primary sources of transmission should have been its classical written versions, the *Orfeo* poem contains elements that suggest a possible influence of the oral poetic tradition. It is not clear whether the myth first acquired its medieval taste thanks to its use in troubadour songs, but the court environment certainly played a role in shaping new themes in *Sir Orfeo*. The most plausible theory is that the myth circulated firstly among medieval scholars, which might have come across Latin versions of the Orpheus myth, probably Virgil's *Georgics*. These versions came together with the commentaries of Christian theologians, which gave their own interpretation to pagan figures as allegories. It is possible to observe this process already in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, another fundamental source for medieval fruition of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale. At a certain point during the early Middle Ages, the myth must have left its written dimension to circulate as a tale in oral form. This could explain how the Orpheus myth acquired those foreign elements to the classical culture that can be found in *Sir Orfeo*.

2.2 The vernacular reception of the Orpheus myth in England: King Alfred's Old English Boethius

Outlining how the Orpheus myth may have reached its medieval audience in England is fundamental to understanding the process that led to the peculiar composition of *Sir Orfeo*. The addition of new elements and the removal of others may have been determined not only by the myth's reception, but by political and cultural factors. Until now, this analysis of the Orpheus myth's reception has been limited to its transmission in cultured environments, while *Sir Orfeo* clearly shows elements typical of the popular oral tradition. The circulation of a vernacular version of the Orpheus myth among educated laymen may be the reason for a first reception of the story outside its Latin boundaries. In this case, a fundamental source for the reception of Orpheus and

Eurydice's myth in early medieval England may have been King Alfred the Great's translation into Old English of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Ninth century scholars at King Alfred's court might have known of Virgil's version of the myth in the *Georgics* or its interpretations in Christian Fathers' writings, but the Old English translation of the myth certainly reached a wider audience in Anglo-Saxon England. Moreover, the version of the tale that circulated thanks to the Old English translation is Boethius' interpretation of the Orpheus myth, with all its philosophical and cultural implications. This detail suggests that the Orpheus myth already had lost part of its classical taste at the time of its possible circulation into vernacular in early medieval England.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* fascinated its medieval readers both as an irreplaceable element of late antiquity's cultural elaboration and as an example of its author's nobility.¹⁴² Copeland describes Boethius as a key transitional figure for early medieval culture, since he was perceived as an author constantly in between the classical and the medieval dimension, since his chronological lateness must have made him no less a revered ancient in the eyes of the medieval audience.¹⁴³ The *Consolation* was an extremely popular text throughout the Middle Ages. The use of the classical mythology in the book was used to demonstrate the inner philosophical truth of pagan tales, and its illustration of complex dialectical arguments made it a textbook suitable for logical training. It was the most popular literary text for vernacular translation across Europe, from Old English to nearly every other regional language in the later Middle Ages.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Troncarelli, Fabio, "Afterword: Boethius in Late Antiquity the Early Middle Ages", in Noel Harold Kaylor, Philip Edward Philips, eds, *A Companion to Boethius in The Middle Ages*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 534.

¹⁴³ Copeland, "Introduction: England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Copeland, "Introduction: England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism", p. 8.

The production of a vernacular translation in early medieval England implies that its source text must have circulated to a certain extent in the cultivated environment. There are more than one fascinating theories about the transmission of Boethius' *Consolation* in early medieval England. Adrian Papahagi specifies that all extant Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the vernacular *Consolation* date back to the tenth century onward.¹⁴⁵ In all likelihood, a Latin manuscript of the *Consolation* first reached England through Carolingian France.¹⁴⁶ Previous studies on the matter agree in recognizing the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin of York as the providential figure who rescued the *Consolation of Philosophy* from being forgotten and brought it to the attention of the Carolingian world. According to this hypothesis, Alcuin discovered in Italy one rare sixth-century codex of the *Consolation*, which he then brought at the Carolingian court. The copies produced there then circulated from one end of Charlemagne's empire to the other.¹⁴⁷ However, some scholars have argued that Alcuin of York might not be the first Anglo-Saxon scholar to have known the *Consolation*: the West-Saxon bishop Aldhelm of Malmesbury, Bede the Venerable and the archbishop of Canterbury Tatwine are among those believed to have been familiar with the text before Alcuin was even born. In that case, at least one manuscript of the *Consolation* must have existed in England between the seventh and the eighth century, but evidence is scarce.¹⁴⁸ So far, the only piece of evidence suggesting that the *Consolation of Philosophy* was available in England before the tenth century is King Alfred the Great's translation of Boethius' work, the Old English *Boethius*.

¹⁴⁵Papahagi, Adrian, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010, p. 24.

¹⁴⁶Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁷ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 15.

King of Wessex and man of culture, Alfred the Great was the first Anglo-Saxon sovereign to promote a recovery of learning and literacy among his people. In his long preface to the translation of the sixth-century *Pastoral Care*, King Alfred recalls the disastrous situation of education in England when he became king.¹⁴⁹ Learning had so decayed, that few were still able to read English and yet fewer were the ones capable to understand Latin except priests and monks. These factors inspired King Alfred to promote his famous cultural program.¹⁵⁰ Under his reign, a number of fundamental Latin texts began to be sought out, copied and, above all, translated. All Anglo-Saxon freemen must learn to read their own language, and, by his own translations and those of his helpers, the king made available vernacular versions of those books that would bring the readers wisdom and virtue. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the *Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans*, by the fifth century theologian Paulus Orosius, St. Augustine's *Soliloquies* and St. Gregory I's *Pastoral Care* are some of the texts that were translated at King Alfred's court. In all likelihood, even the writing of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one of the greatest sources of information about Anglo-Saxon England, was part of the cultural program promoted during King Alfred's reign. Among those texts, the translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy* was of no secondary importance.

Interestingly, King Alfred's translation into Old English of the *Consolation of Philosophy* was not a passive activity. In the preface of the Old English *Boethius*, it is possible to read:

Ælfred kuning wæs wealhstod ðiesse bec and hie of boclædene on Englisc wende, swa hic nu is gedon. Hwilum he sette word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite, swa swa he hit þa sweotolost

¹⁴⁹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-king-of-Wessex/>> [accessed 9 November 2020].

¹⁵⁰ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 180.

and andgitifullcast gerecoan mihte for þam mislicu and manigfealdum weouldbisgum þe hine oft
ægþer ge on mode ge on lichoman bisgodan.¹⁵¹

[King Alfred was the translator of this book and turned it from Latin into English, as it is now set
down. Sometimes he set down word for word, sometimes sense for sense, in whatever way he
could explain it most clearly and intelligibly, given the many worldly troubles of different kinds,
which often occupied him in mind and body.]¹⁵²

Papahagi considers King Alfred's translation of the *Consolation* more like a free
paraphrase, rather than an actual translation, since the frequent additions and omissions
of the text show an active elaboration of its source.¹⁵³ The reason for King Alfred's free
translation of Boethius' *Consolation* was the necessity for the text to be comprehensible
to an Anglo-Saxon audience, as Nicole Guenther Discenza states.¹⁵⁴ The Old English
Boethius presents a powerful fusion of classical, Christian and Anglo-Saxon literary
forms and elements.¹⁵⁵ For this reason, Discenza describes it as a work that goes beyond
the source text.¹⁵⁶ King Alfred's translation bridged three cultures, linking the two
higher in prestige with the one most familiar to his readers. He gave his text
distinctiveness not through grammar or dialect but through this synthesis of cultural
references and modes of discourse.¹⁵⁷ King Alfred did not limit himself to a word for
word translation of Boethius' work, but also interpreted the text in a way that would
have let his target readers better understand the contents of the text. In Discenza's
opinion, King Alfred's syncretism "helped to maintain the authority of the Old English
Boethius while providing readers with a text that offers point of familiarity".¹⁵⁸ From
the Christian tradition, King Alfred borrowed the figure of "heofenlich", heavenly,

¹⁵¹ Alfred, King of Wessex, *The Old English Boethius: With Verse Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred*, edited and translated by Susan Irvine and Malcom Godden, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012, p.2.

¹⁵² Irvine, Godden, *The Old English Boethius: With Verse Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred*, p.3.

¹⁵³ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 179.

¹⁵⁴ Discenza, Nicole Guenther, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 87.

¹⁵⁵ Discenza, Nicole Guenther, "The Old English Boethius", in Nicole Guenther Discenza, Paul E. Sarmach, eds, *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 201.

¹⁵⁶ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 116.

¹⁵⁷ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 87.

¹⁵⁸ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 87.

Wisdom and of those who need her most, the foolish, to make Philosophy more welcoming in the Anglo-Saxon context. From Christian iconography, he selected images familiar to his audience, in order to give people a way to understand the philosophical references of Boethius' treatise.¹⁵⁹ In particular, King Alfred's replacement of the more general "Philosophia" with the Christian concept of "Wisdom" had the effect not only of making the work more Christian, but also more Anglo-Saxon: in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, Wisdom represents a crucial quality in a king and rulers, as well as religious figures, are praised for their wisdom.¹⁶⁰

Without a doubt, King Alfred translated the *Consolation* while infusing it with elements of the Christian tradition, but the choice of when to use that tradition to explain difficult passages of the text, and which particular strands of it to use, was conditioned by Anglo-Saxon norms and by his own interest and strategies. Once again, Discenza praises King Alfred's ability in gathering elements from multiple sources into a collection accessible and acceptable to his audience while quietly reshaping them into something new and unique.¹⁶¹ An example is the choice to employ images that allowed associations between Christian precepts and the readers' everyday experiences.¹⁶² The Old English *Boethius* offered a distinctive mode of discourse comprehensible to an Anglo-Saxon audience that might not have been able to understand all the concepts of a classical text without the mediation of Christian imagery and language. King Alfred's introduction of Christian elements into the *Boethius* made it more familiar to readers without lowering the style of the text. Moreover, the development of the themes of friendship and kingship emphasized topics and issues crucial to a king and often treated

¹⁵⁹ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 87.

¹⁶⁰ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 89.

¹⁶¹ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 122.

¹⁶² Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 122.

by native poetry, closing the possible cultural gap between the source text and the target audience.¹⁶³

In King Alfred's interpretation of the *Consolation*, the Orpheus tale is regarded as the section that best shows the fusion of the Latin, Christian and Anglo-Saxon tradition. As Joseph S. Wittig explains, King Alfred's Orpheus is characterized by an original use of mythological lore reinterpreted through the lenses of explicit Christian moralizations.¹⁶⁴

In the Old English *Boethius*, only about nineteen lines are a word for word translation or a very close paraphrase of the Orpheus section. Another twenty-two lines stand in a looser but perfectly justifiable relationship to Boethius's text. King Alfred chose to simplify the language, tone down the diction, omit material that may have been considered peripheral and distracting, and add summary generalizations, narrative bridges and moralizing expansions.¹⁶⁵ Once again, the Orpheus tale focuses on the soul's journey from the darkness of Hell to the light of God. In all likelihood, King Alfred was particularly concerned to explain the moral nature of Orpheus' symbolic looking back into hell instead of returning in the living world. The introduction of the fatal backward glance as a return to sin may be a likely explanation of the Orpheus' section, but it could derive from the commentaries' interpretation of the myth rather than from King Alfred's original deduction.¹⁶⁶

Surprisingly, most of what King Alfred wrote about Orpheus shows his knowledge of the story in a more detailed form than that found in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Quite apart from what is explicit in the *Consolation*, King Alfred and his scholars almost certainly knew of Orpheus and his music, for both classical and medieval

¹⁶³ Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius*, p. 124.

¹⁶⁴ Wittig, Joseph S., "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11 (1983), p. 163.

¹⁶⁵ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 163.

¹⁶⁶ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 167.

authors refer to them repeatedly.¹⁶⁷ Some elements of King Alfred's Orpheus correspond closely to Virgil's tale in the *Georgics*, suggesting that King Alfred or his scholars may have used Virgil's account to expand the Old English version of the tale.¹⁶⁸ Some examples are Orpheus' encounter with Charon on the river Styx, with the Parcae or the power of Orpheus' music in calming even the souls of the dead.¹⁶⁹ King Alfred's Orpheus metre seems clearly to indicate knowledge of the fourth Georgic, but also of Ovid's version of the tale in the *Metamorphoses* and reflects the sort of traditional learning found in Isidore of Seville.¹⁷⁰ Extant manuscripts do not provide enough evidence of the books King Alfred and his scholars might have used in compiling the *Boethius* or evidence that they copied such books themselves; nevertheless channels existed through which Alfred's circle might have had access to Latin learning.¹⁷¹ As already mentioned before, there are dozens of references in classical authors to Orpheus' ability as a musician, and such references do not stop with the end of the classical period. Poets from the fourth century to the tenth cite him as a model poet-singer, and more references to his ability to charm nature with his music developed during the medieval period.¹⁷² It is therefore likely then, that King Alfred's knowledge of the Orpheus myth did not depend just on Boethius' version of the story. Nonetheless, the information about Alfred's authorship of the translations commonly attributed to him has been challenged more than once.¹⁷³ Whatever Alfred's real knowledge of Latin may have been, it still appears unlikely that a warrior king could have found the leisure to translate and thoroughly rework the *Consolation* and other

¹⁶⁷ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 175.

¹⁶⁸ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 178.

¹⁶⁹ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 170.

¹⁷⁰ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 185.

¹⁷¹ Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 186.

¹⁷² Wittig, "King Alfred's "Boethius" and its Latin Sources: a Reconsideration", p. 176.

¹⁷³ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 21.

long texts among so many other obligations.¹⁷⁴ Perhaps the translation of Boethius' prosimetre is best to be understood as a contribution by scribes that worked at King Alfred's court.¹⁷⁵ Despite the doubts on King Alfred's authorship, the Old English Boethius proves that at the end of the tenth century the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and the Orpheus myth with it, circulated among the elite circles of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. Whether King Alfred translated the *Consolation* or not, the fact remains that together with the *Consolation*, a version of the Orpheus tale existed in the vernacular around the tenth century.

What is extremely important for this analysis though is the reason behind King Alfred's choice of re-elaborating the Orpheus section. That Alfred expatiated on the singer's powers strongly suggest that he did not expect all of his audience to be familiar with the story, regardless of how much he and his circle may have known about it. This demonstrates that the Orpheus myth, together with the other classics, circulated among the well-educated class of early medieval England, but it does not prove yet how certain elements of the popular tradition were added to the myth. The elaboration of the Orpheus myth may have started exactly with King Alfred's introduction of the tale to his Old English readership. In its vernacular written form, the Orpheus myth probably was already able to reach a wider audience in England in comparison to the Latin *Consolation of Philosophy* or the other classical sources. In all likelihood, the production of a written vernacular form was just the first step for an even wider reception of the Orpheus myth, which increased thanks to the *Boethius* being read aloud to a non-scholarly audience in early medieval English courts.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Papahagi, *Boethian Medievalia: A Collection of Studies on the Early Medieval Fortune of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁵ Szarmach, Paul E., "Boethius's Influence in Anglo-Saxon England: The Vernacular and De Consolatione Philosophiae", in Noel Harold Kaylor, Philip Edward Philips, eds, *A Companion to Boethius in The Middle Ages*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 224.

¹⁷⁶ Szarmach, "Boethius's Influence in Anglo-Saxon England: The Vernacular and De Consolatione Philosophiae", p. 223.

The environment of the court may have been determining for the reception, elaboration and transmission of the Orpheus tale. The presence in *Sir Orfeo* of elements strongly connected to the popular tradition certainly suggests that whoever first came into contact with the tale must have had a direct access also to folkloric material. The author of *Sir Orfeo* might have been an individual educated enough to know the classical tradition, but who also had a strong connection with popular culture, someone between the courtly and the popular dimension. The figure of the court poet may fit the description. As somebody closely related to the court, the court poet was at the centre of a cultural environment where various kind of traditions and genres could meet, like classical myths and popular folkloric tales. Therefore, the possibility that a version of Virgil's *Georgics* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* circulated in medieval English courts and the poets there decided to give new shape to the Orpheus story is not to be completely excluded. But the courtly environment might have been just the first stage for the reception and transmission of the Orpheus myth. The poets were not the only subjects to perform their compositions in the court. In fact, Thomas C Rumble claims that:

“for every court poet, there appear to have been dozen, perhaps hundreds, of lesser makers and singers, those anonymous and itinerant minstrels who went about the country plying their trade of chanting tales, romances, and ballads at any town fair or manor feast where they might find an audience”.¹⁷⁷

Minstrels at the courts of noble lords and ladies may have been in contact with the Latin version of the Orpheus tale, or directly have known a further elaboration of the myth by court poets there. Nevertheless, it is possible that those minstrels knew a first version of *Sir Orfeo*, which then entered their repertoire of songs and ballads.

This second step may have represented a turning point for the Orpheus myth reception, which entered the oral transmission. Circulating freely among all levels of society, the myth may have acquired all those elements typical of medieval English lore.

¹⁷⁷ Rumble, Thomas C., *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965, p. XVI.

2.3 Anglo-Norman literature and the influence from France

The literary production of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries represents a fundamental phase for medieval English literature. Far from being just an act of political supremacy, the 1066 Norman Conquest shaped irreversibly England's cultural dimension. The Normans brought with them not only a new ruling class, but also their language and, above all, their culture, a culture that was strongly tied to the French tradition. The development of new literary tastes influenced to a certain extent England's literary production, which at first reflected the preferences of the Norman aristocracy. As Ian Short explains, the introduction of new concepts such as chivalry, courtliness and courtly love laid the foundations for the written vernacular culture that was to flourish with ever-increasing creativity over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁷⁸ This new literary production, made to meet the expectations of the Norman aristocracy, introduced themes and genres that were bound to characterize the English medieval production as a whole. For this reason, the Norman contribution to England's medieval literature is impossible to overlook.

As concerns the composition of *Sir Orfeo*, the new literary themes and genres popular among the Norman aristocracy might have played an important role in the elaboration of the tale. Three centuries after King Alfred's *Boethius*, the Orpheus myth shows different characteristics compared to its Latin sources, both in genre and in meaning. In all likelihood, the myth's primary form of circulation was through the oral form. In this case, the aural reception of the Orpheus story could have simplified the assimilation in the myth of some foreign folkloric elements during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As Karl Reichl suggests, oral poetry must have flourished in Britain all through the

¹⁷⁸ Short, Ian, "Language and Literature", in Christopher Harper-Bill, Elisabeth Van Houts, eds., *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003, p. 191.

Middle Ages and beyond, since much of medieval literature was performed orally.¹⁷⁹ The reading aloud had a special position in medieval culture, and the preference for an aural reception of literature was stronger even when a written text served as basis.¹⁸⁰ In the case of *Sir Orfeo*, the most ancient written version of the poem is to be found in the 1330 Auchinleck manuscript. It is rather difficult to assert whether the *Sir Orfeo* circulated simultaneously both in written and in oral form. However, various interpretations of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth circulated throughout medieval England, and thanks to their circulation in oral form, it was possible for the myth to diverge from its classical sources. Some traits of the poems recall *Sir Orfeo*'s Latin origins, while others seem to have a connection to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. But at the end of the eleventh century, another cultural tradition was going to exert its influence on the English cultural landscape, and on the reception of the Orpheus myth. The literary models and the themes of the continent always influenced to an extent early medieval production in England, but with the Norman Conquest and the direct contact with a Norman-French ruling class, English cultural tradition was subject to a strong flux of French elements.

Neil Cartlidge affirms that the Norman Conquest is often perceived as a dark shadow on English literary history.¹⁸¹ The reason is the sudden halt that literary production had during the twelfth century in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon period. If truth be told, the Anglo-Saxon literary culture never disappeared completely, but only lost its prestige during the Normans' rule. The pre-Conquest tradition of writing in the vernacular must have been much more extensive, much more self-consciously literary and much more

¹⁷⁹ Reichl, Karl, "The Oral and the Written: Aspect of Oral Composition", in Robert Demaria, Jr., Heesok Chang, Samantha Zacher, eds., *A Companion to English Literature Volume I: Medieval Literature 700-1450*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, p. 2.

¹⁸⁰ Reichl, "The Oral and the Written: Aspect of Oral Composition", p. 7.

¹⁸¹ Cartlidge, Neil, "The Norman Conquest and English Literary Culture after 1066", in Robert Demaria, Jr., Heesok Chang, Samantha Zacher, eds., *A Companion to English Literature Volume I: Medieval Literature 700-1450*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, p. 100.

representative of Anglo-Saxon culture as a whole to fade out.¹⁸² Certainly, the social institutions of Anglo-Saxon England were irrevocably changed by the strong influx of Normans traditions and by a new language of power, Norman French. Yet, English continued to be spoken, manuscripts in Old English continued to be copied and vernacular English texts were still used in the twelfth century, as Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe specifies.¹⁸³ Thus, the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition coexisted side by side with the French literary tradition, even if with less prestige. By the thirteenth century, England was the meeting point of three different cultures in everyday contact: the Germanic, Celtic, and cross-Channel French cultures coexisted and influenced each other.¹⁸⁴ Did this cultural mix influence the reception and transmission of the Orpheus myth in England? In all likelihood, the contact with new different traditions marked the reception of the Orpheus myth. The process behind *Sir Orfeo*'s innovative composition, however, is not clear yet. How did these cultures influence each other? Which were the consequences as far as concerns *Sir Orfeo*?

From a linguistic point of view, before 1066 English co-existed with Latin, the language of the universal Church. After the Conquest, it competed with an alternate vernacular, Norman French, which in England developed its own features.¹⁸⁵ Anglo-Norman, or Insular French, was the socially and politically dominant language that developed among the Norman aristocracy who governed twelfth-century Britain as a powerful aristocratic élite.¹⁸⁶ However, the close relation between English and French was not limited to the linguistic dimension, but affected England's cultural environment as well. As Short underlines, in the early 1130s there is proof that the Normans already referred

¹⁸² Cartlidge, "The Norman Conquest and English Literary Culture after 1066", p. 100.

¹⁸³ O'Brien O'Keefe, Katherine, "Old English Literature and the Negotiation of Tradition", in Robert Demaria, Jr., Heesok Chang, Samantha Zacher, eds., *A Companion to English Literature Volume I: Medieval Literature 700-1450*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, p. 16.

¹⁸⁴ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 193.

¹⁸⁵ Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *Reading Middle English Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 7.

¹⁸⁶ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 204.

to themselves as Englishmen.¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, they were persistent in preserving the colonial language of their ancestors, in a gesture of separate identity and cultural distinctiveness.¹⁸⁸ Rapidly developing dialectic characteristics of its own, Anglo-Norman formed a natural bridge with the continental culture while, at the same time, it retained its linguistic distinctiveness from Norman and other French dialects.¹⁸⁹

As already mentioned before, the relationship between English and Norman culture must have mirrored that of the two languages. Even though the Normans represented a relatively small proportion of the population, they had power in their hands and so their language came to have a disproportioned impact upon society.¹⁹⁰ Norman-French traditions represented the culture of the rulers, and thus had more prestige in England's political and cultural dimensions. At first, Anglo-Saxon lore suffered a long-term eclipse in the written literary tradition since it was the culture of the conquered, but it never really disappeared as the majority of the population was of English origin and thus, with a deeply rooted English culture. Quite the opposite, however, developed from the direct contact of the two literary cultures. Early Anglo-Norman writers focused on narratives of the pre-Conquest past while using themes and genres from the popular French tradition. The preferred subjects were histories of ancient Britons and Anglo-Saxons, mythical stories of English heroes and lives of Anglo-Saxon saints, soon identified as part of their newly acquired cultural heritage. In all likelihood, this attitude in literature originates from the necessity risen within the Norman aristocracy to link their rule to the Anglo-Saxon past as a form both of legitimacy and of identification. In fact, in the twelfth century, a process that led to an innovative cultural dimension started. To maintain a certain level of interaction with the English people, the Norman

¹⁸⁷ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 204.

¹⁸⁸ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 205.

¹⁸⁹ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 205.

¹⁹⁰ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 7.

aristocracy had to learn to communicate with their English vassals and vice versa.¹⁹¹ Moreover, little by little, England's society saw the fusion of the two separated social environments. From Norman lords' marriages with English ladies, to English bailiffs employed in Norman courts, with whom the lords needed to communicate in one language or the other if their estate were to be run effectively, the Norman aristocracy slowly began to blend with the English people, closing the cultural gap between the two worlds.¹⁹² The mutual influence of the two cultures resulted in the innovative mixture of Anglo-Norman culture.

In all likelihood, the most important contribution of Anglo-Norman culture is the attachment to the French literary tradition, whose introduction in England brought new literary themes and genres. Among these new genres, the introduction of romance was of primary importance. The term *romance* itself in Middle English means something in a romance language, and thus a work of a kind particularly associated with French, and therefore often a work about chivalric heroes.¹⁹³ The typical dimension of romance tales is the knightly society, characterized by European qualities of chivalry and politeness.¹⁹⁴ In the realm of French romance, the knight risks all to pursue a noble quest and his qualities of bravery, honour, fellowship, generosity, purity and courtesy will be tested by individual adventures.¹⁹⁵ Since the romance genre was extremely popular on the mainland during the eleventh century, the new Norman aristocracy continued to reflect the French literary taste once settled in England, a taste that highlighted their bond with the motherland and thus their prestige. Strictly speaking, romance as a literary genre in England emerged in the early thirteenth century, but throughout the twelfth century, a

¹⁹¹ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 7.

¹⁹² Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 7.

¹⁹³ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 95.

¹⁹⁴ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 113.

¹⁹⁵ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 113.

corpus of Anglo-Norman romance poems already existed.¹⁹⁶ The romances written in Anglo-Norman had a profound influence on the development of the Middle English romance. Susan Crane explains that Anglo-Norman romances were the references for the development of an insular romance tradition in Middle English.¹⁹⁷ The insular lay derived its emphases and expressions from continental romance, while sharing poetic concerns and techniques relevant to an English audience.¹⁹⁸ Anglo-Norman writers created a new and peculiar type of romance, mid-way between the courtly romance and the *chansons de geste* produced on the continent.¹⁹⁹ Some of these made use of English or pseudo-English subjects, keeping pace with the revival of interest in British saints and heroes.²⁰⁰ A fine example of this new literary production is the *Roman de Waldef*, the longest single surviving Anglo-Norman romance. *Waldef* follows the typical convention of most chivalric romances while also combining Anglo-Saxon traditional elements.²⁰¹ Turville-Petre affirms that the recovery of the Anglo-Saxon past gave the Anglo-Norman aristocracy a connection with the English identity itself, linking them with the land and with the traditions they inherited from past generation of heroes and saints.²⁰² However, they did not abandon completely their continental literary tradition, a tradition that gave the Anglo-Normans prestige for its connection to the mainland. As concerns the Orpheus myth, it is possible to find in *Sir Orfeo* many typical elements of the romance genre. The courtly environment, the marvellous and the importance of love are just some easily recognizable themes present in the poem. Of course, the influence of the Norman aristocracy on literature was so deep that it is not to exclude the

¹⁹⁶ Short, "Language and Literature", p. 198.

¹⁹⁷ Crane, Susan, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁹ Legge, M. Dominica "The Rise and Fall of Anglo-Norman Literature", *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 8 (1975), p. 5.

²⁰⁰ Legge, "The Rise and Fall of Anglo-Norman Literature", p. 5.

²⁰¹ Cartlidge, "The Norman Conquest and English Literary Culture after 1066", p. 108.

²⁰² Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 11.

possibility that the Orpheus myth was adapted to the growing interest for the romance genre. However, the main reason for such an alteration of the Orpheus tale seems to be in another French-derived genre.

Another literary genre that gained popularity in England thanks to the Norman influence was the Breton lay. As Thomas C. Rumbles explains, this genre likely originated from oral tradition, so it is no easy task to trace back its development in detail.²⁰³ Until now, I have identified all the possible routes that may have led the Orpheus myth to the innovative elaboration of *Sir Orfeo*, from the transmission of its Latin sources to the likely reception of the Orpheus myth in the Anglo-Saxon context. However, trying to understand the process that led the Breton lay genre to be performed at the court of Anglo-Norman lords and ladies could be useful to understand how the *Sir Orfeo* poem found its place in Middle English literary history. Did the genre of the Breton lay ultimately influence the Orpheus myth reception in twelfth century England? Was the Norman-French tradition so influent that the Anglo-Saxon Orpheus was forgotten in the poem's composition? The genre of the Breton lay certainly played an important role in shaping the Middle English version of the Orpheus myth, as well as its reception and transmission. The fantasy events that take place in *Sir Orfeo* can be traced back both to the romance and to the Breton lay genre. The story unfolds in a fictional dimension, where the elements of the popular oral tradition come to life in a way that is typical of the romance tradition. Moreover, elements of Celtic folklore appear frequently in the poem. This feature underlines once more the oral origin of *Sir Orfeo* and its connection to the popular tradition. However, there are also numerous general elements common to all these previous mentioned traditions. All these aspects reflect the assimilation of different traditions that characterize *Sir Orfeo*, but such an assimilation would have started from the Breton lay genre.

²⁰³ Rumble, Thomas C., *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965, p. XIII.

The genre of the Breton lay was part of that cultural heritage that reached England thanks to the Norman aristocracy's attachment to French literary tradition, since the form of the lay was popular in the late twelfth century in France. In particular, it was associated with the court poet Marie de France, who wrote a series of French *lais* in which she acknowledges several times her debt to Breton minstrels, itinerant musicians who performed their compositions while playing the harp.²⁰⁴ The word "lay" suggests an early origin of the genre among the insular Celts of Wales and Ireland, in whose language it seems to have meant a short musical composition, probably played with the harp.²⁰⁵ However, the designation "Breton" places the development of the genre among the continental Armorican Celts.²⁰⁶ The Bretons were Celtic speakers who traced back their origins to the inhabitants of Britain, to that part of the population who had emigrated after the invasion of the Angles and the Saxons during the fifth century.²⁰⁷ Although in a different land, the Bretons kept their language and their lore. The Celtic cultural heritage then found its way to the courts of France and Normandy in the form of lays. Luckily, these stories found an enthusiastic audience in the twelfth century aristocracy that developed a taste for fantasy tales.²⁰⁸ But the Breton lay soon merged in a stream of stories called romances, probably due to the similar elements and patterns that characterized the two literary genres. John Finlayson explains that the main reason for considering the lays as forming a legitimate sub-genre of the romance is that all extant examples of the genre share the same characteristics: they are short, between 500 and 1200 lines, and with one exception they all refer to themselves as lays.²⁰⁹ Rumble gives more information by describing the Breton lays as:

"less ornate than the romances, even if interfused with similar elements. The lay were simpler, less diffuse in their effects, more reliant upon folklore motifs and faery lore; and while love is

²⁰⁴ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 116.

²⁰⁵ Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, p. XIII.

²⁰⁶ Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, p. XIII.

²⁰⁷ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 116.

²⁰⁸ Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, p. XIII.

²⁰⁹ Finlayson, John, "The Form of the Middle English Lay", *The Chaucer Review*, 19 (1985), p. 353.

frequently one of their central interest, the Breton lays were less concerned with the elaborately embroidered subtleties of courtly love than were the romances”.²¹⁰

The perception of the Breton lay as part of the French romance tradition was an idea especially widespread in Normandy, and consequently in Norman England.²¹¹ Shearle Furnish explains that the typical structure of the lay implies the focus on the protagonist’s life and social context, as well as on the trials that he meets on the way and his subsequent growth. Every crisis is marked clearly with meaningful symbols, and often there is the implication of the working of a central power that helps the protagonist to overcome his hurdles. In the English tradition, this central power is often some manifestation of love.²¹² However, there are only few Middle English works that meet these conditions to be categorized as lays: some of them are *The Erl of Tolous*, *Sir Launfal*, *Emare* and *Sir Gowther*, Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* and, of course, *Sir Orfeo*. With the exception of the *Franklin’s Tale*, all these works are recorded in miscellanies containing romances, as Finlayson highlights.²¹³ All the English lays share a common theme, namely the occurrence of an ordeal that involves marvellous events. The interference of an inexplicable magical element is more evident than general similarities such as length, verse form and supposed Breton sources, and, as Furnish affirms, identifies the Middle English lay.²¹⁴ However, it is often asserted that the Middle English lays are an imitation of Marie de France’s lays, short romances in which a fairy-tale dimension and courtly love predominate.²¹⁵ In fact, some of the Middle English lays are translations of Marie de France’s lays, while others refer to themselves as derived from Breton lays.

²¹⁰ Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, p. XXX.

²¹¹ Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, p. XIV.

²¹² Furnish, Shearle, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays”, *Traditio*, 62 (2007), p. 114.

²¹³ Finlayson, “The Form of the Middle English Lay”, p. 352.

²¹⁴ Furnish, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays”, p. 96.

²¹⁵ Finlayson, “The Form of the Middle English Lay”, p. 353.

Of all the extant medieval English lays, *Sir Orfeo* is the only one that claims a direct relationship to the Breton lay tradition.²¹⁶ In the prologue, the poet defines *Sir Orfeo* a Breton lay:

We redeth oft and findeth y-write,
And this clerkes wele it wite,
Layes that ben in harping
Ben y-founde of ferli thing:
Sum bethe of wer and sum of wo,
And sum of joie and mirthe also,
And sum of trecherie and of gile,
Of old aventours that fel while;
And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,
And mani ther beth of fairy.
Of al thinges that men seth,
Mest o love, forsothe, they beth.
In Breteyne this layes were wrought,
First y-founde and forth y-brought,
Of aventours that fel bi dayes,
Wherof Bretouns maked her layes.
When kinges might ovr y-here
Of ani mervailles that ther were,
Thai token an harp in gle and game
And maked a lay and gaf it name.
Now of this aventours that weren y-falle
Y can tel sum, ac nought alle.²¹⁷ (13-20)

In the prologue, it is possible to find listed all the elements that characterize the poem. In *Sir Orfeo*, it is possible to find a surprising number of the courtly life features typical of the best romances: the fairy hunt, the damsel on milk-white steed, the theme of loyalty and kingship, and above all love.²¹⁸ In addition, the marvellous theme, with which the lays are associated, is more thoughtfully developed in *Sir Orfeo* than in any other Middle English lay. Given its extraordinary charm, the courtly dimension, and the fairy glamour of its story, *Sir Orfeo* is often regarded as the paradigm of what a lay ought to be.²¹⁹ In the lay *sir Orfeo*, a musician king, suffers the intrusion of the Fairy king in his realm and his home, loses his wife Heurodis and thus his first test of strength against a magical opponent. Then he exiles himself to the wilderness, from which he emerges after many trials of privation and perception with the will to win his wife back.

²¹⁶ Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English Lay", p. 353.

²¹⁷ Burrow, John Anthony, Turville-Petre, Thorlac, eds, *A Book of Middle English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p.114.

²¹⁸ Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English Lay", p. 353.

²¹⁹ Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English Lay", p. 353.

In the enchanted world, king Orfeo pits himself against the Fairy king a second time and wins, bringing back Heurodis from the Fairy kingdom. Although these trials find him whole again in himself and in his marriage, he next must reclaim his position as a lord of men. Thus in a final trial Orfeo, once more in his own kingdom, tests his steward and proves his own largesse and judgment.²²⁰

The primary source of the poem seems to be the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as told by Virgil and Ovid. The Celtic folkloric tradition is also evident.²²¹ The fact that the poem belongs to the Breton lay genre and that this genre derives from a tradition better established on the continent may suggest that, in all likelihood, also the elaboration of *Sir Orfeo* may have its origin on the continent. Even though there is no version of a French *Sir Orfeo* story now in existence, there are references in more than a French work to a Breton musical lay, the *Lai d'Orpheu*.²²² That such a lay once existed is shown by two well-known passages: the first is from the *Lai de l'Espine* and the second is from the first version of *Floire et Blanceflor*.²²³ As the title suggest, the lay must have had the Orpheus myth as its content, but it is impossible to assert whether it was closer to the Latin myth of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*. However, the mention of the lay in more than one poem may suggest that the *Lai d'Orphéu* was indeed well known and popular in eleventh- and twelfth-century France. Even if the existence of a French intermediary cannot be directly proved, it is possible to hypothesize that some version of the story was known in French, and that the English *Sir Orfeo* is an adaptation of a French lay, which in turn was modelled on a celticized version of the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice.²²⁴

²²⁰ Furnish, "Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays", p. 87.

²²¹ Lyman Kittredge, George, "Sir Orfeo", *The American Journal of Philology*, 7 (1886), p. 176.

²²² Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 116.

²²³ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", *The American Journal of Philology*, 7 (1886), p. 181.

²²⁴ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 181.

Given the circumstances, it is difficult to assert to which cultural tradition *Sir Orfeo* owed more for its composition, and the lack of any written document previous to the Auchinleck manuscript raises more questions than answers. However, the coexistence of more than one cultural tradition in *Sir Orfeo* may also be explained by the way in which the Breton lays were often composed and performed. As already mentioned before, the Breton lay belonged to the oral tradition, and the oral transmission is a medium that is often prone to change. Thus, a story transmitted orally might not have a standard and fixed plot, and some of its elements could be removed or added. Naturally, most Breton lays were on Celtic subjects, and set their scenes in Celtic countries, like Britain, Ireland and Scotland, but the Armorican minstrels did not confine themselves only to Celtic themes.²²⁵ During their wanderings, minstrels picked up tales and legends from different sources and traditions, gathering material for their own repertoire. In all likelihood, a travelling minstrel might have heard somebody tell the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and then decided to add the tale to his collection of ballads.²²⁶ This might have happened either in England or in the South of France, where Virgil and Ovid were well known, and where the minstrels had an active audience.²²⁷ But some interference must have occurred during the reception of the Orpheus myth for the tale to change so much. Whoever first tried to elaborate the Orpheus tale probably got the story by word of mouth and in no very accurate shape. Therefore, while turning the classical myth into a lay, the author must inevitably have changed the story to make it fit his own beliefs and traditions, and those of his audience.²²⁸ This could explain the reliance on Celtic folklore and the romance elements that were popular in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this way, the Ovidian story became a Breton lay in every sense: short, romantic and Celtic.

²²⁵ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 183.

²²⁶ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 184.

²²⁷ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 185.

²²⁸ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 185.

From this analysis, it seems clear that the origins of *Sir Orfeo* are to be found in France rather than England. Of all the variations that the Orpheus myth may have sustained, the elaboration of the Latin myth by Celtic minstrels on the continent seems to be the most plausible explanation. However, there is also proof of the circulation and transmission of the Orpheus myth in England before the success of the Breton lay in the Anglo-Norman courts. Did some shred of Anglo-Saxon culture remain visible in *Sir Orfeo*? How much did the poem drift apart from its Latin source? It is evident that the Celtic component of the poem is stronger than any other cultural tradition that may have influenced the composition of *Sir Orfeo*. However, it may be interesting to analyze the poem more in depth, in order to better understand to what extent *Sir Orfeo* changed the Orpheus myth.

3. The Middle English *Sir Orfeo*

The fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo* represents one of the best examples of Middle English lay. Among the surviving English lays, *Sir Orfeo* is regarded as one of the poems that better expresses the typical fantasy dimension of the genre, connecting a wide range of different elements. As Dorena Allen claims, *Sir Orfeo*'s peculiarity lies in the ability of its author to elaborate and adapt for his own purpose materials and traditions shared with more than one generations of popular storytellers.²²⁹ From the romance setting and Christian parallelism to the Celtic references, the poem reflects aspects and elements that do not derive from the same cultural tradition. Did the poet consciously mix all these features? Sadly, it is not possible to verify how deeply the *Orfeo* poet knew all these different elements while composing the text. A possible explanation is that, in elaborating *Sir Orfeo*, the poet simply mixed a series of themes already available in his literary repertoire, relying more upon his imagination than any singular extant literary source.²³⁰ However, certain aspects of the poem suggest that the *Orfeo* poet composed the text with his audience in mind more than any tradition: he likely took a popular story in the Middle Ages and elaborated it to suit the tastes of his medieval courtly audience. Romance, fantasy, kingship, marvel and morality were mixed together, giving life to a lively experimentation whose result is *Sir Orfeo*.

It is clear that *Sir Orfeo*'s main source of inspiration was the Latin myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but the story of the Middle English poem changed so much from its classical counterpart that the situation raises some doubts. Bruce A. Rosenberg believes the poet of *Sir Orfeo* to have been familiar with the myth, and that it was "a major shaping

²²⁹ Allen, Dorena, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", *Medium Ævum*, 33 (1964), p. 102.

²³⁰ Friedman, John Block, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 178.

influence”.²³¹ However, as George Lyman Kittredge explains, the dimension where *Sir Orfeo* takes place is completely different from that of the classical myth.²³² Clearly, the myth served as a reference for the poem, but other features and expectations were added to it. Moreover, whoever may have first elaborated the poem could have not known of the classical myth at all, since in all likelihood *Sir Orfeo*’s main source of transmission in England was the French *Lai d’Orphéy*, a (lost) poem whose plot could already have withstood some degrees of alteration. In the lay, as in the myth, Orfeo loses his wife against a power stronger than him and wins her back with the help of his music, but this is just one of the similarities that the Middle English poem shares with the myth. In all likelihood, the medieval context played an important role in *Sir Orfeo*’s composition. In the Middle Ages, the audience’s expectations were different from those of a classical audience and, consequently, the aim of the poem changed as well, introducing new themes and features. For this reason, *Sir Orfeo* can be considered more than just a medieval retelling of the Orpheus tale: it reflects medieval society with its interests, worries and attitudes. In his chivalric dimension and its concern with love, honour and loyalty, the poem mirrors the tastes and preoccupation of its audience, but also contains rich references on Christian and Celtic beliefs.²³³ As Shearle Furnish specifies, it is possible to find prominent and recurrent symbols of chivalric romance in the poem, like shining armours, white steeds, the forest and castles as settings.²³⁴ Some elements belongs to Celtic lore, while others show a connection to Latin culture. These are just some examples of the elements that can be found in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*. In turning a classical myth into a romance tale, the poet probably drew details from the various reading of the Orpheus tale that spread during the Middle Ages, which resulted

²³¹ Rosenberg, Bruce A., “Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 13 (1976), p. 319.

²³² Lyman Kittredge, George, "Sir Orfeo", *The American Journal of Philology*, 7 (1886), p. 187.

²³³ Allen, “Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken”, p. 102.

²³⁴ Furnish, Shearle, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays”, *Traditio*, 62 (2007), p. 89.

in the creation of a new innovative story.²³⁵ Sometimes, these elements do not seem to share a connection to each other, making the analysis of *Sir Orfeo* rather complicated. For this reason, it is difficult to assert which tradition was more crucial in the composition of *Sir Orfeo*. Although a prevalent tradition might not be found, a closer analysis to the poem could be useful to establish how *Sir Orfeo*'s characteristic features developed in such an innovative way.

3.1 *Sir Orfeo as a moral, folkloric and romance tale*

As John Block Friedman affirms, the composition of *Sir Orfeo* is “the result of many lines of development”.²³⁶ In fact, there are multiple levels of interpretation to the poem: from a stylistic point of view, it is possible to analyse *Sir Orfeo* as part of the romance genre, or to recognise its many moral features, and thus reading it as a medieval allegory of the classical myth. The presence of elements from different cultural traditions makes the poem both interesting and difficult to analyse. Yet, tracing back the meaning of these elements may be useful to understand why they were added and with which consequences.

As already mentioned before, the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice only shares some similarities with its Middle English counterpart. Nevertheless, the most obvious departure of the lay from the Orpheus myth is its positive conclusion, which already shows the innovative elaboration of the classical tale. Both in Virgil's and in Ovid's versions, Orpheus fails his quest and Eurydice is to stay forever in the underworld, but in *Sir Orfeo* the musician king successfully rescues his queen from her captivity, returning with her to his reign.²³⁷ However, such a divergence from the classical tradition may originate from the narrative conventions of romance. As Rosenberg

²³⁵ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 178.

²³⁶ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 148.

²³⁷ Rosenberg, “Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature”, p. 319

affirms, nearly all romance tales end successfully, since lovers frustrated by separation are conventionally reunited, in life or in death.²³⁸ This aspect of the successful conclusion is so frequent that it became part of the definition of the romance genre.²³⁹ For this reason, as a Breton lay some features of the *Orfeo* poem may have been influenced by the romance genre itself. However, this is not the only explanation that can be proposed for Orfeo's successful quest. Orality must have played an important role as well. Since the transmission of the Middle English romances was largely oral, the audience's preference for a positive outcome of the stories may have been so strong that fourteenth-century minstrels decided to alter the myth's tragic ending, so that it would meet their listeners' expectations by adhering to romance conventions.²⁴⁰ Moreover, as the *Orfeo* lay passed from narrator to narrator, the death of Eurydice might easily have come to receive less attention than in the previous versions. In time, Eurydice's death might have been easily forgotten altogether, as Allen suggests, and be replaced by the account of the rescue from the fairies, which forms the basis of *Sir Orfeo*.²⁴¹

Nonetheless, classical mythology supplies the names of the hero and heroine of the medieval lay, as well as the genealogy of king Orfeo. But already from the beginning, it is possible to see an alteration of the classical tale.²⁴² In the poem, the pagan gods of the Latin tradition provide Orfeo with a distinguished lineage: he descends from mighty kings, thus already has a sort of legitimacy as a ruler even without showing his qualities as a man.

Orfeo was a king,
In Ingland an heighe lording,
A stalworth man and hardi bo;
Large and curteys he was also.
His fader was comen of King Pluto,

²³⁸ Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature", p. 319.

²³⁹ Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature", p. 320.

²⁴⁰ Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature", p. 320.

²⁴¹ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 110.

²⁴² Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 179.

And his moder of King Juno,
That sum time were as godes yhold ²⁴³ (39-45)

Curiously, Orfeo's mighty ancestors are "King Pluto" and "King Juno", an ancestry which raises the question of whether the author had any idea that Pluto was the king of Hell, and one of the antagonists of the classical Orpheus, or that Juno was a female goddess. All the poet writes of them is that they "sum-time were as godes y-hold".²⁴⁴ This confusion may have originated from the distance of the author from the classical myth, or from the misreading of some elements of the myth during the various performances of minstrels that passed down the *Orfeo* tale over time.

Another classical element that survived in the medieval elaboration of the Orpheus myth is Orfeo's depiction as a musician:

Orfeo mest of ani thing
Lovede the gle of harping.
Siker was everi gode harpoure
Of him to have miche honour.
Himself he lerned forto harp,
And leyd theron his wittes scharp;
He lerned so ther nothing was
A better harpoure in no plas.
In al the world was no man bore
That ones Orfeo sat bifore -
And he might of his harping here -
Bot he schuld thenche that he were
In on of the joies of Paradis,
Swiche melody in his harping is. (25-38)

The power exercised by Orpheus' harp is preserved in the Middle English lay, since Orfeo's musical skills are no less outstanding than those of his classical counterpart.²⁴⁵ However, Orfeo turns from a generic musician into a minstrel, a more appealing and well-known figure for the medieval audience. Orfeo is portrayed as the finest of minstrels, and his harp as an object that gives him almost magical abilities.²⁴⁶ The classical taming of animals, moving of trees, and the winning over of the gods of Hades

²⁴³ Burrow, John Anthony, Turville-Petre, Thorlac, eds, *A Book of Middle English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 115.

²⁴⁴ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 179.

²⁴⁵ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 18.

²⁴⁶ Taylor Beekman, Paul, "Sir Orfeo and the Minstrel King", *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*, 13 (2000), p. 14.

are cited in *Sir Orfeo* as evidences of the protagonist's magical powers, an element that can often be found in romance tales.²⁴⁷ Nevertheless, his ability with the harp still represents a characteristic attribute of the protagonist, and plays an important role in overcoming the hurdles of his journey. Orfeo's attachment to his harp is evident in his self-imposed exile of ten years, when he abandons all his possessions except his harp and all his royal activities except his harping.²⁴⁸

The importance of the harp is one of the features that may have more than one interpretation in the poem. Different cultural traditions share the same respect for music, for the harp, and consequently for the figure of the harper. This aspect is particularly emphasised in the Celtic tradition. The respect felt by all Celtic nations for their harpers is famous, and often, the ability with the harp is used as a parameter for discerning a good ruler. From this point of view, Orfeo meets the necessary requirements, since he is not only the best of the harpers, but he is also a king. In Celts folktales, kings and princes are often equipped with the harp, and this detail recurs often in Celtic-derived tales, like *Tristan and Yseut*.²⁴⁹ As already mentioned before, Celtic culture played a fundamental role in the elaboration of *Sir Orfeo*. The hero of *Sir Orfeo*, as Robert M. Longworth underlines, is a minstrel, and "the instrument of his heroism is minstrelsy".²⁵⁰ Thus, the possibility that the author of the poem, a minstrel himself, chose the Orpheus myth because of the affinity with the harp symbolism is not to be excluded. However, the power of music to overcome hurdles is a quality that occurs also in Norse mythology, so it cannot be claimed as the exclusive property of a singular tradition.²⁵¹ In fact, Orfeo's harping also brings into the lay a series of Christian and musical associations of which the most direct is with King David. During the Middle Ages, a

²⁴⁷ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 157.

²⁴⁸ Longworth, Robert M., "Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel's Art", *Study in Philology*, 71 (1982), p. 4.

²⁴⁹ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 186.

²⁵⁰ Longworth, "Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel's Art", p. 6.

²⁵¹ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 18.

series of theories spread about the role of music in society. Some of them associated well-known figures of the Christian tradition with music, such as the association between King David and Christ the musician, or Christ as the harp, the perception of musical harmony as universal order or as the harmony of soul and body, music as spiritual striving, as grace and so on, as Jeff Rider explains.²⁵² The parallelism between Orpheus and King David was another product of Christian rhetoric's tendency to link Latin and Greek mythology to Biblical figures. As already mentioned in chapter one, the association of Orpheus with Christly was one of the earliest ideas to exert a modifying influence upon medieval conceptions of Orpheus, so that it was natural for medieval authors to associate Orpheus, King David and Christ. The resemblance between the psalmist and the classical musician was already used during the early Christian period by Church Fathers and believers who wanted to hide their faith during Christian persecution through classical iconography, but clearly such a parallelism survived throughout the Middle Ages as well. Both figures were of noble or divine descent, and had impressive music abilities. As David, sent to a remote countryside to pasture his flock, played upon his harp and later used it to drive away the evil spirits, Orpheus played his lyre in the wilderness of Thrace, where he drew the animals around him and later moved to compassion the gods of the underworld. Orpheus's ability to win over the king of Hades was also compared to Christ's victory over death, hell and the devil.²⁵³

In the account of David's surrounding himself with musicians and organizing them into classes, a medieval reader would have seen hints not only of Orpheus' distinction among musicians, but also of his supposed discovery of the laws of harmony.²⁵⁴ The

²⁵² Rider, Jeff, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and Sir Orfeo", *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of language and Literature*, 24 (1988), p. 357.

²⁵³ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 148.

²⁵⁴ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 148.

relation between music and harmony is a popular feature of medieval literature, and in *Sir Orfeo* it could serve as a further reading of the harp, symbol of good governance. Music had a primary role in medieval society, and was considered particularly useful for community life: since its fundamental components are rhythm, energy and harmony, music contains all the qualities for a good society. The harp was the perfect symbol with which medieval authors conveyed the image of a perfect society. Like all string instruments, the harp does not rely to one line of sound alone: the harper harmonises all the sounds that the harp can produce, moving together each string to create the best sound. In medieval poetry, the figure of the harper became a symbol of good governance, with the prince moving all the strings together to create harmony, peace and prosperity, like a good harper. In the romance, the qualities of the good musician, and of the harper in particular, are often transferred to the hero, who proves not only physically strong but also morally so. As concerns *Sir Orfeo*, the attention given to the harp may be related to an attachment to the classical tradition. It may be also possible that the Orpheus myth, with its harper protagonist, was just apt to this sort of elaboration, and the medieval poet saw the potential for the development of a political feature in the story. This could be part of the greater intention of the minstrels to give an example to their courtly audience, and the Orpheus myth was fit for the task.

The relationship with Celtic folklore is another characteristic aspect of *Sir Orfeo*. The Middle English lay is often described as a Celtic elaboration of the Orpheus myth, and indeed, the connection with Celtic lore seems stronger than the connection with the classical myth. The presence of Celtic lore elements represents one of the major divergences from the Orpheus myth as it is told in Virgil's *Georgics* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the *Orfeo* poem, the classical figures replaced by the mysterious fairy people and all the marvellous events related to them. But the manifestation of the fairy world within that of the humans is not always bewitching. In fact, as Turville-Petre

highlights, the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* “disrupt the world of the humans just when it seems most secure”.²⁵⁵

As ich lay this undertide
And slepe under our orchardside,
Ther come to me to fair knightes,
Wele y-armed al to rightes,
And bad me comen an heighing
And speke with her lord the king. (133-148)

In the poem, queen Heurodis falls asleep at noonday under an “ympe-tree”, only to awaken in a terrible shock. In her sleep, Heurodis has entered Fairyland, an episode that marks her fate in the story. There, she is forced to meet the Fairy king, who shows her the beauties of his land. However, once Heurodis returns to the human world, the Fairy king tells her that the next day she will be brought to the Fairyland forever, and she is actually snatched away from her husband’s side.²⁵⁶ In the Middle English lay, the fairies are responsible for Heurodis/Eurydice’s disappearance. There is no reference to Virgil’s Aristeus nor to Ovid’s poisonous snake. Moreover, Heurodis does not die but is abducted instead. In this way, the Orpheus myth is converted in a fairy abduction tale, a recurrent theme in Celtic folklore.²⁵⁷ In many Celtic tales, people visit the Fairyland during their sleep. In Allen’s opinion, this represents a survival of a widespread medieval superstition that during life, and especially during sleep, the human soul is able to wander from the body on adventures of its own.²⁵⁸ However, in *Sir Orfeo* Heurodis is abducted, body and soul, and brought forever to the fairy world. Eurydice’s death is replaced by Heurodis’ abduction; both characters disappear from the human world but only one is still alive. In Celtic popular tradition, sometimes death was not perceived as something natural, but involved the interference of the supernatural, and in particular the interference of the fairies.

²⁵⁵ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 117.

²⁵⁶ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 178.

²⁵⁷ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 117.

²⁵⁸ Allen, “Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken”, p. 103.

Than he gan bihold about al,
And seighe liggeand within the wal
Of folk that were thider y-brought
And thought dede, and nare nought. (387-90)

The abduction of living humans and the substitution with a lifeless changeling is a recurrent pattern of Celtic lore: death is only one of the paths that lead to the fairy community.²⁵⁹ In this case, the return of the dead may be confused with the rescue of abducted mortals.²⁶⁰ For this reason, it is no surprise that *Sir Orfeo's* Fairyland resembles much more Hell than an idealised place. This represents another obvious difference between *Sir Orfeo* and its classical counterparts: the change of scene from Hades to Fairyland, and the substitution of the Fairy king for Pluto.²⁶¹

Barbara Fass Leawy claims that the association of Hades with Fairyland represents a characteristic element of *Sir Orfeo* and a result of the combination of Celtic and classical mythology.²⁶² However, Allen asserts that Fairyland should not be perceived as a Celtic Hades, since its inhabitants are not devils, and the human residing there may not be dead but "taken". Inside the fairy castle, Heurodis and the other figures in the courtyard remain exactly as they were at the moment they were abducted, stretched in sleep, or frozen in grotesque attitudes of apparent death.²⁶³ Nevertheless, the subterranean location for Fairyland in the poem suggests a particular parallelism with Hell. The location of Fairyland is a matter of conflicting traditions, and Celtic tales seem to give different versions of where the fairy world should be. Some ancient conceptions seems to have placed it beneath the earth, while, according to the medieval Celtic lore, Fairyland must have been closer to the Arthurian Isle of Avalon, a beautiful country beyond the sea, inhabited by gods and sometimes visited by valiant heroes.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 105.

²⁶⁰ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 110.

²⁶¹ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 188.

²⁶² Fass Leawy, Barbara, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*, New York: New York University Press, 1994, p. 246.

²⁶³ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 105.

²⁶⁴ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 194.

Al that lond was ever light,
For when it schuld be therk and night,
The riche stones light gonne
As bright as doth at none the sonne.
No man may telle, no thenche in thought,
The riche werk that ther was wrought.
Bi al thing him think that it is
The proude court of Paradis. (369-76)

The lack of an unambiguous tradition may have lead the *Orfeo* author to associate Hades with Fairyland, and to add gruesome details to the glittering world of the fairies. In fact, the castle of the Fairy king is splendid on the surface but terrible on the inside: as Orfeo enters the fairy castles' courtyard, a gruesome sight awaits him.²⁶⁵

Sum stode withouten hade,
And sum non armes nade,
And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
And sum armed on hors sete,
And sum astrangled as thai ete;
And sum were in water adreynt,
And sum with fire al forschreynt. (391-98)

Certainly, the description of the Fairy king's courtyard is "a vision of Hades in its grimmest aspect", as James K. Knapp affirms.²⁶⁶ This is no Land of Youth, where beautiful creatures and heroes dwell. Rather, it is a place filled with people who have experienced suffering, violence, or madness both in the human world and in Fairyland.²⁶⁷ Like his classical counterpart, Orfeo enters a land of grim horrors, but it is not clear whether the poet intentionally modified the fairy world to resemble the classical Hades, or Christian hell. Instead of a fusion or a blending of more traditions, it is possible to hypothesise a reinterpretation of the ancient legend by someone who believed, as his people had done for centuries, that death might be no more than an illusion and a deceit.²⁶⁸

Allen sees the resemblance between the world of *Sir Orfeo* and what she defines "the primitive world of popular belief", a fantasy world in which men are forever surrounded

²⁶⁵ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 118.

²⁶⁶ Knapp, James K., "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History*, 29 (1968), p. 267.

²⁶⁷ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 267.

²⁶⁸ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 110.

and threatened by cruel and capricious beings.²⁶⁹ In the lay, the supernatural comes suddenly and mysteriously, and no one has the ability to resist this occult power.²⁷⁰

Er the quen schuld fram hem gon.
Ac yete amiddes hem ful right
The quen was oway y-twight,
With fairi forth y-nome.
Men wist never wher sche was bicombe. (190-94)

The Fairy king's first visit to Heurodis in her sleep, the obscurity of his motives and methods in abducting her, the fairy hunt, ride and dancing in the wilderness all help create the impression of a marvellous world beyond human apprehension.²⁷¹ But the Fairy king threatening death and darkness may represent an unlooked-for evil, which enters man's everyday life in the happiest moment and spoils his joy.²⁷² This mysterious intrusion of the fairies in man's life and their unintelligible behaviour vaguely resembles the unpredictable nature of human Fortune expressed by Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Just as Boethius perceived the reversal of Fortune causing his sufferings as dark and inscrutable, the actions of the Fairy king express the same mysterious nature of destiny.²⁷³ The relation between marvellous events and the fickle nature of human Fortune is based on the restlessness that both create in the human soul. The apparition of the supernatural in everyday life turns the usual into something unknown that defies human comprehension. Maybe, the only thing to do is to accept the intrusion of the Fairy king as it is, a mysterious supernatural event. However, by reading the poem through the romance genre's lenses, the Fairy king may just prove the perfect opponent for the protagonist. In fact, Orfeo's world is plunged into sorrow and disorder until finally he is willing to risk his life to save his queen. Among the literary genres affected by the classical tradition, romance tales express their connection to the classics

²⁶⁹ Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken", p. 110.

²⁷⁰ Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 193.

²⁷¹ Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and Sir Orfeo", p. 357.

²⁷² Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 268.

²⁷³ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 266.

by recalling the mythical pattern of the hero and his quest. For this reason, Knapp identifies in *Orfeo* the traits of the archetypal hero on a journey, and his enemy is Death, a threatening figure who would disrupt the order and happiness of man's world.²⁷⁴ The intromission into everyday life of an inexplicable and unparalleled force is a typical element both of the romance genre and of the Breton lay, and often it is recognized as the essence of the marvellous events that take place in them. In all likelihood, the use of the fairy lore is attributable to the knowledge of the Celtic tradition by the *Orfeo* poet. It is possible to suggest also a connection to shreds of Germanic lore of early Anglo-Saxon England, but Lyman Kittredge explains that:

“the fairies of the Middle English poem have nothing Teutonic about them. They are not gnomes, or trolls or nixies, nor the mischievous creatures that abound in German popular tales. They are precisely those mysterious, revered beings of human size and with more than mortal power and beauty, in which Celtic imagination delighted”.²⁷⁵

Another detail in which the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* resemble the Celtic tradition is the parade of fairy knights with flying banners and gleaming arms that Orfeo sees in the woods during his exile.²⁷⁶

As a gret ost bi him te,
 Wele atourned, ten hundred knightes,
 Ich y-armed to his rightes,
 Of cuntenaunce stout and fers,
 With mani desplaid baners,
 And ich his swerd y-drawe hold -
 Ac never he nist whider thai wold.
 And otherwile he seighe other thing:
 Knightes and levedis com daunceing
 In queynt atire, gisely,
 Queynt pas and softly;
 Tabours and trunpes yede hem bi,
 And al maner menstraci. (290-302)

Similar apparitions were common also in the Irish tradition of the twelfth century, according to which the fairy chiefs had always soldiers under their command and engaged in murderous duels with each other. The parade of knights and ladies that accompany the Fairy king in *Sir Orfeo* shares some similarities with romance

²⁷⁴ Knapp, “The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*”, p. 268.

²⁷⁵ Lyman Kittredge, “*Sir Orfeo*”, p. 188.

²⁷⁶ Lyman Kittredge “*Sir Orfeo*”, p. 189.

conventions, for example in the number of the participants, a hundred each, and the typical snow-white steeds.²⁷⁷

On the other hand, a point in which *Sir Orfeo* is close to Ovid's version of the Orpheus tale is the protagonist's despair and his solitary life in the woods after Heurodis' disappearance. Orfeo plays his harp to the animals who gather to listen, sometimes seeing the fairies out hunting: the wilderness may represent an in-between place, on the threshold between the human and fairy worlds.²⁷⁸ The wilderness where Orfeo lives in wretchedness for ten years is a landscape untouched by civilization, as the poet emphasizes with a series of contrasts between Orfeo's prosperous courtly past and his desolate existence into the wild.²⁷⁹

He that hadde had castels and tours,
River, forest, frith with flours,
Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,
This king mot make his bed in mese.
He that had y-had knightes of priis
Bifor him kneland, and levedis,
Now seth he nothing that him liketh,
Bot wilde wormes bi him striketh. (245-52)

Through repeated contrasts between past and present, the *Orfeo* author seems to take as example the tradition of saints' lives, which pictured holy men often barefoot and ragged in the wilderness, choosing a life of solitude and sacrifice to express their love for God.²⁸⁰ Whereas the saint enters the wilderness because he has decided to abandon the vanity of all earthly pleasures, Orfeo exiles himself out of sorrow for the loss of the queen who, for him, was the greater earthly pleasure.²⁸¹ However, the man that rejects civilisation and chooses to live in the wilderness is a recurrent feature of medieval literature. The idea of renouncing civilization was perceived as a form of madness but also as sign of supernatural tendencies, since once outside society the wild man acquires supernatural powers. The rejection of society is also attributable to the romance pattern

²⁷⁷ Lyman Kittredge "Sir Orfeo", p. 189.

²⁷⁸ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 118.

²⁷⁹ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 117.

²⁸⁰ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 270.

²⁸¹ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 270.

of the wild knight, who abandons community life due to his love sufferings. In this, the lay may be compared with the *Romance of Iwain* and with the story of Merlin Silvestris.²⁸²

In the poem, Orfeo's choice to abandon his wealth and his kingdom is determined by his utter commitment to Heurodis and by his desire to follow her, wherever she might have been taken. Orfeo's absolute devotion for Heurodis introduces another central element to the poem, namely the virtue of personal loyalty.²⁸³ Like the classical source, but unlike many similar tales of the courtly love tradition, *Sir Ofeo* is a celebration of marital love and loyalty.²⁸⁴ Only by risking all for love, the protagonist reaches the fairy world: immediately before he decides to enter Fairyland, Orfeo exclaims that death is a thing he no longer fears; when he decides to follow Heurodis, it is implicit that death is what he expects to find there.²⁸⁵ But loyalty in love is not the only virtue with which the poem deals, since the importance of loyalty in general is shown in more than one episode. Whereas the classical Orpheus won back his Eurydice through the enchanting beauty of his music, the Middle English Orfeo succeeds by invoking the honour-bound duty of a king to keep his word.²⁸⁶ In striking a bargain with the Fairy king, Orfeo reminds him of the importance of maintaining his pledged word: "nedes þou most þi word hold". Even in Fairyland, loyalty is the foundation on which society rests.²⁸⁷

The same issue is examined in a more significant way at the end of the poem, when Orfeo tests his own steward.²⁸⁸ In fact, the poem does not end with Orfeo and Heurodis' reunion, but with the additional episode of the steward's loyalty. Faithful stewards are stock roles in romance, but none quite matches the one in *Sir Orfeo*. There are good

²⁸² Lyman Kittredge, "Sir Orfeo", p. 188.

²⁸³ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 118.

²⁸⁴ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 272.

²⁸⁵ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 268.

²⁸⁶ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 272.

²⁸⁷ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 119.

²⁸⁸ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 272.

stewards in *Bevis of Hamtoun* and in *Guy of Warwick*, though neither of them rules in his lord's behalf. In *Emare*, which like *Sir Orfeo* is a Middle English lay, the heroine is rescued by a good steward, but he has no political role.²⁸⁹ In this case, the *Orfeo* poet's choice to emphasize the political as well as the personal significance of loyalty may be related to the importance given to the theme of good governance introduced with the harp, and then developed with the faithful steward episode. But why then does the king find it necessary to test the steward's loyalty? He is not really obliged to return the kingdom to Orfeo, yet he proves himself faithful and waits for his king. Actually, such a motif is frequently repeated in romance narration: the disguise return carries an element of drama and surprise with it and the circumstances of Orfeo's exile, particularly his hardened and roughened features acquired in the wild, lead naturally enough into his disguise, despite the addition of this theme apparently does not make sense.²⁹⁰ The addition of this last episode may be part of the loyalty theme that permeates the poem, but it also may have been added just as a further narrative development. However, the emphasis upon the social consequences of loyalty links *Sir Orfeo* with other texts collected in the Auchinleck manuscripts, suggesting that the attention to this particular feature may not have been accidental.²⁹¹ At every point of the plot, the disaster and loss that threaten Orfeo are averted by the power of loyalty, as if the poet wanted to underline the importance of such a virtue. In this case, it is possible to suggest the introduction of a likely moral lesson directed to *Sir Orfeo*'s audience.

These are just some of the main interpretations given to *Sir Orfeo*'s features. As can be seen, more than one element can be interpreted from the point of view of different traditions and have an actual function in all of them. In all likelihood, the different receptions of the Orpheus myth during the Middle Ages helped to blur the classical

²⁸⁹ Taylor Beekman, Paul, "Sir Orfeo and the Minstrel King", p. 15.

²⁹⁰ Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature", p. 319.

²⁹¹ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 119.

outlines of the tale and suggest new associations, which might have been more popular among the medieval audience. Nonetheless, *Sir Orfeo* is also a somewhat different story from its classical and early medieval analogues and should be praised in terms of what its author did with it, not in hindsight.²⁹² In this case, *Sir Orfeo* represents one of the best products of Middle English poetry, giving the reader a perspective on medieval English society with its tastes and expectations. For this reason, it is impossible to ascertain which tradition was more influential in the poem's composition. All of them are of equal importance, and one interpretation does not exclude the others. The only thing the readers of the poem can do is to choose one interpretative key at a time and analyse *Sir Orfeo* through ever-new lenses.

3.2 Heurodis' new image and Eurydice's redemption

Another particular issue of *Sir Orfeo* that I would like to discuss in this chapter is the representation of Heurodis/Eurydice. Critical literature on *Sir Orfeo* often focuses on the poem's general interpretation, but never really takes into consideration Heurodis as more than Orfeo's abducted wife. In my opinion, the attention given to the many differences between *Sir Orfeo*, the Orpheus myth and their possible meaning has limited the analysis of the poem only to its male protagonist without considering another main character, Heurodis. Her behaviour in the poem shows clearly the new elaboration her character withstood, a change that cut the ties completely with the previous elaborations of Eurydice.

As concerns Heurodis' character, her new portrayal is the first striking feature that it is possible to notice. Unlike Eurydice, she is not a background shadow but a well-developed character with many facets. Heurodis' actions show an actual development of the character's inner dimension, a dimension that outlines her character's profile. This

²⁹² Rosenberg, "Folklore Methodology and Medieval Literature", p. 321.

development, however, is not casual, but derives from a series of medieval elaborations thanks to which the figure of Eurydice began to change, acquiring more depth than her classical version.

In *Sir Orfeo*, “Dame” Heurodis is as beautiful as a romance heroine is expected to be:

The king hadde a quen of priis
That was y-cleped Dame Heurodis,
The fairest levedi, for the nones,
That might gon on bodi and bones,
Ful of love and godenisse -
Ac no man may telle hir fairnise. (51-56)

Tara Williams claims that Heurodis’ first description underlines her nobility and her virtues, while also signalling her qualification as a queen.²⁹³ Similarly, Jacob Lewis highlights how this list of Heurodis’ positive qualities may be seen also as part of a larger theme running through *Sir Orfeo*, namely the fascination with nobility.²⁹⁴ Some elements that the *Orfeo* poet chooses to emphasize are in close relation with a series of recurrent symbols used as reference for elite characters in romance, like the aristocratic concept of power, class, gender role and of appropriate behaviour in love. Since the primary audience of *Sir Orfeo* must have been the courtly nobility, it might not be strange to find in the poem some models of behaviour in which the nobles could identify themselves. Heurodis’ character undergoes a positive, aristocratic and courtly interpretation, becoming the prototype for the perfect romance heroine. This represents a clear separation not only from the classical myth, but also from the entire medieval tradition, where Eurydice was conventionally perceived as a negative figure.

In the Middle Ages, Eurydice was usually identified with the prototype of feminine evil, an allegorized embodiment of irrational human sensuality and passion.²⁹⁵ Boethius, as Friedman explains, was the first author to give an a different interpretation of the

²⁹³ Williams, Tara, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018, p. 554.

²⁹⁴ Lewis, Jacob, “Visible Nobility and Aristocratic Power in *Sir Orfeo*”, *The CEA Critic*, 75 (2013), p. 16.

²⁹⁵ Fass Leawy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*, p. 249.

Orpheus myth, and thus to suggest a specific reading of Eurydice's character, a reading that gave a direction to almost all subsequent commentaries on the myth in the Middle Ages.²⁹⁶ In the context of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the Orpheus myth was used to show the distinction between worldly desire and spiritual tension: while Orpheus represents reason, Eurydice stands for sensual desire, as the passionate part of man's soul. From this allegorical interpretation, Eurydice began to be considered as inferior to Orpheus, being identified with the sinful aspect of human life. Given Boethius' authority and the importance of the *Consolation* during the Middle Ages, this interpretation exercised a considerable influence on the medieval portrayal of Eurydice, especially as later commentators of the *Consolation* were already inclined to regard any woman with a certain amount of misogyny.²⁹⁷ Thus, Eurydice's negative perception during the Middle Ages spread thanks to the moralizing interpretation of the Orpheus myth suggested by Christian commentators. Orpheus' backward glance to Eurydice represented man's attachment to the sensual world, a world embodied by Eurydice who prevented Orpheus from detaching himself from earthly pleasures. To strengthen the moralising meaning of the Orpheus tale, Eurydice was often associated with the Biblical figure of Eve.²⁹⁸ From a medieval point of view, Eurydice's influence on Orpheus must have resembled that of Eve on Adam, but this interpretation might have become popular among medieval commentators and clerks also thanks to the allegorical interpretation given to the snake of the Orpheus myth. As the snake is the reason for Eve's transgression of God's will, it is also the cause for Eurydice's death and Orpheus' consequent descent to Hades. The medieval perception of the snake as a symbol of Satan, then, added a further interpretation to Eurydice's character. Victim of Satan and unable to resist his temptation, Eurydice leads Orpheus to follow her down to Hades,

²⁹⁶ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", *Speculum*, 41 (1966), p. 23.

²⁹⁷ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 23.

²⁹⁸ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 24.

reinforcing the idea that Orpheus's descent to the underworld symbolizes man's descent to his low nature.²⁹⁹ Identified with Satan, the snake acquires more value as a character over the centuries while Eurydice becomes a tool for his mischiefs. She cannot avoid Satan's temptation, because her nature forces her to do so.

The moralizing association between Eurydice and Eve, the snake and Satan certainly had a great impact on the Orpheus myth's reception during the Middle Ages, as well as on the perception of Eurydice's role in the story. For this reason, a similar interpretation may be suggested for Heurodis' encounter with the Fairy king.³⁰⁰ For this reason, it is possible to hypothesise a connection between Eurydice's death as it is told in the medieval commentary tradition and Heurodis' abduction in *Sir Orfeo*. Conventionally, popular romances expect mysterious and often malevolent beings to confront the hero or the heroine no less frequently than they might face human enemies. In Friedman's opinion, the Fairy king is evidently part of this romance convention, but in causing Heurodis' departure from her husband and from the world of mortal men, he serves well enough also as a substitute for the classical and Christian snake.³⁰¹ If truth be told, the association of the Fairy king with Satan may have more than one explanation. Certainly, the Fairy king, ruler of the fairies, may stand on the same level as Satan, ruler of Hell, in terms of power. The *Orfeo* poet may have seen a parallelism between the two figures, but he chose the Fairy king as Heurodis' abductor to match romance conventions. Another explanation could be that during the Middle Ages, all supernatural beings outside the Christian tradition came to be thought of as manifestations of the devil. Their existence was so rooted in the popular tradition that, after the conversion to Christendom, the Church could not erase them or label them as blasphemous. For this reason, they entered the Christian tradition as descendants of fallen angels, thus as

²⁹⁹ Fass Leawy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*, p. 249.

³⁰⁰ Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*", p. 357.

³⁰¹ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 22.

mighty spirits that could have a negative impact on man's life. The fairies were part of those supernatural beings thought to have a special influence on the human world, but were not always categorized as evil. According to medieval lore, however, sometimes they would appear to humans and attack mostly women, especially those who were caught to be near trees and bushes.³⁰² However, in many old Celtic legends, maidens are stolen away also for love. This scenario frequently occurs in romances, where the fairies often represent a sexual threat for the characters, like in *Sir Degaré*, for example. An account of how supernatural beings were thought to be a sexual threat for women can be also found at the beginning of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's* tale. However, in *Sir Orfeo* there is ambiguity: in the text there is no reference to a possible sexual assault at Heurodis, although the Fairy king's tour of Fairyland might be seen as a possible act of seduction, an attempt to draw Heurodis to his reign. Moreover, Heurodis cannot have been abducted for love because the Fairy king already has a queen, and because such a motive would conflict with another main theme of the poem, namely that of marital love and loyalty.³⁰³ A possible interpretation of Heurodis' abduction could be the natural tendency of the fairies to mischief.³⁰⁴ When they feel offended or simply maliciously inclined, fairies can represent a threat to humans. In this case, Heurodis' abduction might be the result of her prior refusal of the fairy knight's invitation to meet his king. The identification of the Fairy king with Satan, and with a demonic power in general, is strengthened also by the association with what in medieval tradition was known as the "noon-day demon". Heurodis' abduction happens in a specific time of the day, which in the text is specified as "undertide":

Bifel so in the comessing of May
 When miri and hot is the day,
 And oway beth winter schours,
 And everi feld is ful of flours,

³⁰² Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 27.

³⁰³ Knapp, "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*", p. 267.

³⁰⁴ Kruse, John T., Daimler, Morgan, *Faery: A Guide to the Lore Magic & World of the Good Folk*, Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2020, unnumbered page.

And blosme breme on everi bough
Over al wexeth miri anought,
This ich quen, Dame Heurodis
Tok to maidens of priis,
And went in an undrentide
To play bi an orchardside,
To se the floures sprede and spring
And to here the foules sing. (57-68)

Romances are rarely specific about time and space, but the *Orfeo* poet repeats the world “undertide” so persistently that it must have a meaning in the story. Even more notable is the fact that all the Fairy king’s visits to the land of mortals take place at this time.³⁰⁵ “Undertide” can mean either morning or noon. In medieval folklore, mid-day was considered the period of time where magical events would occur, but in *Sir Orfeo* it seems to be perceived as a time of danger. This negative perception of the “undertide” can be traced back to antiquity: in the Old Testament, it is possible to read how mid-day was believed to be the time of the day where the “dæmonio meridiano” would appear. In Psalm 90, lines 5-6, King David writes “deliver me from the snare of the hunters...from hostile attack and from the noon-day demon”.³⁰⁶ This verse then was interpreted as a warning against malicious spirits appearing at noon-day, since the heat of the sun directly overhead rendered man weaker than usual to their attacks.³⁰⁷ Several Church Fathers elaborated on the dangers of noon-day, warning their audience that spiritual sloth threatens men at this time of the day, particularly cloistered and holy men. A popular interpretation of this passage for the Middle Ages was that of St Jerome, who identified the noon-day demon with Satan. The association of Satan with the noon-day demon was very popular throughout the Middle Ages, and even the seventeenth-century poet John Milton lets Satan tempt Eve at midday. Thus, if the noon-day demon was associated with Satan, it is no surprise that the apparition of the Fairy king at “undertide” in *Sir Orfeo* would be interpreted as a demoniac interference.

³⁰⁵ Friedman, “Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon”, p. 28.

³⁰⁶ Biblia Sacra Vulgata (Vulgate), Psalm 90, lines 5-6,
</<https://www.biblegateway.com/passages/?search=Psalmi+90&version=VULGATE/>> [accessed 9 November 2020].

³⁰⁷ Friedman, “Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon”, p. 28.

The medieval poet probably saw the approach of the Fairy king in the heat of midday as a satanic threat, and interpreted the fate of Heurodis as the result of Eurydice's failure to resist to that threat successfully.³⁰⁸

Yet, there is one serious discrepancy between the medieval depiction of Eurydice and *Sir Orfeo's* Heurodis. If Eurydice's nature drew her to be susceptible to Satan's approach, the conduct of Heurodis in the Middle English lay is blameless.³⁰⁹ The *Orfeo* poet does not depict her as having an over-sensuous nature, yet the Fairy king abducts her regardless of her innocence.³¹⁰ It seems probable, then, that the *Orfeo* poet had a conception of Heurodis that required her to be attacked by Satan. Presumably, Heurodis did not struggle against the Fairy king in part because of her identification with a Eurydice who, as Satan's natural prey, was destined for the demon world, and in part because of the narrative requirement of a positive conclusion that forces her to be abducted only to be eventually restored to the world of the living.³¹¹ Whatever origins the medieval interpretations of Eurydice might have, they show a deeper development of the character from its classical form, even if in a negative way. These interpretations, by giving Eurydice an ethical function, give her also a larger place in the story than she had held in antiquity, and through them she began to acquire a character in her own right.³¹² It is not strange, thus, for Heurodis to be a more developed character. She may be the result of a series of experimentations on Eurydice's character that began with Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and reached their most imaginative point with the romance re-telling of the Orpheus myth by Breton minstrels.

As already mentioned before, Heurodis can be interpreted as a prototype of romance heroine: she is not just beautiful, but also sincere and loyal to her husband. That of

³⁰⁸ Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo", p. 264.

³⁰⁹ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 26.

³¹⁰ Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 26.

³¹¹ Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, p. 194.

³¹² Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon", p. 22.

loyalty is one of *Sir Orfeo*'s main themes, and an essential aspect in Heurodis' analysis. If in the medieval Christian interpretation Eurydice was seen as a sinful creature, Heurodis is the finest example of virtue. Romance tales typically engage in blazoning, that is, listing the characteristics by which a female character is noble and desirable, such as fair skin, fair hair, long neck, black eyebrows, nice ankles and so on. However, the *Orfeo* poet seems to ignore Heurodis's body description to focus on her noble virtues. He speaks mainly of her "love and goodness", both words that have a great resonance for England's courtly audience.³¹³ But, while the virtuous heroine might be a conventional character of courtly romance, this positive portrayal of Eurydice should not just be attributed to the poem's romance structure. In fact, Heurodis' actions shows a deeper and mindful elaboration of her character. An important detail that supports this hypothesis is Heurodis' self-harm after waking up from her visit to Fairyland:

Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,
 Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;
 Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,
 And crached hir visage - it bled wete -
 Hir riche robe hye al to-rett
 And was reveyd out of hir wit. (76-82)

Heurodis' behaviour is often reduced to madness by critical literature, but, however disturbing the journey to Fairyland might have been, a "quen of priis" would never react this way. From a well-mannered lady she turns into "a screaming witch who violates decorum by tearing her clothing and clawing at her face", as Ellen M. Caldwell affirms.³¹⁴ Heurodis' self-harm must have an actual explanation. Clearly, she does not want to follow the Fairy king in his realm, so she must find a way to remain by her husband's side. Then Heurodis' madness may be interpreted as her "de-classing", a frenzied removal of all those signifiers of elite beauty and status that may make her desirable: Heurodis loses her bodily composure while she destroys her face, her clothes,

³¹³ Lewis, "Visible Nobility and Aristocratic Power in *Sir Orfeo*", p. 17.

³¹⁴ Caldwell, Ellen M., "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*", *Papers on Language: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 43 (2007), p. 294.

and is robbed of her wits.³¹⁵ The hypothesis of Heurodis' self-harm as a strategy to avoid her abduction originates from the similarity with a recurrent pattern in early medieval hagiographic tradition, namely women's self-mutilation. In the medieval hagiographic tradition, it is possible to read of more than one holy and chaste woman choosing to disfigure herself in order to appear unappealing to would-be attackers, as Caldwell explains.³¹⁶ To prevent being sexually assaulted, the preferable form of mutilation chosen by female saints and cloistered women in the Middle Ages was something highly visible and easy to accomplish. A fine example are the thirteenth-century St Margaret of Hungary's cut-off lips, an attempt to avoid the Tartars' sexual assault. Similarly, Heurodis' self-harm can be interpreted an attempt to preserve her chastity, or more likely to prevent her abduction to Fairyland.³¹⁷ However, the Fairy king seems to anticipate her:

"'Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow be
 Right here under this ympe-tre,
 And than thou schalt with ous go
 And live with ous evermo.
 And yif thou makest ous y-let,
 Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,
 And totore thine limes al
 That nothing help the no schal;
 And thei thou best so totorn,
 Yete thou worst with ous y-born.'" (165-174)

Regardless of her appearance, however, Heurodis is eventually abducted by the Fairy king. The influence of the hagiographic tradition in the elaboration of the character of Heurodis is also supported by the parallelism between Christian writing and romance. During the Middle Ages there were no clear boundaries between literary genres, so that it is often possible to find elements from different genres and traditions in the same text.³¹⁸ Christian tradition was so influent that poets and writers often took inspiration from the vast repertoire of Christian's legends for their characters, so that the behaviour

³¹⁵ Lewis, "Visible Nobility and Aristocratic Power in Sir Orfeo", p. 17.

³¹⁶ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 291.

³¹⁷ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 291.

³¹⁸ Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature*, p. 96.

and the deeds of their heroes and heroines would mirror those of saints or virtuous individuals. As concerns Heurodis' character, the connection with the hagiographic tradition reflects this thriving exchange between the Christian tradition and the romance genre. Heurodis's connection to a series of holy and chaste women influences so much the perception of her character that all the previous negative associations of Eurydice are erased, drawing her closer to the representation of virgin heroines than to that of the sinful Eve.³¹⁹

Another characteristic that marks Heurodis' importance in the poem is her association not only with marital loyalty, but also with the theme of political sovereignty.³²⁰ In fact, as long as Heurodis is at Orfeo's side, he maintains control of his kingdom, but when she is abducted he surrenders his authority and retires in grief to a solitary life in the woods. Caldwell claims that:

“the abduction of Herodis creates not only a rift in her and Orfeo's marriage, but also in the kingdom, representing a violation of Orfeo's authority and identity as a king. The pursuit of Heurodis to the fairy world and her subsequent recovery is Orfeo's answer to the fairy king's challenge of his political as well as marital authority. Only with the retrieval of Heurodis Orfeo's marriage and kingdom can be restored and sovereignty returned to him”.³²¹

Taken into consideration together with her self-wounding, Heurodis' relationship to political sovereignty also connects her to another recurring character of romance tales, namely that of the “loathly lady”. Usually, the subject of the loathly lady revolves around the union of a knight with an unattractive hag; if the knight swears sovereignty to this woman, however, she is magically transformed into a beautiful lady, and the knight is granted authority over the kingdom she represents.³²² In this case, Heurodis' self-mutilation may represent a test both of Orfeo's faithfulness as a husband and of his worth as a ruler: in an innovative adaptation of the loathly lady theme, Heurodis tries to

³¹⁹ Caldwell, “The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo”, p. 296.

³²⁰ Caldwell, “The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo”, p. 297.

³²¹ Caldwell, “The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo”, p. 299.

³²² Caldwell, “The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo”, p. 292.

protect Orfeo's kingdom by disfiguring her beauty. Ultimately, Orfeo's devotion rescues her, restoring her beauty and recovering his right to be king.³²³

Not only is rule central in the relationship of husband and wife, but it is crucial in ascertaining Orfeo's identity itself. In fact, the disfiguring and subsequent abduction of Heurodis mark the loss of identity that had once shaped both characters as husband and wife, and king and queen. A number of parallel actions establish their mutual relationship. For example, after ten solitary years of exile away from his kingdom and grief-stricken over the loss of his wife, Orfeo becomes the loathly one.³²⁴

Al his bodi was oway dwine
For missays, and al to-chine.
Lord! who may telle the sore
This king sufferd ten yere and more?
His here of his berd, blac and rowe,
To his girdel-stede was growe. (261-266)

In the woods, Orfeo disfigures himself in the same way as his wife has disfigured herself, perhaps to share the same kind of altered state in which his wife dwells.³²⁵ On the other hand, before his self-exile to the woods, Orfeo promises "neuer eft y nil no woman se", having lost his Heurodis. His transformation, then, may also represent a means of diminish his appearance to avoid other women's attentions. Another fundamental mirroring of Heurodis's actions occurs when Orfeo meets his wife unexpectedly in the forest. She weeps at his disfigurement with the same grief that attended Orfeo's concern over her own disfigurement then years earlier, before her abduction.³²⁶

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

³²³ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 304.

³²⁴ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 299.

³²⁵ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 299.

³²⁶ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 300.

Thus, it can be suggested that Heurodis' fidelity and compassion offer a model for Orfeo's own behaviour: he mirrors the action and attitudes of his wife, the image of marital and political fidelity.³²⁷

Although Orfeo brings her back to the human world, Heurodis never fully recovers from her stay in Fairyland: she never returns to being fully human or to having the more developed character she once had. The experience in Fairyland must have really affected her, since Heurodis never expresses herself again for the rest of the poem. Moreover, the *Orfeo* poet chooses to make Heurodis extremely silent and emotionless in the moment she should express her emotion clearly, namely her reunion with Orfeo and consequent end of her captivity. Unexpectedly, she does not show a particular reaction to her rescue nor to her return to Orfeo's kingdom. Tara Williams suggest that Heurodis' silence may be due to her inability to express herself again after her stay in Fairyland. Although she previously expressed herself violently against the abduction, after her return to the human world she is reduced to a silent figure in the background, losing all those aspects that made her a romance heroine.³²⁸ This situation may derive from the actual conclusion of Heurodis' role in the poem: after her rescue, she does not have a significant role anymore, and thus the reader's attention is transferred to the steward's loyalty. However, if the spousal reunion is the element that differentiates the lay from its source and the most significant reason why it concludes happily, then it is impossible to overlook this contrast.³²⁹ For this reason, it may be suggested that the most prominent difference between the two versions of the story is Orfeo's role as king rather than the recovery of his wife, to the extent that Heurodis' presence remains just as a symbol of Orfeo's claim to the throne.³³⁰

³²⁷ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in Sir Orfeo", p. 300.

³²⁸ Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 557.

³²⁹ Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 558.

³³⁰ Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 557.

Despite her lack of action in the last part of the poem, Heurodis remains an indispensable presence in *Sir Orfeo*. Moreover, she may be far more crucial to an understanding of the poem than she was to the classical version of the story, which focused primarily on love and loss.³³¹ Heurodis represents the meeting point of a series of intertwined issues like love, loyalty, power, and kingship, which have different effects on Orfeo and his kingdom depending on her involvement in the story. No matter what kind of interpretation Heurodis would get, it is clear that the character underwent a purely positive elaboration compared to the previous interpretations of the Orpheus myth: from symbol of worldly pleasure to romance heroine, Heurodis breaks the chain that bound her to a series of negative misogynistic portrayals of the classical Eurydice. In my opinion, this romance elaboration does not only rehabilitate Eurydice's character but represents a redemption of the female figure more in general. Obviously, it is too early to speak of feminism in fourteenth-century Europe, but I consider the distance of Heurodis from a solid tradition of sinful Eurydices a little step towards the rehabilitation of women's perception in medieval literature. Heurodis' character development testifies to a conscious rethinking of her role as a medieval woman, lady, and queen, as a figure that can give the good example through positive associations rather than a negative portrayal. In this way, Heurodis overcomes her sad fate of ghostly shadow in the underworld and is allowed to return at Orfeo's side.

3.3 Anglo-Saxon culture, English identity and Sir Orfeo: the case of the Auchinleck manuscript

As already mentioned before, *Sir Orfeo* is often considered the best example of Breton lay among the extant Middle English lays. This statement implies the existence in the poem of the typical aspects of the Breton lay genre, and consequently of romance.

³³¹ Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*", p. 309.

Previously in this chapter, I highlighted how one of the best features of *Sir Orfeo* is the chivalric and fantasy dimension where the story takes place, a common aspect of romance tales. However, the enthusiasm for chivalric and extraordinary adventures was not a typical feature of the English literary tradition.

As a genre developing in a different cultural environment, the romance's first audience was an élite deeply immersed in the romance tradition itself, namely the continental French aristocracy, whose tastes and expectations were different from those of an Anglo-Saxon audience. It is important to remember that romance found its way in medieval England thanks to the Norman Conquest and the consequent substitution of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy with a new Norman ruling class. Literary interests changed after the Conquest, following the Normans' preference for French-oriented genres. In all likelihood, the elaboration of the *Orfeo* poem originates from this shift of literary preferences, differentiating the lay from all previous elaborations of the Orpheus myth in England. At first glance, the *Orfeo* poem seems to have a very thin connection with the pre-Conquest English tradition: all of those aspects that are commonly associated with the medieval English tradition, like castles, knights, chivalric adventures and marvellous encounters, are actually developments of French and Celtic features. Thus, it seems inevitable to group *Sir Orfeo* together with the other French-derived tales and lays that spread in England, often as translations of famous romances. However, the *Orfeo* poem has more than one line of development, and the possible influence of the Anglo-Saxon tradition cannot be excluded. In fact, although some features of the poem certainly declare its belonging to the romance tradition, a further analysis of *Sir Orfeo* would also show the association of themes and elements unrelated to romance but surely closer to the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. The presence in the poem of these elements suggests a further innovative elaboration of the Orpheus myth, an elaboration

that borrows the structures of romance tradition for what it seems a political and cultural affirmation of Anglo-Saxon identity.

England's post-Conquest literary history was characterized by different trends. The principal trend was the substitution of the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition with that of the Normans, with the consequent spread in England of narratives with a clear romance style. Another trend that developed from the contact between the Norman and the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition was the recovery and transmission of the Anglo-Saxon traditions through romance, resulting in a series of romance tales known as "Matter of England" romances. In Matter of England romances, the story usually takes place in a pre-Conquest England, but the values and codes that their hero follows are that of romance's chivalric behaviour. In all likelihood, after one or two centuries of frequent contacts between the English population and the Norman rulers, and above all of intermarriages of English ladies with Norman lords, the cultural division between English and Normans began to decrease, resulting in a recovery of the Anglo-Saxon past in literature. However, the construction of Anglo-Saxon England in these texts serves just as a background. As Robert Allen Rouse explains, often the hero is portrayed as an Anglo-Saxon noble, but his behaviour is that of a thirteen- and fourteenth-century knight.³³² A third and particular trend developed simultaneously with the imposition of the new Norman culture in twelfth-century England, namely the expression through popular literature of the never-fading Anglo-Saxon culture and identity. In my opinion, *Sir Orfeo* contains aspects of all these trends, since every features of the poem can be interpreted from a different point of view. Undoubtedly, both romance conventions and the interest in the pre-Conquest past have influenced the elaboration of the poem, but the turn that these features took shows a conscious understanding of the cultural changes triggered by the Norman Conquest.

³³² Rouse, Robert Allen, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005, p. 55.

Dominique Battles claims that Anglo-Saxon literary tradition did not end with the Norman Conquest: it lost its prestige, but continued to be transmitted until the Middle English period.³³³ Together with Anglo-Saxon literature, Anglo-Saxon identity did not disappear completely from twelfth-century England. Rather, it found its way in the vernacular texts that continued to be written, transcribed and copied even after the Conquest, as Lindy Brady affirms.³³⁴ However, those texts contained values and expectations that clearly belonged to the Anglo-Saxon culture, a culture that was often opposed to that of the Norman rulers.³³⁵ For this reason, the production of texts still connected with the Anglo-Saxon popular tradition highlights the development among medieval English poets of an awareness of the contrast between Saxons and Normans in the thirteen and fourteenth centuries.³³⁶ This awareness was often expressed with the introduction of a negative perception of the Norman rulers in Anglo-Saxon-derived narratives. This perception was expressed by the representation of the contrasts between the two different cultures. For example, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the entries regarding the Norman Conquest stand out for the immediacy with which several crucial differences between Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman governance are underlined. In the same way, Anglo-Saxon texts produced after the Conquest expressed the differences between the English and the Normans also on the levels of appearance, clothing, hairstyle, manners and customs, language, governance and military organisation, preserving a sense of English identity in opposition to the Normans long after the Conquest itself.³³⁷

³³³ Battles, Dominique, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity." *Studies in Philology*, 107 (2010), p. 181.

³³⁴ Brady, Lindy, "Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship." *South Atlantic Review*, 2 (2016), p. 119.

³³⁵ Brady, "Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship", p. 119.

³³⁶ Brady, "Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship", p. 120.

³³⁷ Brady, "Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship", p. 120.

In Battles' opinion, the connection between the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* and the culture of pre-Conquest England is by no means new.³³⁸ The elaboration of the Orpheus myth in England already started with King Alfred's ninth-century translation and adaptation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which included the retelling of the Orpheus myth into Old English. While King Alfred tried to translate as faithfully as possible the Latin original, he nevertheless adapted the *Consolation* for an English audience by introducing details and interpretations not found in any of the myth's classical sources, some of which may have influenced the Middle English retelling of the Orpheus legend. However, another reason for asserting *Sir Orfeo*'s bond with the Anglo-Saxon culture may be found in its belonging to the coherent narrative collection of the Auchinleck manuscript. In fact, some of the tales of the Auchinleck manuscript share a connection with Anglo-Saxon past. However, rather than a cultural affirmation, the references to pre-Conquest England in the Auchinleck tales may just be part of the romance retelling of historical facts.

As Rouse explains, romances were also perceived as a source of historical facts, not only as a form of entertainment: in Matter of England romances, the boundary between history and fantasy is often vague, so that it is not strange to find historical matters expressed in romances.³³⁹ Romances like *Guy of Warwick*, *Beves of Hamtoun*, or *Horn Childe* are just some of the chivalric tales that can also be interpreted as historical narratives.³⁴⁰ Part of this reconstruction of the pre-Conquest past, the *Orfeo* poem can thus be read through the lenses of historical romance. In this historicizing process, the poet might have inserted elements of the Anglo-Saxon tradition to highlight the connection of the fourteenth-century poem with pre-Conquest England. However, *Sir Orfeo* shows a deeper understanding of the role of Anglo-Saxon history in romance.

³³⁸ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 181.

³³⁹ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 52.

³⁴⁰ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 60.

The *Orfeo* poet might have used the references to Anglo-Saxon culture to assert the awareness of ethnic differences between Normans and Anglo-Saxons, another frequent aspect of vernacular literary production. While the French influence on post-Conquest England's society and literature remains indisputable, the persistence of an Anglo-Saxon cultural identity also played an important role in shaping England's literary production. Land holding, castles and military strategies, among other aspects of the poem, move the attention from the conflict between Orfeo and the Fairy king to the cultural differences between Anglo-Saxons and Normans.³⁴¹

The first detail that underlines the connection between the *Orfeo* poem and the Anglo-Saxon tradition lies in Orfeo's attempt to protect Heurodis from the Fairy king's plan of abduction. After her visit in Fairyland, Heurodis returns to the orchard knowing that the next day she will be taken forever to the fairy world, with or without her consent. Orfeo reacts to Heurodis' imminent abduction by deploying his army against the Fairy king. Regardless of Orfeo's efforts, Heurodis is snatched away without engaging any battle with the fairies. This scene focuses the attention on the battle formation of Orfeo's army, which seems to reproduce a typical Anglo-Saxon battle strategy.

Amorwe the undertide is come
 And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,
 And wele ten hundred knights with him,
 Ich y-armed, stout and grim;
 And with the quen wenten he
 Right unto that ympe-tre.
 Thai made scheltrom in ich a side
 And sayd thai wold there abide
 And dye ther everichon,
 Er the quen schuld fram hem gon. (182-190)

King Orfeo employs a *scheltrom*, a close defensive formation involving shield-bearing infantry. The term *scheltrom*, from the Old English *scyld-truma*, indicates a group of soldiers in fighting formation.³⁴² Given the antiquity of this battle formation, Orfeo's strategy must have seemed outdated to the Middle English audience, accustomed to hear

³⁴¹ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 180.

³⁴² Northcote Toller, T., *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscripts Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921, p. 697.

about knights on white steeds. For this reason, the *Orfeo* poet's knowledge of pre-Conquest battle tactics in fourteenth-century England rises some questions. In all likelihood, the *scheltroum* was a frequent feature of Anglo-Saxon literature, and thus it might have been adopted in Matter of England romance. Both the earliest Middle English romance, the thirteenth-century *King Horn*, set during the period of the Viking raid in England, and *Lazamon's Brut*, composed one hundred and forty years before *Sir Orfeo*, exhibit a similar historical awareness of Anglo-Saxon battle tactics, specifically through the use of the *scheltroum*.³⁴³ On the other hand, the Fairy king's intrusion into Orfeo's realm with his cavalry evokes the military strategy that brought the Norman dominion over the Anglo-Saxons.³⁴⁴ In the poem, Orfeo's infantry contrasts with the Fairy king's cavalry. Heurodis specifies that the Fairy king and his men approached her on horseback, but none of Orfeo's men decide to meet the threat equally with cavalry. While this might suggest a mistake on Orfeo's part, it may also represent the poet's conscious choice of using a familiar, distinctively English defensive tactic often associated with the Anglo-Saxons in other post-Conquest texts. The Fairy king and his entourage are represented on horseback, evoking the image of the Norman invaders, whose military prestige was due to the mounted knightly class.³⁴⁵ In contrast to the Anglo-Saxons, who preferred infantry warfare, the Normans became famous also for breeding large warhorses and for the shining yet heavy armours that such horses were able to sustain. The *Orfeo* poet frequently associates the Fairy king and his entourage with splendid horses, as in Heurodis' first visit to Fairyland, or in the later description of the fairies hunting and playing in the woods. Thus, horses are part of those elements

³⁴³ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 184.

³⁴⁴ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 186.

³⁴⁵ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 185.

chosen to represent the parallel between the Fairy king's political image and that of the Norman aristocracy.³⁴⁶

Another important aspect of the opposition between Norman and Anglo-Saxon culture in medieval literature can be also found in the use that poets and minstrels made of landscape.³⁴⁷ As Rouse specifies, the retelling of the Anglo-Saxon past is often based on precise geographical details.³⁴⁸ The worlds constructed in these texts are grounded in known and recognizable landscapes, providing a familiar context for the representation of the pre-Conquest world.³⁴⁹ Places make the past real, and provide concrete connections between the fantasy world of romance and the audience's world by encoding the narrative into familiar landscapes. Embodying history, places occupy an important role within the creation of social identity: the land contains the past, told in terms of its relationship with the land.³⁵⁰ Orfeo and the Fairy king move often within the same natural landscape, but their experiences and use of the land differ in many ways, according to the Anglo-Saxon and Norman worldviews codified in their behaviours.³⁵¹ The setting of *Sir Orfeo* expresses this association of Anglo-Saxon and Norman symbols with landscape. The poet chooses to represent two similar yet different worlds, that of the humans and that of the fairies. In doing so, the poet imbues the world of the humans, and of the protagonist, with Anglo-Saxon elements while Fairyland clearly resembles a Norman environment. Orfeo, the poem's hero, symbolises the lost pre-Conquest past, in opposition to the Fairy king's Norman present.

The first setting opposition that it is possible to notice is that between Orfeo's palace and the Fairy king's castle.³⁵² The description of both residences highlights the cultural

³⁴⁶ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 186.

³⁴⁷ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 53.

³⁴⁸ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 53.

³⁴⁹ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 68.

³⁵⁰ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 61.

³⁵¹ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 196.

³⁵² Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 186.

distinctions between the two kings and, consequently, between Anglo-Saxons and Normans. In the broadest sense, the two royal dwellings featured in the poem conform to the building parameters of pre-Conquest and post-Conquest fortifications in England.³⁵³ Before the Norman Conquest, aristocratic residences were located within the fortified town or city, designed to protect the community at large. The type of fortification that the Normans brought with them after 1066 served a rather different function: the castle was more or less a private dwelling that was also used for public functions. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Norman are said to have “built castles widely throughout the nation, and oppressed the wretched people; and afterward it grew very much worst”.³⁵⁴ Since castles came to England with the Norman invaders, and since many of them were constructed within Anglo-Saxon fortified cities, the English people viewed them as symbols of oppression.³⁵⁵ The different use of architectural structures before and after the Conquest manifest themselves in subtle yet meaningful ways in the two royal residences depicted in *Sir Orfeo*.³⁵⁶

However, most of the description of Orfeo’s palace has to do with his location rather than with architectural structure. Curiously, the *Orfeo* poet replace the classical Thrace with the historical city of Winchester.

This king sojourned in Traciens,
That was a cité of noble defenses -
For Winchester was cleped tho
Traciens, withouten no. (47-50)

The setting of Winchester as the capital of Orfeo’s kingdom underlines the pre-Conquest dimension of the poem.³⁵⁷ The reference to Winchester is an important political and historical statement, since king Orfeo, following the custom of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs, resides in Winchester, a clear reference to Anglo-Saxon royal

³⁵³ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 187.

³⁵⁴ Brady, “Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship”, p. 120.

³⁵⁵ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 188.

³⁵⁶ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 189.

³⁵⁷ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 190.

authority.³⁵⁸ Winchester was the royal residence of the West Saxon kings, the city where they lived, were crowned and were buried, including King Alfred the Great. The city of Winchester preserved its political importance even during Cnut the Great's reign and in post-Conquest England, where it maintained its cultural importance through its historical position as the chief city of Wessex.³⁵⁹ During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with the Anglo-Norman aristocracy's recovery of the Anglo-Saxon culture, Winchester came to represent a direct link with the pre-Conquest tradition, and its function in romance tales reflects the importance that the city had in the past.³⁶⁰ Just like *Guy of Warwick* and *Havelock the Dane*, many Middle English romances refer to the city of Winchester, probably a way to highlight the relation to the Anglo-Saxon past and English identity.³⁶¹ If truth be told, Winchester continued to be the seat of royal power even after the Normans' settlement in 1066. Only by the twelfth century, the centre of royal power began to shift towards London, a process that began with the destruction of the royal palace at Winchester. In setting *Sir Orfeo* in the city of Winchester rather than London, therefore, the poet ties Orfeo's English identity to the Anglo-Saxon kings and to pre-Conquest royal power. By making Orfeo king of England, with his throne in the ancient city of the Anglo-Saxon kings, the poet consciously connected the tale to one of the main symbols of pre-Conquest England.

The opposition between Anglo-Saxon and Norman identity continues with the description of Orfeo's actual palace. The poet describes Winchester as "a cite of noble defens", suggesting Orfeo's palace position within a fortified city. Again, when Orfeo goes into exile after the loss of his queen, he goes out of "toun", and he returns at the end of the poem to "his owen cite".³⁶² Thus, the *Orfeo* poet depicts the location of

³⁵⁸ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 154.

³⁵⁹ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 62.

³⁶⁰ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 62.

³⁶¹ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 191.

³⁶² Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 189.

Orfeo's palace as an urban residence, which would conform to a pre-Conquest lordly dwelling.³⁶³ On the contrary, the Fairy king occupies a castle in the sense of a private fortified residence, a structure usually preferred by the Norman aristocracy.

Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,
Riche and real and wonder heighe.
Al the utmast wal
(...)
An hundred tours ther were about,
Degiselich and bataild stout.
The butras com out of the diche
Of rede gold y-arched riche. (355-362)

When Orfeo enters the Fairy kingdom, what he sees is a clear reference to the typical structure of Norman castles: in addition to being “riche and real”, the castle is “wonder heize”, with a “diche”, a ditch, surrounding it. Analysing this description, the castle of the Fairy king conforms to the parameters of the Norman bailey castle, with a tower resting on top of an artificial hill surrounded by a ditch.³⁶⁴ The list of architectural details used to describe the Fairy king's castle depicts it as a private residence also used for military purposes, the kind of architecture that guaranteed the success of Normans' rule over England, and that was consequently associated to Norman political and social authority.³⁶⁵ Unlike Orfeo's palace, the Fairy king's castle does not lie within a town, but instead it is located in a rural area.³⁶⁶ This detail clearly refers to the Normans' practice to build castles usually in peripheral areas, distancing themselves from the civilian population for military advantage.³⁶⁷ The Fairy king's castle has often been interpreted also as a Celtic representation of Hades, but the gruesome vision that awaits Orfeo in the castle's courtyard may represent a more concrete prison rather than a celticized underworld. Taken away from the human world, the figures assembled in the Fairy king's castle resemble victims of torture and war, reminding the audience more of war prisoners rather than of dead souls. Those who disobey the Fairy king are punished

³⁶³ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 190.

³⁶⁴ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 193.

³⁶⁵ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 194.

³⁶⁶ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 192.

³⁶⁷ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 189.

with physical violence, with dismemberment and other dreadful tortures. This threat is also extended to Heurodis, should she refuse to follow the Fairy king's orders. Although such gory images of suffering are quite rare in chivalric romance, the context of racial conflict may help to explain their introduction in a Middle English lay.³⁶⁸

On the other hand, the few details about Orfeo's palace express a completely different mood from the cold, far and dangerous fairy castle. Orfeo's residence is characterized by a clear Anglo-Saxon structure: the *Orfeo* poet mentions two architectural spaces, a "halle" and a "chamber" with a stone floor. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the *halle* formed the heart of the Germanic society, a communal space reflecting the nature of Germanic societies.³⁶⁹ As Kathryn Hume affirms, in popular literary tradition the hall had a positive value, based on its role as a protecting space and as a centre for early Anglo-Saxon civilisation.³⁷⁰ Hume further explains that:

"The glorification which the building itself and the primitive form of society it embraced underwent in later centuries is not difficult to understand. The close fellowship among men devoted to the same kind of life, the personal friendship with a lavishly generous lord, the harping and feasts, were doubtless never as glorious in truth as in song, but, once so described, they would be attractive to men of later generation whose own times left much to be desired."³⁷¹

In a world picture where the hall represents order, social pleasure and security, the outside world will naturally be the opposite. Moreover, if the order of the hall is destroyed, the survivors can expect only loneliness or the extreme paths of exile.³⁷²

The exile is another frequent feature of Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. Its connection with the hall as a symbol of the whole community, whose equilibrium should not be disturbed, is a recurring theme of pre-Conquest popular tradition, and often can be found in romances as well. However, in *Sir Orfeo* the Fairy king does not target an entire community gathered in a hall, like *Beowulf's* Grendel, but only the king's wife. The hall, symbol of community life, is not destroyed and Orfeo does not need to be

³⁶⁸ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 194.

³⁶⁹ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 190.

³⁷⁰ Hume, Kathryn, "The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), p. 68.

³⁷¹ Hume, "The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry", p. 69.

³⁷² Hume, "The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry", p. 67.

exiled, as the Anglo-Saxon literary conventions impose. Yet, Orfeo chooses to leave the city voluntarily and spend the rest of his life in self-exile. If truth be told, in Anglo-Saxon tradition the exile represents also a standard response to the loss of an important relationship, like that of husband and wife.³⁷³ Moreover, Orfeo's self-isolation resembles the circumstances typical of the exile that can be found in Old English elegies. Several famous examples of this feature survive in Old English poems, as in *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and the Last Survivor's episode in *Beowulf*. In each case, the protagonist finds himself alone in a wild, hostile landscape, cut off from civilisation as a result of either natural or political factors.³⁷⁴

In somer he liveth bi wild frut,
 And berien bot gode lite;
 In winter may he nothing finde
 Bot rote, grases, and the rinde.
 Al his bodi was oway dwine
 For missays, and al to-chine. (257-262)

Far from community life, the exiled Orfeo wanders in the wilderness grieving for the loss of Heurodis. However, his lament intertwines with the poet's description of Orfeo's aspect pre- and post-exile, resembling another typical feature of Old English elegy, namely the *ubi sunt* motif.³⁷⁵ The description of lost pleasures characterizing the *ubi sunt* motif is expressed through concrete images of property, such as an empty hall or lost weapons. Displayed as an *ubi sunt* lament, these images become the symbol of a lost civilization.³⁷⁶ It is possible to find the same listing of lost pleasure in *Sir Orfeo*, a list that includes the loss of clothing, dwellings, knights and companions, ladies, and food and drink, and all the things that constitute every form of civilization.³⁷⁷ The very presence of a catalog of lost community of this sort links *Sir Orfeo* with the pre-Conquest literary tradition more than it is usually affirmed.³⁷⁸

³⁷³ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 196.

³⁷⁴ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 196.

³⁷⁵ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 199.

³⁷⁶ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 200.

³⁷⁷ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 201.

³⁷⁸ Battles, "Sir Orfeo and English Identity", p. 202.

The exile episode in *Sir Orfeo* reveals two rather different perspectives of the forest that correspond to a pre- and post-Conquest point of view in English literature.³⁷⁹ As already mentioned before, Orfeo and the Fairy king move within the same landscape in the poem, but they experience it in very different ways. The forest represent another important place where the opposition between Anglo-Saxon and Norman culture expresses itself. The forest where Orfeo decides to spend his life in exile is the same landscape where the Fairy king and his entourage frequently appear. Yet their attitude towards the forest, and the effect that the forest has upon them, is completely different.³⁸⁰ The way Orfeo and the Fairy king move in the forest corresponds to the historical use of the land in the post-Conquest period.³⁸¹ In Battles opinion, the kind of forest experience that the Fairy king enjoys, full of courtly activities, refers clearly to “the Norman transformation of the English landscape as an enjoyable ground, where the arena of court civilisation is extended to the wilderness”.³⁸² The idea of the forest as an enjoyable and privileged dimension, an extension of the court and its leisure activities, derives directly from the French aristocratic culture.³⁸³ The fairy company that Orfeo spies in the forest represents a fine example of this new use of the forest:

Oft in hot undertides,
 The king o fairy with his rout
 Com to hunt him al about
 With dim cri and bloweing,
 And houndes also with him berking; (282-286)
 (...)
 And otherwile he seighe other thing:
 Knightes and levedis com daunceing
 In queynt atire, gisely,
 Queynt pas and softly;
 Tabours and trunpes yede hem bi,
 And al maner menstraci.
 And on a day he seighe him biside
 Sexti levedis on hors rid; (297-304)

³⁷⁹ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p. 91.

³⁸⁰ Battles, Dominique, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 202.

³⁸¹ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p. 92.

³⁸² Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 202.

³⁸³ Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity”, p. 202.

(...)
And ich a faucoun on hond bere,
And riden on haukin bi o rivere.
Of game thai founde wel gode haunt -
Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt. (307-310)

The *Orfeo* poet lists a number of courtly activities typical of medieval romance, like hunting with hounds, hawking, courtly processions of armed knights, and ladies dancing elegantly.³⁸⁴ On the other hand, Orfeo experiences the forest in the Anglo-Saxon mode, as a place of wilderness and exile that separates humankind from civilisation.³⁸⁵

As Battles specifies, the idealisation of the wilderness as an extension of the court derives largely from the importance of hunting as a social practice, a fundamental feature of Norman cultural identity.³⁸⁶ While it was certainly a common practice in Anglo-Saxon society, the concept of hunting introduced by the Normans corresponded more to a social ritual than to a practical need, and new types of landscape were exclusively created to enjoy hunting, such as the “forest” and the “park”.³⁸⁷ On the other hand, Anglo-Saxon narratives such as *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer* focus on lone individuals, usually forced into exile in a wild and hostile landscape, often beyond any form of civilisation instead that the fashionable hunting parties featuring in courtly romance. Rather than the summer forest of French chivalric literature, these poems feature a harsh winter landscapes.³⁸⁸ In this respect, the forest in the poem reflects the conventional portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Norman identity in the literary production, and another feature that explores their cultural differences.³⁸⁹ The post-Conquest idea of a pleasing forest, both real and fictional, contrast with the Anglo-Saxon view of a

³⁸⁴ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p. 92.

³⁸⁵ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p. 92.

³⁸⁶ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p.84.

³⁸⁷ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p.84.

³⁸⁸ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p.86.

³⁸⁹ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p.84.

dangerous nature, a nature in which the individual perceives himself as the hunted, and not the hunter.³⁹⁰

Far from being just a pleasant fairy tale, *Sir Orfeo* can be considered a literary manifesto of Anglo-Saxon culture after the Norman Conquest. Throughout the poem, the opposition between Orfeo and the Fairy king reflects the contrast between Anglo-Saxon and Norman culture: the protagonist represents values and expectations of pre-Conquest England, while his antagonist follows the typical behaviour of the Norman ruling class. This is just one of the many interpretations that the *Orfeo* poem offers to its audience, so it is difficult to assert whether the Anglo-Saxon elements in the poem were actually used to consciously affirm English identity after the Conquest or were simply part of a literary heritage received in the romance genre. In Matter of England romances, there are frequent references to Anglo-Saxon culture that, in all likelihood, had more of an evocative than a political function. However, in these romances, the use of the Anglo-Saxon past can be interpreted as a recovery of English history and values, which contribute to the developing of a sense of Englishness that find expression in thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries literary production.³⁹¹

As a Middle English lay, *Sir Orfeo* surely reflects themes and expectations of the romance fantasy world, but the connection with the Anglo-Saxon tradition draws the poem also closer to Matter of England's tales. Was the poet just influenced by another similar romance subgenre in *Sir Orfeo*'s composition? The use of historical events in romance narratives suggests that during the Middle Ages the division between fantasy and history was not always clear. Yet, in *Sir Orfeo* the references to Anglo-Saxon culture express such a deep elaboration of the Norman Conquest and its effects that it is impossible to suggest the poet's adhesion to some literary conventions. Moreover, the

³⁹⁰ Battles, *Cultural Differences and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons*, p.85.

³⁹¹ Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 69.

concern for the development of an English identity seems to be a recurrent theme in most of the tales of the Auchinleck manuscript. The frequency with which the bond with pre-Conquest England is expressed in the tales of the Auchinleck manuscript suggests that such a feature cannot be casual. Rouse cites Thorlac Turville-Petre when describing the Auchinleck manuscript as “a handbook of the Nation, an expression of passion for England and of the pride for being English”.³⁹² The individual romances within the manuscript contribute to the construction of the manuscript’s idea of Englishness, with Anglo-Saxon dimension as an important space of development. Thus, the editing of the Auchinleck manuscript may represent a first attempt to affirm the importance of English culture and identity after the Norman Conquest. Undoubtedly, most of the features of the *Orfeo* poem derive from romance tradition, and Celtic culture obviously played a fundamental role in this Middle English elaboration of the Orpheus myth. However, the likely connection of the poem with the development of an English identity in fourteenth-century literature surely allows further considerations.

Was *Sir Orfeo* added to the Auchinleck manuscript for its Anglo-Saxon elements or did the compiler of the collection add them? If the poem’s main source of inspiration was the French *Lai d’Orpheus*, it is possible to assert that such themes and expectations were added only later, after the transmission of the lay in medieval England. As already mentioned, the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition never disappeared after the Conquest, but the clear interest of an entire manuscript on the concept of Englishness in the fourteen century is certainly new. Was it really the Norman Conquest that reawakened the interest for English identity three centuries after 1066? The easing of the tensions between Normans and Anglo-Saxons had begun much earlier than the composition of the Auchinleck manuscript, encouraged by intermarriages and the consequent birth of new generations of Anglo-Norman individuals. The new Anglo-Norman aristocracy

³⁹² Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*, p. 74.

sought a link with Anglo-Saxon literary tradition to establish a connection with the land despite the nature of their power. Moreover, if the *Orfeo* poem's main audience was the Anglo-Norman nobles, why would the poet clearly depict their ancestors as anti-heroes? Maybe such details were not outstanding for a medieval audience, but the opposition of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman tradition still raises questions.

In my opinion, a possible reason for *Sir Orfeo*'s and the Auchinleck manuscript's concern with English identity may be found in one of the most important conflicts of medieval England after the Norman Conquest, namely the Hundred Years' War. The fight over the right to rule the kingdom of France brought in England new awareness, both in the social and literary context. France was considered the enemy, not a country to admire anymore. This was especially valid for the Anglo-Norman nobles, whose land possession in France made them primary figures in the dispute over the French throne. In this political climate of high tension, a sense of unity against a common enemy began to develop in England, and thus a consequent awareness of English identity. The need to express this new cultural awareness must have found its way in literature, and since the Auchinleck manuscript was composed around 1340, three years after the outburst of the conflict, the possibility of a connection between the manuscript's romances and England's claims over France cannot be excluded. Therefore, *Sir Orfeo*'s opposition between Anglo-Saxon and Norman culture may assume a more general meaning, since the Norman features in the poem are the symbol of an enemy French tradition. The addition of this further hypothesis shows how *Sir Orfeo* is actually open to more interpretations, making the poem one of the most interesting narratives of the Middle English literary production.

Conclusions

As one of the most interesting poems of the Middle Ages, *Sir Orfeo* surpasses every other medieval retelling of the Orfeo myth. The poem's peculiarity lies in the multiple aspects that its elements represent. No narrative explores such a great number of different matters in the same ways as *Sir Orfeo* does in England's medieval literary production. Therefore, to analyse the story of *Sir Orfeo*'s composition means to analyse all the facets that the poem may hide. This operation brings whoever approaches the poem into a journey through history itself, from the classical time to the High Middle Ages. *Sir Orfeo* contains the developments of ten centuries of culture, from the classical to the medieval tradition. The story of the reception, transmission and elaboration of the Orpheus myth, and its consequent transposition in *Sir Orfeo*, starts from the classical period with Virgil, Ovid and Boethius, and then develops in the Middle Ages in a number of various interpretations that are still visible in the composition of the *Orfeo* poem. But how much weight does each tradition and interpretation have on *Sir Orfeo*? There is no answer to this question. Every tradition involved in the composition of the *Orfeo* poem left a mark in the development of its innovative features. Therefore, it is impossible to establish which was the most important tradition for the poem's development. Classical, romance, Celtic, Christian and Anglo-Saxon traditions were all equally essential to the narrative, since every element of the poem assumes different connotations according to the cultural lenses with which the text is analysed.

The classical tradition provides its audience with written sources of the Orpheus myth, sources that allowed the myth not to be lost over time. On the other hand, Christian culture started the process that led to many moral interpretations of the Orpheus myth. The freedom with which Christian commentators on Latin texts read the Orpheus myth paved the way for a series of interpretations that clearly changed the meaning of the tale

throughout the Middle Ages. If the Orpheus myth could be the subject of multiple interpretations, it is not strange to find the tale as a romance elaboration in medieval England. Together with the Celtic popular tradition, the romance genre, with its chivalric adventures and imaginary dimension, gives the Orpheus myth that fantasy and courteous taste that characterises the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*. In this mixture of cultural influences, the Anglo-Saxon culture seems to have a secondary role compared to all the previously mentioned tradition. Although it is expressed in a less visible way, the Anglo-Saxon tradition lives in the *Orfeo* poem and shows its influence in a series of details that add a further interpretation to the narrative. The references to the Anglo-Saxon tradition as a way to affirm English identity in the fourteenth century introduce another important aspect in *Sir Orfeo*'s composition. Classical myth, moral teaching, fairy tale or political manifesto, the *Orfeo* poem represents different aspects of the European literary tradition, and each definition the reader chooses to describe the text would seem in any case correct.

However, among these different interpretations, it seems reasonable to wonder which is the true meaning of *Sir Orfeo*. Obviously, the meaning of the poem differs accordingly to the reading that one chooses to give to the text. Sadly, there are no copies nor written references to any similar narratives about king Orfeo's story before the Auchinleck's *Sir Orfeo*, so that the investigation on the poem's actual meaning cannot be sustained by more than one source. My hypothesis and suppositions derive from what the Auchinleck's *Sir Orfeo* expresses, or it is said to express. In my opinion, there are two possible meanings to the *Orfeo* poem, and both of them are related to the role that such an elaboration of the Orpheus myth may have had in medieval England. The first aspect that I would like to take into consideration is the relation between *Sir Orfeo* and romance. In fact, the poem can be considered an English development of the Breton lay genre, and this detail might suggest a possible meaning for *Sir Orfeo*. As a lay, the

poem is also connected to romance, the genre to which most of the elements belong. Moreover, the *Orfeo* poem might have been part of a literary repertoire belonging to the oral tradition and performed in England's courts throughout the High Middle Ages. In this case, whether the first author of the poem was a travelling minstrel or a court poet, *Sir Orfeo's* main goal might have been that of entertaining its courtly audience, since the features of the poem express themes, values and expectations of a medieval aristocracy and its enthusiasm for romance. For this reason, if the poem's purpose was to thrill, the meaning of *Sir Orfeo* might be found in the audience's desire for amazement. In this way, romance elements replace both the classical and moral interpretations of the Orpheus myth. The *Orfeo* poet creates a world where his courtly audience could project and identify itself. From this point of view, *Sir Orfeo's* fantasy world, with its supernatural encounters and chivalric environment, may be considered as part of a series of tales oriented more to the audience's favourable response than to the poet's actual desire to express his view on society through the text. However, this aspect differs completely from the vision of the compiler of the Auchinleck manuscript, whose intention was that to cause more than an astonished reaction in the manuscript's readers. Throughout the Auchinleck manuscript, the repetition in more than one poem of references to the Anglo-Saxon past may suggest the author's conscious collection of tales expressing England's popular tradition. This choice has often been considered an attempt to affirm the existence of an English identity, free from any other cultural influence. As part of the Auchinleck anthology, *Sir Orfeo* becomes part of the manuscript's cultural ambitions. Therefore, the *Orfeo* poem assumes a different meaning as one of the symbolic tales representing English identity.

Going back to the meaning *Sir Orfeo* may convey, this analysis is proof that an exact meaning to the poem cannot be found. There exist different meanings, and each of them depends on the context chosen by the reader to analyse the poem. Ultimately, *Sir Orfeo*

is a product of the Middle Ages, and should be read as one. No matter what its sources are, the creative mixture of different traditions from which *Sir Orfeo* originates makes the poem no less of an authentic narrative than the Orpheus myth is. Without forgetting its ties with the past, *Sir Orfeo* prevails on any retelling of the Orpheus myth, showing that a story may assume as many facets as the people who decide to interact with it. In this case, the *Orfeo* poem reflects every steps that led to its composition, a composition that went throughout ten centuries of history.

RIASSUNTO

Quello di Orfeo ed Euridice è uno dei più belli e toccanti miti di tutta la cultura classica. La storia di Orfeo, di come abbia perso la sua amata e del viaggio nell'oltretomba per poterla riportare alla vita rimangono impressi nell'animo di chi vi entra a contatto, e la sua tragica conclusione non fa che aumentare le intense emozioni che essa regala. Il pathos che caratterizza il mito di Orfeo è sicuramente alla base del successo che esso ha ottenuto nei secoli successivi al periodo classico. La profondità delle molteplici valenze culturali ha reso il mito di Orfeo il soggetto di varie interpretazioni nel corso della storia, passando per le note interpretazioni allegoriche cristiane fino ad arrivare al particolare caso preso in analisi in questa tesi, quello del *Sir Orfeo*, poema anonimo in medio inglese risalente alla prima metà del XIV secolo. Il poema si distingue da tutte le precedenti versioni del mito di Orfeo, soprattutto da quelle raccontate nelle fonti classiche: *Sir Orfeo* si presenta come una peculiare rielaborazione medievale del mito, le cui caratteristiche sembrano legate agli sviluppi socio-politici dell'Inghilterra alto-medievale. Spesso *Sir Orfeo* viene definito come una rivisitazione in chiave celtica del mito classico: Sir Orfeo, antico re d'Inghilterra e abile suonatore di lira, vede scomparire la sua amata Heurodis a causa dell'oscuro volere del re degli elfi, il quale decide di rapire la regina affinché si unisca al popolo fatato. Questa versione della storia prende chiaramente le distanze dalla tradizione classica ed è prova di una originale elaborazione del mito in chiave medievale. Non è possibile stabilire con certezza quale sia la causa di questa innovativa interpretazione. Con ogni probabilità, sono stati molti i fattori ad aver giocato un ruolo fondamentale nell'elaborazione del *Sir Orfeo*, essendo ogni elemento del poema analizzabile da più punti di vista.

Sicuramente alla base dell'evoluzione del *Sir Orfeo* si trovano le fonti latine del mito di Orfeo ed Euridice, le cui principali versioni note al pubblico medievale sono comprese

nel libro quarto delle *Georgiche* di Virgilio, nel libro decimo ed undicesimo delle *Metamorfosi* ovidiane, e nel libro terzo de *La Consolazione della Filosofia* dell'autore tardo-antico Boezio. Queste opere hanno giocato un ruolo fondamentale in tutto il medioevo, rappresentando un punto di riferimento nell'evoluzione della cultura e della letteratura europea. Godendo di perenne popolarità per tutto il medioevo, le opere di Virgilio, Ovidio e Boezio hanno certamente garantito la trasmissione del mito di Orfeo ed Euridice nella tradizione medievale. Le tre versioni latine presentano una trama simile, ma i temi che esse affrontano sono molto distanti tra loro. Il mito di Orfeo raccontato da Virgilio fa parte della più ampia missione di propaganda politica a favore dell'imperatore Augusto espressa nelle *Georgiche*: l'episodio di Orfeo ed Euridice è parte di una narrazione incentrata non tanto sul musicista e l'impresa di salvare la sua amata dalla morte, ma su un ideale di società e buon governo incarnato dalle api, vere protagoniste del libro quarto delle *Georgiche*. Totalmente diverse le intenzioni di Ovidio nelle sue *Metamorfosi*, il cui scopo è di raccontare una storia universale dell'umanità attraverso il tema portante delle metamorfosi. Stranamente, nonostante non ci sia nessuna metamorfosi, la storia di Orfeo viene compresa in questa grande raccolta di miti, e il fine epico-educativo di Virgilio viene sostituito da una percezione fantastica e passionale del mito orfico. Una decisiva svolta per la percezione del mito di Orfeo è la lettura che Boezio propone ne *La Consolazione della Filosofia*. Nel trattato tardo-antico, il mito di Orfeo assume i tratti di un racconto moralizzante, diventando metafora dello sconforto morale dell'autore ingiustamente condannato per tradimento da re Teodorico. Come Orfeo, soffrendo per la morte della sua Euridice, discende negli inferi per poterla riportare in vita, anche Boezio si sente nel punto più buio della sua vita, in un suo personale inferno. Da questo inferno, allo stesso modo di Orfeo, Boezio riesce ad emergere grazie soprattutto all'intervento della Filosofia, figura che lo guiderà in tutta

l'opera. Per l'autore, quello di Orfeo ed Euridice non è solamente un mito ma una metafora che esprime le sue più profonde considerazioni sull'esistenza umana.

Virgilio, Ovidio e Boezio rappresentano tre punti cardine della tradizione letteraria classica, e la loro importanza nel medioevo ha dettato certamente la maniera in cui il mito di Orfeo ed Euridice è stato recepito dalle generazioni di studiosi ed intellettuali successivi. Ciò è particolarmente vero per quanto riguarda l'interpretazione cristiana sviluppata dall'analisi dei Padri della Chiesa sia delle opere di Virgilio che di quelle di Boezio. Nel tentativo di creare un legame con l'antica tradizione latina, intellettuali come Clemente d'Alessandria e Sant'Agostino tentarono di dare un'interpretazione prettamente cristiana alle opere classiche degli autori latini più importanti, che non potevano essere semplicemente etichettati come pagani. Nel caso di Virgilio, l'introduzione ne *Le Bucoliche* della figura di un fanciullo, l'arrivo del quale avrebbe risollevato le sorti del mondo, venne interpretata come una profezia cristiana e un chiaro riferimento alla venuta di Cristo, non tenendo in considerazione la più probabile allusione ad Ottaviano Augusto. La revisione cristiana di Virgilio da parte dei Padri della Chiesa ha permesso a molte sue opere di essere trasmesse nel medioevo, e con loro il mito di Orfeo ed Euridice. Similmente, la versione narrata da Boezio ebbe grande successo nel medioevo grazie ai commenti in chiave cristiana aggiunti all'analisi de *La Consolazione della Filosofia*. Orfeo diviene il simbolo dell'animo umano, incapace di distaccarsi dai piaceri della carne rappresentati da Euridice. In questo senso, il voltarsi di Orfeo verso Euridice, infrangendo il voto fatto al signore degli inferi, rappresenta l'attaccamento dell'uomo a un mondo sensuale che impedisce l'elevarsi ad una dimensione spirituale. Nonostante *Le Georgiche* di Virgilio e *Le Metamorfosi* di Ovidio siano considerate le maggiori fonti per la trasmissione del mito di Orfeo nel medioevo, l'adattamento che Boezio ne fa ne *La consolazione della Filosofia* rappresenta una delle versioni più popolari del mito al di fuori della tradizione classica. L'originale uso del

mito di Orfeo da parte di Boezio può aver inaugurato l'inizio della rielaborazione del mito classico nel medioevo. Infatti, divenuto parte di un ampio e prestigioso patrimonio culturale, il mito di Orfeo ed Euridice non ha mai smesso di circolare in Europa, nonostante il crollo dell'impero romano d'Occidente abbia rappresentato un punto di svolta per la cultura medievale.

La circolazione del mito di Orfeo fuori dai confini greco-romani è però caratterizzata da una vivace sperimentazione che trova il suo apice proprio in *Sir Orfeo*. Esempio lampante di questa teoria sono i numerosi elementi estranei alla tradizione classica che si possono trovare nel poema, come l'introduzione di un chiaro contesto cavalleresco, tipico più del genere romanzo che della mitologia classica, dove però eventi sovranaturali continuano a susseguirsi: Heurodis non viene morsa dal classico serpente, che ne segna il triste destino, ma viene invece rapita nientemeno che dal re degli elfi e costretta a vivere per sempre nel suo regno, parallelo ma distante da quello degli umani. Sebbene cambino le dinamiche, Orfeo perde comunque la sua amata Heurodis. Ma questa versione medio-inglese si distacca ancora di più dalla tradizione classica, concedendo un lieto fine alla coppia: *Sir Orfeo* non termina né con il ritorno di Heurodis nell'oltretomba, né con la morte di Orfeo, bensì con il ricongiungimento dei due personaggi, riusciti ad emergere dal regno delle fate grazie alle doti musicali di Orfeo. Questo originale sviluppo del mito antico rappresenta una delle maggiori peculiarità del *Sir Orfeo*, che ad una più attenta analisi risulta profondamente intriso di diversi elementi della cultura medievale piuttosto che di quelli classici.

Ad oggi è difficile affermare con sicurezza quali siano stati i processi alla base di una tale rielaborazione del mito d'Orfeo nell'Inghilterra medievale. La mancanza di fonti scritte, necessarie per tracciare un percorso preciso dello sviluppo del *Sir Orfeo*, lascia spazio solo a ipotesi e teorie sulla composizione del poema, a volte anche contrastanti tra loro. Sicuramente, la continuità con cui autori classici come Virgilio vennero

trasmessi nell'ambiente scolastico e accademico ha contribuito alla diffusione del mito d'Orfeo in Inghilterra, ma anche la trasmissione in ambito monastico di copie sia de *Le Georgiche*, che de *Le Metamorfosi* e de *La Consolazione della Filosofia* può aver giocato un ruolo importante nella sua elaborazione medievale. In entrambi i casi, però, la circolazione del mito classico è relegata all'interno di un circolo ristretto di individui capaci di comprendere il latino, mentre *Sir Orfeo* mostra caratteristiche decisamente popolari. Questo fa intendere che alla base dell'innovativo sviluppo del mito d'Orfeo nell'Inghilterra medievale deve esserci stata una fruizione della storia in ambito popolare, da parte di individui in contatto con il lato più folkloristico della loro cultura ma allo stesso tempo abbastanza colti da rielaborare i concetti classici attraverso il filtro della tradizione popolare. In questo senso, la traduzione in inglese-antico da parte di Re Alfred del Wessex de *La Consolazione della Filosofia*, contenente una delle versioni più di successo del mito d'Orfeo in epoca medievale, ha tutti i requisiti per essere la fonte di trasmissione principale del mito classico nell'Inghilterra alto-medievale. In quanto parte di un più ampio programma di recupero culturale, la traduzione in inglese-antico de *La Consolazione* ha certamente ampliato il raggio di ricezione del mito d'Orfeo, fruibile così anche da un pubblico che non conosceva il latino, ma capace di approcciarsi a una letteratura vernacolare. È interessante notare come Re Alfred nel tradurre Boezio non abbia sempre scelto di rimanere fedele all'originale: a seconda della situazione, infatti, egli sceglie di tradurre in maniera più o meno aderente il testo di Boezio. Alla base di questa scelta c'è la necessità di adattare il testo per un pubblico diverso da quello latino, rendendo comprensibili temi e concetti estranei alla tradizione anglosassone. La scelta di Re Alfred di adeguare la *Consolazione della Filosofia* alle aspettative della cultura d'arrivo, può aver giocato un ruolo importante non solo nella trasmissione del mito d'Orfeo nell' Inghilterra medievale, ma anche nella ricezione di

una storia in parte già rielaborata rispetto all'originale classico, facilitando i successivi sviluppi che possono aver condotto alla composizione del *Sir Orfeo*.

Nonostante la traduzione de *La Consolazione della Filosofia* in antico-inglese possa aver ampliato la ricezione del mito di Orfeo, alcuni elementi del *Sir Orfeo* suggeriscono un'altra via attraverso la quale il mito può essere stato recepito e modificato. Infatti, *Sir Orfeo* mostra chiaramente di appartenere alla tradizione romanza, e più precisamente al genere del *Breton lay*, poema eseguito con accompagnamento musicale tipicamente collegato alla tradizione orale popolare. La dimensione cavalleresca, l'intromissione del fantastico nel quotidiano, la perdita e la riconquista dell'amore sono temi che appartengono chiaramente alla tradizione romanza, e la loro presenza nel *Sir Orfeo* lascia intendere che, con tutta probabilità, l'origine della rielaborazione del mito d'Orfeo in chiave medievale deve trovarsi nel centro di sviluppo del genere romanzo, ossia in Francia. In Inghilterra, lo sviluppo del genere romanzo non è stato semplicemente dettato dall'influenza che tale tradizione letteraria può aver recepito dall'Europa continentale, ma si è imposto pesantemente come conseguenza culturale di uno dei cambiamenti socio-politici più importanti dell'Inghilterra alto-medievale, ossia la Conquista Normanna del 1066. I normanni, nuova classe dominante dopo la vittoria nella battaglia di Hastings, non solo sostituirono le strutture socio-politiche della tradizione anglosassone con quelle tipicamente francesi, ma introdussero in Inghilterra anche generi letterari che rispecchiassero i loro gusti e costumi. In questo processo di sostituzione culturale, oltre al genere romanzo approdò in Inghilterra anche quello del *Breton lay*, di matrice fondamentale celtica. La matrice celtica del genere romanzo è riconducibile alla presenza nel nord della Francia medievale, nella zona d'influenza normanna, di una comunità celtica emigrata dalla Britannia durante le invasioni di Angli e Sassoni. In stretto contatto con la cultura romanza, il mondo fantastico e fatato del folklore celtico deve essere sembrato talmente affascinante da diventare uno degli

elementi principali del genere romanzo. L'introduzione nel mito d'Orfeo di re e cavalieri fatati, e il loro rapimento di Heurodis, è un chiaro rimando al folklore celtico, mentre la presenza di tale tradizione all'interno del *Sir Orfeo* avvalorata l'ipotesi che, più di quella cristiana e anglosassone, alla base della rielaborazione del poema ci sia stata la tradizione romanza franco-celtica. La possibile ricezione in ambito romanzo del mito di Orfeo è sostenuta dalla presenza nel repertorio letterario del tempo di un testo in particolare, l'ormai perduto *Lai d'Orpheu*, conosciuto oggi solo attraverso la sua menzione in altri cantari romanzi. L'esistenza di un testo romanzo anteriore al componimento in forma scritta del *Sir Orfeo*, suggerisce l'esistenza con ogni probabilità di una precedente rielaborazione romanza del mito di Orfeo. Quella della matrice romanzo-celtica è una delle ipotesi più avvalorate come causa dell'innovativa elaborazione medievale della struttura classica del mito orfico. Ad oggi, non esiste un'analisi della trasmissione, ricezione ed elaborazione del *Sir Orfeo* capace di mettere d'accordo tutti gli studiosi di letteratura medievale. La mancanza di materiale scritto sulla trasmissione del mito d'Orfeo, all'infuori dell'ambito accademico ed ecclesiastico, lascia presagire che tale trasmissione doveva avvenire in forma orale. Essendo priva di strutture rigide e di regole, anche la tradizione orale può aver influito nella composizione del *Sir Orfeo*. Sicuramente, a partire da una probabile fonte latina scritta il mito di Orfeo deve aver vagato in forma orale fino alla Francia medievale, dove ha assunto toni e colori del genere romanzo.

La coesistenza all'interno del *Sir Orfeo* di elementi appartenenti a più di una tradizione influisce anche sulle varie interpretazioni che possono essere date al poema. Difatti *Sir Orfeo* può essere analizzato sotto diversi punti di vista: la dimensione cavalleresca, l'innovativo lieto fine, nonché il conformarsi dei personaggi al codice cavalleresco, inseriscono il poema all'interno della tradizione romanza. L'allontanamento dalla classica perdita finale di Euridice è riconducibile all'adesione del poeta a convenzioni

tipiche del genere romanzo, dove gli amanti separati dal destino tendono sempre a ricongiungersi, se non in vita almeno nella morte. Molto evidenti anche gli elementi della tradizione celtica, come il rapimento di Heurodis da parte del re degli elfi. In effetti, il rapimento di essere umani è un tema ricorrente del folklore celtico, così come le spiccate qualità musicali di re ed eroi. In questo caso, già nella sua versione classica, Orfeo rappresenta un punto d'incontro tra la tradizione latina e quella celtica. L'arpa, simbolo di armonia e giustizia, è lo strumento principale con cui Orfeo esprime la sua validità come uomo e come re. Quello del buon governo è uno dei temi principali del poema. Difatti, gli avvenimenti a cui viene sottoposto Orfeo sembrano voler provare la sua autorità come re. L'impossibilità di fermare fisicamente il re degli elfi rappresenta una sconfitta morale che risulta nella scelta dell'esilio. Solo attraverso il sapiente suono della sua arpa Orfeo può superare gli ostacoli che il destino gli pone davanti, recuperando così Heurodis e il diritto ad essere re. Oltre all'innovativa conclusione del viaggio di Orfeo nel regno delle fate, nel poema spicca un'altra alterazione del mito originale, ovvero la maggiore attenzione concessa al personaggio di Heurodis. Elaborazione medievale del personaggio di Euridice, Heurodis sviluppa nel poema una profondità emotiva nuova rispetto al mito classico, dove spesso è più una figura nascosta nell'ombra di Orfeo. Contrariamente alle versioni latine del mito, Heurodis viene raffigurata come una vera e propria eroina del genere romanzo. Questa descrizione si distacca anche dalla diffusa interpretazione cristiana, che vedeva nel mito di Orfeo ed Euridice una metafora dell'influenza che il mondo sensoriale può avere sull'animo umano. Percepita come una figura prettamente negativa, Euridice rappresenta il piacere della carne, la tentazione che lega l'uomo alla vita terrena. In *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis riceve non solo una voce per esprimersi, ma recupera una dimensione positiva in cui essere iscritta, dimostrandosi leale e coraggiosa come mai era accaduto nelle precedenti rielaborazioni del mito classico.

Di tutte le varie interpretazioni possibili del *Sir Orfeo*, è impossibile stabilire quale sia quella più decisiva per lo sviluppo del poema. Sia la cultura romanza che quella celtica hanno contribuito in egual misura alla composizione del poema, unico nel suo genere e spesso preso come modello di “Middle English lay”. Più che ad un solo filone narrativo, il poema può essere ricondotto a più tendenze provenienti dai processi culturali medievali. Per questo motivo non stupisce in un poema il cui scopo principale è quello di intrattenere la presenza di un motivo particolarmente legato alla storia inglese, come l’affermazione dell’identità anglosassone dopo la conquista normanna. Diversi studiosi hanno individuato in *Sir Orfeo* alcuni dettagli che sembrano chiaramente rimandare alla tradizione anglosassone, poi soppiantata da quella normanna nei secoli successivi l’insediamento della nuova classe dirigente. In realtà, la tradizione anglosassone non scomparì mai del tutto durante il dominio normanno in Inghilterra. I testi della tradizione popolare continuarono ad essere scritti e trasmessi, nonostante avessero certamente perso parte del loro prestigio. La presenza di elementi appartenenti alla tradizione anglosassone in un poema dal chiaro stampo romanzo come *Sir Orfeo* lascia pensare che il poeta abbia aggiunto questi aspetti consapevolmente. Una possibile ragione per la presenza di tali elementi può essere indicata nel legame che il poema dimostra avere con i cantari del ciclo bretone, in cui questi stessi elementi si susseguono frequentemente. Tuttavia, la presenza di *Sir Orfeo* nella raccolta del manoscritto Auchinleck, un insieme di poemi più o meno legati dalle stesse caratteristiche, suggerisce la probabile propensione del redattore a voler trattare tematiche legate alla definizione di una identità inglese che passa per il recupero del passato. La tradizione anglosassone, quindi, viene utilizzata per affermare un passato ormai perduto, evocato nei romanzi all’interno di un mondo dove fantasia e storia si confondono. Nello specifico, l’affermazione di una identità inglese in *Sir Orfeo* passa attraverso l’opposizione degli elementi tipici della tradizione anglosassone con quelli della

tradizione normanna. Chiaramente, Orfeo rappresenta la civiltà anglosassone e i suoi valori, mentre il suo antagonista, il re degli elfi, è portavoce di uno stile di vita prettamente normanno. La necessità di mettere in contrasto la cultura anglosassone con quella normanna tre secoli dopo la conquista (la versione più antica del *Sir Orfeo* risale al 1340) ci fa pensare all'utilità di tale sviluppo letterario nell'Inghilterra del XVI secolo. Nei secoli successivi la conquista normanna, l'iniziale diffidenza tra la popolazione anglosassone e quella normanna venne sostituita gradualmente dal mescolarsi dei due gruppi etnico-sociali, creando una generazione Anglo-Normanna certamente legata alle tradizioni francesi, ma altrettanto consapevole del proprio legame con la cultura anglosassone. Essendo la nobiltà anglo-normanna, con ogni probabilità, il pubblico a cui il poeta del *Sir Orfeo* si rivolge, sembra strana la rappresentazione negativa delle tradizioni normanne rispetto alla scelta di evidenziare il valore di quelle anglosassoni. Una probabile spiegazione all'esigenza di affermare l'identità inglese tre secoli dopo la conquista normanna, potrebbe essere l'ulteriore sviluppo di un senso di unità come nazione dopo lo scoppio della guerra dei cent'anni. In questo caso l'opposizione tra Orfeo e il re degli elfi non è da tradursi con una contrapposizione tra anglosassoni e normanni, ma più come un'invettiva rivolta al nuovo nemico: la Francia. Lontano dall'essere solo una trasposizione romanza del mito d'Orfeo ed Euridice, pertanto *Sir Orfeo* dimostra di essere uno dei testi più interessanti della produzione medievale. La molteplicità di interpretazione del poema sottolinea lo sviluppo di più filoni narrativi che, partendo dal mito classico, raggiungono forme di espressione innovative, tipiche della cultura medievale in generale. Questo rende *Sir Orfeo* non solo un esempio di rielaborazione originale del materiale classico, ma anche un manifesto cultura medievale ed un importante specchio dei processi storici che hanno coinvolto l'Inghilterra alto-medievale.

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