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## Sir Orfeo and Middle English Romance as Creative Re-Reading

### **Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh, medievalist and post-colonial novelist, in his Arthur Ravenscroft Memorial Lecture (Leeds, 1997), recounts his experience as a writer in autobiographical and literary terms. Beginning with the memory of his grandfather's bookcase and its contents, Ghosh considers the nature of the space the novel-writer occupies with respect to a form at once 'vigorously international' and locally specific (7), and concludes that a process of alienation must take place if one is to write about one's own experience: 'to locate oneself (through prose) one must begin with an act of dislocation' (13). Ghosh's reflection on 'dislocation' offers a point of contact and continuity between the postcolonial and the medieval, as literatures and as critical disciplines, for, as this paper aims to demonstrate, the author of the early fourteenth-century romance, Sir Orfeo,<sup>^</sup> also engages in disjunction, dislocating the forms of romance in order to refamiliarise the reader with the genre as literary experience, and to valorise its own poetry.

CATHERINE BATT

## *Sir Orfeo* and Middle English Romance as Creative Re-Reading

Amitav Ghosh, medievalist and post-colonial novelist, in his Arthur Ravenscroft Memorial Lecture (Leeds, 1997), recounts his experience as a writer in autobiographical and literary terms. Beginning with the memory of his grandfather's bookcase and its contents, Ghosh considers the nature of the space the novel-writer occupies with respect to a form at once 'vigorously international' and locally specific (7), and concludes that a process of alienation must take place if one is to write about one's own experience: 'to locate oneself (through prose) one must begin with an act of dislocation' (13). Ghosh's reflection on 'dislocation' offers a point of contact and continuity between the postcolonial and the medieval, as literatures and as critical disciplines, for, as this paper aims to demonstrate, the author of the early fourteenth-century romance, *Sir Orfeo*,<sup>1</sup> also engages in disjunction, dislocating the forms of romance in order to refamiliarise the reader with the genre as literary experience, and to valorise its own poetry.

Postcolonial and medieval alike pay particular attention to the nature of the reading process. In its subject matter and form, *Sir Orfeo* invites both critical interpretation, and scrutiny of that interpretation. If, as A.C. Spearing suggests, the story of Orpheus has no 'fixed' meaning, but rather, 'the power to generate meanings' (1987 78), its retelling in the Middle English version uncannily reflects on the processes of interpretation. Its author rewrites the role of art in society that other forms of the Orpheus legend implicitly envisage. In *Sir Orfeo*, the classical tale of individual poetic aspiration and (ultimately) of alienation, a narrative medieval authors eagerly glossed in moral and literary terms (Rider), becomes a tale of poetic and social integration. The author's innovative re-reading of the myth, however, involves both violence, in evidence at those very points of critical re-reading, and a 'textual violence' in the disjunctive displacement of the motifs and tropes of the courtly world. I want to consider how both violence and trope relate to the imaginative processes of literary creativity and interpretation, and to suggest that Chaucer, in his figuring of at least one damaged female figure (in *The House of Fame*), and in his own adaptation of arguably *Orfeo*-derived motifs (in *The Franklin's Tale*), acknowledges the earlier poem's structures and concerns in his own vernacular creativity. *Sir Orfeo*, with its simultaneous evocation and troubling of binaries, its consideration of the location and nature of power, and its interest in the creative potential of 'in-between'

spaces, registers a self-consciousness in the production of vernacular poetry, and employs a methodology that resounds beyond a localised medieval critical/creative poetic.

Unusually, but not alone among medieval writers (Dronke), the poet's story of Orfeo and Heurodis provides a happy ending for the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the classical version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus goes to the underworld to rescue his untimely-dead wife, and wins her back by the power of his music, only to lose her again when he breaks the injunction not to turn back to gaze upon her until they reach the upper world (64–71). Eurydice lost, Orpheus falls into a decline, and his fate is to be torn apart by Thracian women in a Bacchanalian frenzy (120–27). In the Middle English poem, Orfeo is a king who relinquishes his regal authority at the loss of his queen, but eventually regains both wife and kingdom in a celebration of the redemptive power of music and of love, that also marks the 'joy of recovery' (Riddy 15). However, this optimistic retelling features violent episodes; the classical Eurydice's death from a snake-bite is reworked as an abduction by the King of the Otherworld, proleptically recounted by a distressed Heurodis who explains that she has had a graphic vision of her impending fate. Armed resistance on the part of her husband proves futile, Heurodis is torn from the royal orchard, and Orfeo falls into despair. Wandering destitute and distraught in the wilderness for many years, Orfeo by chance sees the Faery troupe, and finally glimpses Heurodis among them. The couple exchange glances, but do not speak. He follows the company into a parallel Otherworld, but access to the Faery King's castle is through an alien, liminal space, a gruesome gallery of individuals who appear suspended between death and life, at the point at which they were snatched from their own world, and who, the poem tells us, are 'thought dead, and yet are not' (l. 390). It is among this company that Orfeo again recognises his queen. Like his classical counterpart, Orfeo plays his harp so sweetly that the King offers him anything he wishes, but when the latter initially refuses the gift of Heurodis on the grounds that they are ill-matched, the musician has to remind him that it is not courteous to go back on one's word. Returning to his own land, Orfeo disguises himself in order to test the loyalty of his faithful steward, before revealing his identity and reclaiming his throne.

This poem bases its art on antithesis, as its prologue anticipates when it celebrates the range of the Breton lays' narrative subjects, from war and sorrow to joy and happiness, from treason and lewdness to the Faery world and love (ll. 4–12). In a self-reflexive alignment of narrator and hero, the narratorial voice takes on the role of a minstrel, addressing the audience as 'lordinges': 'Ichil [I shall] you telle Sir Orfewe' (l. 24). Heurodis (as well as her husband) is a storyteller too: 'Ichil the telle al hou it is' (l. 132) she promises Orfeo, after she has recovered from her frenzied response to her dreadful ordeal in the orchard. The violation of Heurodis is, however, complexly relayed. Donna Crawford notes how romances'

happy endings are often at the cost of wounded bodies, but she sees gender as especially relevant in *Sir Orfeo*, where ‘the social order of the ending ... has its genesis in an act of violence inflicted on a woman’ (49). Violence is important here, not only socially, but in terms of critical choices, and of poetics. Certainly, Heurodis’ loss is necessary to restoration, just as the fantasy image of a dismembered Orfeo torn into little pieces by lions (l. 538) that the protagonist himself relays at the end of the romance is necessary to the proving of the steward’s loyalty. Heurodis and Orfeo both ‘rehearse’ their dismembering, the one as proleptic external threat, the other as controlled fantasy. The romance’s representation of violence in ‘diptych’ formation assures us of the redemptive effects of poetry. The rhetorically-trained mind, as Mary Carruthers shows in her books on medieval memory techniques, would have conceived of violence as pedagogically necessary to the process of remembering, whether the violence was part of the student’s learning experience, or whether it was designed as a memory-aid (1990 134, 137; 1998 101–02, 143–44). But more is at stake here than the story’s striking memorability. The violence endemic to medieval mnemonics is not solely directed against women, although Marjorie Woods has demonstrated how narratives of sexual violence (and, interestingly, the composing of laments by female victims) were part of mainstream rhetorical training for boys. Gender and violence are crucial to the presentation of Heurodis and, furthermore, to the poem’s exposition of romance poetics.

Critics traditionally interpret Heurodis as functioning ‘differently’ from the other characters. Jeff Rider, for example, distinguishes between those versions of the Orpheus myth he calls ‘allegorical’ and those that constitute a ‘remythification’ of the story: by the former he means those that ‘translate’ the story to carry a particular meaning — Orpheus as ‘reason’ and Eurydice as ‘sensuality’ in the medieval *Ovid Moralisé* (Friedman 124–26) would be an instance of this — while he reads *Sir Orfeo* as exemplifying a reading that recognises myth’s essential power by keeping in play its potential for various meanings. Yet even within this reading of the romance, Heurodis is the ‘matter’ upon which Orfeo works his magic: Rider argues that the Faery King’s abduction of Heurodis is ‘the representation of the allegorisation, the capture and reduction, of myth, which is eventually liberated and brought back to full life through the artist’s efforts’ (366). For Spearing, Heurodis, and her madness subtly figure the nature and reach of a romance genre complemented by the male artist/reader: ‘man follows woman into the realm of female fantasy, woman follows man back into that of male order, and the mutual love that binds them ensures that both complete themselves by doing so’ (2000 271).

Heurodis figures primarily, one might argue, as part of a sophisticated narrative poetic, of which the principal dynamic is a play with the categories of familiar and alien (including the category of ‘oppositional’ gender), for familiar things are alienated in this romance, and the alien made familiar, in ways that, rather

than apportion agency completely to Orfeo, or place Orfeo and his wife in opposition, convey the mystery of romance event, or *aventure*. A range of contradictory associations cluster around the representation of Heurodis the storyteller, who quickly disappears from the text as a speaking presence, and who seems to operate as a site for the working-through of competing narratives, narratives of modern and medieval critical interpretation as well as those terms on which the poem tells her story. When Heurodis wakes raving from her sleep, her mad behaviour — tearing her clothes and scratching her face — anticipates the Faery King's threat that he will dismember her should she resist abduction. For Susan Crane, in destroying her beauty like this, before having recourse to speech, Heurodis acknowledges that her identity is located primarily in the surface appearance of her body, and her self-mutilation further signals her inability to act effectively because she colludes with this construction of her identity (74–76). In a critical climate responsive to theorising the male gaze, one might also interpret Orfeo's negative description of Heurodis' traumatised appearance, which contrasts her pale and scarred flesh with her former beauty (ll. 105–10), as itself an example of masculine rhetorical mastery unsettlingly similar to the Faery King's threats.

There are, however, to be more intricately woven concerns at work here. The poet describes Heurodis as superlatively beautiful (ll. 53–54). In the Faery company of her vision, she meets her uncanny likeness: she has never before, she says, seen such beautiful creatures (ll. 147–48). In this context, *pace* Crane, her attempts at disfigurement seem rather to recall the heroic acts of self-mutilation that historical documents record of religious women's pre-emptive defence against sexual assault (Schulenburg 29–72). Felicity Riddy has also charted the debt owed by Orfeo's description of Heurodis to lyric evocations of the body of the tortured Christ (9–10). This usage extends and destabilises the associations this rhetoric of pathos carries. The redeployment of language recognisable from other contexts is of a piece with instances of repetition in the poem that posit an uncanny similarity between the Faery realm as Heurodis describes it — the King has shown her a vision of 'castels & tours,/Riuers, forestes, frith [woodland] with flours' (ll. 159–60) — and the land Orfeo leaves behind him as the narrator describes it, with its: 'castels & tours,/Riuier, forest, frith with flours' (ll. 245–46). The text suggests, and yet does not fully articulate, the exact nature of the similarities and differences between these two worlds.

There is disjunction too in the repetition of detail concerning Orfeo's attempted defence of his wife when the Faery King returns to the orchard to claim her: Orfeo tries to meet his anticipated assault with 'wele [fully] ten hundred knightes' (l. 183), but the queen is spirited away without violence: 'Men wist neuer wher sche was bicom' (l. 194). In the wilderness, a host of 'ten hundred' knights (l. 291) is part of the vision of courtly and chivalric activity that the grief-stricken Orfeo encounters, including an army ready for battle, that never fights (l. 2898–

95), and who vanish like his wife: 'neuer he nist whider thai wold' (l. 296). Heurodis has heralded her departure in a poetry commemorative of loss: 'now we mot delen ato [separate]/Do thi best, for y mot go' (ll. 125–26). Orfeo's self-imposed lonely exile re-enacts the terms of his wife's departure (ll. 221–26), as he takes up her register of lament. Heurodis' poetry of loss silences, or rather, seems to render inoperable, any other expression of Orfeo's art; elements of the tale repeat, and fragment. The characters stand in imbricated, rather than oppositional, relation.

In terms of the diptych structure mentioned above, Heurodis and Orfeo together function as part of a statement about poetry, or rather, an attempt to register different functions of poetry, and the interdependence of those functions. Heurodis belongs to a complex negotiation of poetry as loss and retrieval, and, in her own silencing she images not only what constitutes poetic telling, but what is left out of the process of articulation. The strange gallery of the 'not dead' that Orfeo encounters as he enters the Otherworld castle (ll. 387–409) features characters in labour, decapitated, badly wounded, choking on food, drowning — scenes of horror to which Heurodis, pictured lying beneath a tree, recognisable to Orfeo (strangely), from what she is wearing (l. 408), does not seem to belong, though she is one of the 'taken'. Seth Lerer has suggested this catalogue is part of a poetic mastery: 'The narrator imposes a rhetorical plan on an experience so horrible that words indeed might fail ... his lines offer an assertion of an overarching literary order' (107). There is perhaps a dreadful comfort in this claim, but the scene of the 'non-dead' also brings together, poetically and in suspension, central themes of loss and restoration in which poetry is itself implicated, and it signals the potential, in terms of literary art and human loss, of these untold (and, in the context of the poem, unredeemed) stories.

Heurodis' positioning and location within the poem is reminiscent of Chaucer's treatment of Dido in his poem the *House of Fame*, for she is another lamenting woman proleptically describing her fate — in Dido's case, her ruin at the hands of Fame — and at whose expense, arguably, the poet/narrator gains an entry into his rhetorical world. To return to Marjorie Woods' investigations of laments as rhetorical exercises for schoolboys: one could argue that both Dido and Heurodis are casualties of a poetic process that has, ultimately, the assertion of the poet's own authority as its goal. In another context, Gail Berkeley Sherman has argued that 'the fiction of the feminine is necessary for the project of Chaucerian poetics, a poetics that affirms and denies the powerlessness of language' (137). The gender of the speaking subject is important to Chaucer-as-narrator and to *Orfeo*-narrator alike. Just as Heurodis struggles to interpret what it means to meet her likeness, so Dido struggles to distinguish sincerity from its rhetorical similitude (Miller 105). Each poem features a woman's lament as an act of self-authorisation; no other version of the Orpheus tale has Eurydice speak like this, and the *House of Fame* narrator disingenuously assures us that Dido's

lament is unique to the dream he had, and depends on no other ‘auctour’, or authoritative source (l. 314). Desolation follows lament. Orfeo retreats to the wilderness, and Chaucer’s narrator, exhausted of poetic resourcefulness in the face of the determinism that seals Dido’s poetic reputation (and to which he has, of course, contributed), finds himself in a desert place, in need of some further, external, intervention to ‘re-start’ his poem.

Yet Chaucer troubles the reading of Dido as a hapless woman inevitably victim to a masculinist poetics by, for example, uniting Dido and the narrator in their concerns over moral discrimination and poetic truth (Miller 105).<sup>2</sup> This same troubling of categories, or rather, the signalling of a necessary interrelation between poetic forms and purposes, is at stake in *Sir Orfeo*, in that Heurodis is not fully a passive subject (and not the sole ‘lamenting’ voice), but plays a role in the poem’s consideration of surface detail and connectivity. Heurodis’ representation is also bound up with the way the text conveys the mystery of romance event, *aventure*, and the question of agency. This essay has already touched on some of the images (such as the armed knights) that confront Orfeo in his exile: the vision of the Faery King draws in its wake the sight of hunters who do not kill, and other re-enactments of courtly process (such as knights and ladies dancing), which also stand ‘outside’ narrative (ll. 283–302). These strange alienations come to an end when the dream-like enters time, and Orfeo’s perspective and the romance vision coincide. Orfeo sees sixty ladies hunting with falcons; the falcons kill their prey, and this entry into time is the trigger to Orfeo’s memory: ‘Parfay! ... ich was y-won swiche werk to se’ [I used to see such pastime] (ll. 315–17).

This perception of courtly activity in time leads to another. Among the company, Orfeo meets Heurodis again, and their mutual gaze initiates the next stage, Orfeo’s reckless pursuit of the otherworldly group: ‘Yern [eagerly] he biheld hir, & sche him eke [also]/Ac noither [neither] to other a word no speke’ (ll. 323–34). This is also a point of recall for Heurodis, who cries silently at his changed state (ll. 326–27). The classical Orpheus, looking back to the underworld and, inevitably, to his receding wife, is guilty of a transgressive gaze, one Maurice Blanchot analyses in terms of art, inspiration, and the need for the artist both to desire and to transcend desire: ‘He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself too, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus scattered, are necessary to the song’ (101). In *Sir Orfeo*, the mutual gaze is redemptive, and rather than an image of the transcendence of male heterosexual desire as one’s entry into poetry, the poem seems rather to want to find space for complementarity, to make Heurodis a ‘subject’ as well as Orfeo: when she cries with pity at his miserable condition, Orfeo’s response joins complaint with action; his despairing speech, “Allas! ...” (ll. 331–42), ends with his determination to follow his wife.

It has been suggested that while Chaucer may draw locally on the repository of romance *topoi* for his effects, the Middle English romances do not particularly

colour his poetic (Pearsall 74–76). Yet Heurodis arguably informs *The House of Fame*, and Chaucer specifically borrows from *Sir Orfeo* in *The Franklin's Tale*. In that poem, the young squire Aurelius, madly in love with the already married Dorigen, enlists the aid of a magician to help him accomplish the impossible task that Dorigen has set him by way of gentle refusal, but which he has interpreted as the condition of her love. In the comfort of his library, 'ther as his bookes be' (l. 1207), the magician projects for Aurelius images of that young squire's own romance desire — inchoate and allusive forms that give concrete expression to the cultural context for his feelings, and include the vision of a savage deer hunt, falconers at their work, and knights jousting (ll. 1184–1208). Only with the final image do these visions resolve themselves into a scene corresponding to the wished-for resolution of Aurelius' own narrative: that is, he sees himself, together with Dorigen: 'Tho saugh he . . . his lady on a daunce,/On which hymself he daunced' (ll. 1200–01). The magician quotes the hallucinatory visions of *Sir Orfeo*'s wilderness, and at the same time literalises love's violent metaphors, in the tableau of the carnage of the deer-hunt, 'hertes . . . with arwes blede of bittre woundes' (ll. 1191–94). Such quotation recognises *Sir Orfeo* as literary currency, at the same time as it adapts that poem's images, with the same end of projecting a vision of an alienated, yet desiring, self. In the portrayal of Dorigen (who shares with Heurodis a register of lament), Chaucer takes to an extreme the romance silencing of the heroine evident in *Sir Orfeo*. At the conclusion of *The Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen's volition and agency disappear from view, and her disregarded autonomy is the precondition of an ending that reclaims and confirms the bonds of 'courteous' behaviour, *gentillesse*, that obtain between men. *Sir Orfeo* in general may be said to inform Chaucer's vision of the problematics of romance closure, but in Chaucer's library-scene, the quotation of its imagery in a bookish environment also establishes the earlier text as a repository of romance motif, and more. Chaucer explicitly reads this early poem, itself constituted from a critical rereading of a classical myth, within a creative form-giving, vernacular literary dynamic.

This emphasis on bookishness returns one to the dominant image of Amitav Ghosh's lecture. Like the author of *Sir Orfeo*, Ghosh writes of the necessity to the creative process of alienation, disjunction, and loss, a necessity Chaucer also endorses as part of his own romance economy. Ghosh lovingly recreates the material actuality of his grandfather's bookcase, but the book collection is also metaphorical of the tradition to which, and out of which, the writer works: 'It is the very vastness and cosmopolitanism of the fictional bookcase that requires novelists to locate themselves in relation to it, and demands of their work that it should set up signposts to establish their location' (13). Postcolonial writer and medieval poet draw on the same metaphoric field to articulate the intertextual dimension of their work, to consider how the author constructs, negotiates, and 'writes to', tradition.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> From the Auchinleck manuscript, MS National Library of Scotland, Advocates' 19.2.1, edited by A. C. Bliss (1966). Middle English characters have been modernised.
- <sup>2</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen considers further the relation between narrator and Dido (98–107).

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