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Author(s): R. H. Nicholson
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SIR ORFEO: A 'KYNGES NOOTE'

By R. H. NICHOLSON

> God is þe lay, swete is þe note.
> þus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
> God graunt ous alle wele to fare.

THE poem ends by noting performance and composition, and by giving itself a name: 'Orpheo Regis', or 'Orfeo þe kyng', or just 'Orfeo' ('after þe kyng'). It is at this end-point my paper begins, as an attempt not at critical explication of the poem but rather at tackling the satisfaction it gives so largely to its audience. Essentially then, my critical concern is to recognize the genre procedures by which this version of the Orpheus story is distinguished from its predecessors. The classical legend of Orpheus and Eurydice is a love tragedy. If *Sir Orfeo* is a modulation of that tragedy into love romance then it is perversely flawed by the effective elimination of Heurodys as a source of interest, and by the final section of the poem which is just too long for a 'happy ever after'. The heroine of medieval romance often does seem to inhabit the margin of the text which records her tale, but Heurodys is given a place and then that place is denied her. The final section advances the passionate history of the love between Orfeo and Heurodys not a jot, and does not even allow them romantically numerous progeny. Yet the poem is a love-story, of course. In so far as such features of the tale are narrative flaws, with respect to either tragic legend or romantic expectation, they pose, in fact, no problem to the reader. This paper is an attempt to account for our untroubled pleasure by attention to the poem's surprising, if conventional, poetic range (from plain exposition, to sensible dialogue, to powerfully moving complaint), and especially by consideration of narrative structure revealing the lai's strong relations with other short English romances. This analysis, unsurprisingly, confirms what most readers feel: the poem finally sets in exhilarating opposition two worlds, that of the rational, humanly social, and that of the irrational, which veers through mystery into nightmare. My consequent hope is, furthermore, that the poet's contribution to the history of the legend may be more sharply defined, and that his contribution to the life of a genre will become clear.

Sir Orfeo is a poem of several beginnings.[1] It begins formally, as it ends, by reference to its genre, the lai first 'wrouȝt' in 'Breteyne'. The introductory description of the genre is summarily useful in itself, but more importantly it provides a context for the story, recognizing both historical origins and modern performance. Significant too is an immediate association between kings and the 'old auentours', the 'meruailles', which make up the matter of these traditional stories; the association is at least, in part, one of composition, for kings have made these lais and given them 'name'. The poet-performer at once calls for attention—he will tell the tale of Sir Orfeo. At the tale's end he signs off in similar terms. The framing account of lai composition is meshed with the history of Orfeo who is introduced to us as, 'In Inglond an heiȝe lording'. His story includes, indeed encloses, the romance of Dame Heurodys which begins in familiar fashion—'Bifel so in þe comessing of May'. To recognize a designed structure of enclosed and enclosing tales is to perceive at once, it seems to me, something of the mechanics of our involvement, the means to our pleasure.[2] Statement of the poem's matter and genre links our age as audience with that of an attestable king (living somewhere between Thrace and Winchester), identified by name and parentage but also notable for his interest in harping and concern for good government. From the rational and public we pass to the enchanting nightmare-tale of the abducted queen and her hero, Orfeo, who quite dies away into the realm of faerie before winning her back and resuming his proper place in his kingdom. That return ushers us back to our own time and society where the tale is told. So despite abandoning the legend's narrative path the poem remains deeply satisfying, as well-shaped narrative foray into a world of irrational dimension, finally setting fears at rest in its reaffirmation of orderly social values of truth and love.

Insufficient critical attention has been paid to the central fact of Orfeo's good rule.[3] Usually commentators have concerned themselves with this aspect of the poem only to the extent of explaining the transformation of the legendary Orpheus's role as musician/priest into that of harper/king in the lai of *Orfeo*. The common modern

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[1] Punningly. References to the poem throughout this paper are to the edition by A. J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo* (Oxford, 1954). Bliss argues (p. xv) that the lines missing from the acephalous version in the Auchinleck MS include twenty-four lines of prologue which are substantially common to *Lai le Freine* (also in Auchinleck) and the other manuscript versions of *Sir Orfeo*.

[2] Later in the fourteenth century this marked structural circularity characterizes much English fiction; for discussion see J. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London, 1971), esp. pp. 64-8.

[3] Notable exceptions include the articles by J. B. Severs, 'The Antecedents of Sir Orfeo', in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honour of A. C. Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), and D. S. Hill, 'The Structure of "Sir Orfeo"', *Medieval Studies*, 23 (1961), 136-53. These articles recognize the complexity introduced into the story by this fact but without clarifying, as I hope my argument does, its romantic function and thematic point.

explanation, most simply and cogently advanced by J. B. Severs, is that Orfeo becomes king in a Breton antecedent under the influence of a specific Celtic tale, the Wooing of Etain. The stories are not unlike in some respects, and since Eochaid, the human hero of the Celtic tale, is a king it is presumed that willy-nilly Orfeo was made one too. Naturally enough proof of such direct influence is impossible; indeed arguments against seem quite as convincing as those for.[4] Equally plausible and attractive is the possibility raised by J. B. Friedman, who points out that Orpheus and David are associated frequently from late antiquity onwards. David was the biblical king *par excellence*; Orpheus then might probably be presented as king too. Friedman supports his case by demonstrating the conflation that took place in pictorial treatments of these two: frequently they are portrayed in the same posture, facing out from the page in majesty, harp or lyre held to one side. The peculiar virtue of this observation is that it identifies a parallel which once established might readily be strengthened by familiar medieval iconography. David as musician/king is an exceptionally common image in England by the fourteenth century, in the illuminated initials of the Psalter's Beatus page. An English poet could scarcely have failed to know well such imagery.[5]

Any explanation of Orfeo's kingship is almost certainly impossible of proof. All we can do is point to a number of possible influences which might make less than surprising or eccentric the imaginative act by which Orpheus, priestly musician, was converted into Orfeo, royal harper. Perhaps the primary influence was that of the genre itself—only one of the half-dozen or so Breton lais in Middle English does not have a royal figure as a principal character. What is unusual about this lai is not that Orfeo is a king but that that fact is not merely incidental, a way of contriving a happy ending, but of central thematic importance. As the hero of its stories, as much as by his emblematic virtue, royal Orfeo represents good order. After its compact, economical, account of the lai genre the poem gives us an introduction to Orfeo which is similarly straightforward. The very straightforwardness of these sections establishes the norms of the

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[4] Severs, pp. 196-8; for the counter argument see Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

[5] J. B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 148-55, and 175 ff. Friedman does not discuss this possibility at any length but rather deals with the ethical aspect of the association between David and Orpheus as musicians. Nor does his account of the iconographic relationship between the two take into consideration the later medieval Psalter. Illustration of the Beatus page, by representation of David playing the harp, or of a Tree of Jesse (often, of course, including David and his harp), is described by Peter Brieger as 'an old tradition' in England by mid-thirteenth century (*English Art, 1216-1307* (Oxford, 1957), p. 84). For some early examples see Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1954), Pls. 62 (A), 104, 122, 124, 131, 133, and 135 (A).

poem, both prosodic and thematic. We are informed immediately of that trained skill in harping by which Orfeo is most strongly marked off from other men, and which is of prime importance to the adventure. He is also identified as an English king descended from known ancestors, the kings Pluto and Juno, and now possessed of an incomparably fair queen, Dame Heurodys (who is, besides, 'Ful of loue & of godenisse'). The introduction, then, forms a conjunction between music (especially harping) and good order in society which is indeed figuratively familiar, but here proves to be the very ground of the romance.[6]

Orfeo's harping is clearly not just virtuosity, but a skill assiduously acquired:

> Him-self he lerned for-to harp,
> & leyd þeron his wittes scharp.
> He lerned so, þer no-þing was
> A better harpour in no plas.   (ll. 29–32)

This deliberateness is characteristic of his harp-playing later in the poem, and manifest, too, in his eloquent use of language. Just as Orfeo 'tempreþ his harp as he wele can' prior to playing his 'blisseful note' before the faerie household, so he tunes its denizens to his will with speech which is tactful as it is compelling. The verse of this passage (ll. 417 ff.) is blandly measured; nothing disturbs even our sense of decorous conversation; there are, for instance, none of the poetically affecting inversions which we find elsewhere in the poem. The amazement of the faerie king at discovering Orfeo in their midst is witness to the hero's royal fortitude, and the promise of unconditional reward tribute to the power of his eloquent music. The disposition of the faerie folk's defences (including their palace grounds display of the fruits of their imperialism—the grotesque bodies like so many Elgin marbles) convince us of the extraordinary

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[6] An illustrative account of kingly virtues demonstrated in the life of David as 'pastour', 'harpour', 'chivalier', 'prophete', and penitent occupies a central place in Gower's brief mirror for princes in his *Miroir de L'omme* (ll. 22861 ff.). It includes a notable, extended parallel between the 'accord et attemprure' of the well-played harp and the accords achieved within society by the king, concluding:

> Rois qu'ensi fait la concordance
> Bien porra du fine attemprance
> La harp au bone note trere.

An even more elaborate version of the analogy frames the mid-fifteenth-century Scottish *De regimine* which begins 'Richt as all stringis are cupillit in ane harpe' (*Maitland Folio MS*, Vol. I, ed. W. A. Craigie, STS NS 17 (1919), 115–25). Its substantive conclusion is an exhortation to the ruler: 'Thus sen thow has the harp in general / As gud menstrall to rewle It be musik / quhilk signifijs thy realme and pepill hale / with officiaris quhilk gouernis thy kinrik / pull out thy wrast and gar þame sownd alyk / As gud menstrall to play in ane accorde / All men will say thow art lyk to be ane Lord.'

strength of this king, yet king and kingdom are as incapable of resist-
ing Orfeo as he and his people had been earlier, when Heurodys was
abducted. In effect, sharp-witted Orfeo insists on their accepting the
rules of his own society, especially the necessity of truth to the given
word, a virtue which works to confirm the important communal
relationship between people. 'By feith', according to Hoccleve, 'is
maad the congregacioun / Of peple.' Gower warns that the king who is
not 'veritable de sa parole' damages his 'Roialté', his majesty, whereas
the king who 'en verité s'etable, / Par ce son regne fait estable'.[7] Just
as Orfeo could tame the creatures of the wilderness, reduce them to
peace and good order at least for the time being with his harp playing,
so is he able to control the faerie kingdom by his harp and sleight of
tongue. The one achievement prepares us for the next.

A different style, one we might call gubernatorial, is used by Orfeo
when he quits his kingdom and the society of all women for the
wilderness, bearing with him only his harp. The *mythos* requires that
he leave, and, if he does not actually do so in order to search for
Heurodys as the legend has it, the departure still seems to us properly
passionate, even romantic. Yet the poet goes out of his way to assure
us that Orfeo is not just abandoning his realm. I can think of no other
medieval English romance (except, perhaps, tales of the death of
Arthur, and then for very different reasons) where a king's departure
is so much an issue. For the most part kings simply get up and leave,
making minimal arrangements, if any, for the administration of their
lands. But here the poet at some relative length represents Orfeo's
action as no dereliction from regnal duty: Orfeo prudently arranges
for the continuance of his good rule and even provides for the
succession of the next king upon his death.[8] His words to his

[7] Hoccleve, *Regement of Princes*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS ES 72, ll. 2192ff.; *Miroir*,
ll. 22936ff. Gower also identifies 'la promesse' with the king's 'coronne' in ll. 23094ff.; his
interpretation of the crown in *Confessio Amantis*, vii. 1751ff., takes the 'vertu' of the crown
gems as a 'verrai Signe . . . that a king schal ben honeste / And holde trewly his beheste / Of thing
which longeth to kinghede'. This obligation is regularly urged upon princes, as in Lydgate's
ballade on the coronation of Henry VI: 'In þy beheestes beo not varyable, / Holde þy promesses
made of entencion' (ll. 137–8; *Minor Poems*, Vol. II, ed. H. MacCracken, EETS 192, p. 629.). It
may even be associated with something like the 'Rash Promise' in exemplary tales warning
against thoughtless swearing of kingly word; see Hoccleve, *Regement of Princes*, ll. 2297ff.

[8] Cf. *Le Morte Arthur*, ll. 2508ff.:

> At hys knyghtis all bydene,
> The kynge gan hys conselle take,
> And bad hem ordeyne hem bytwene
> Who beste steward were for to make,
> The reme for to save and ȝeme,
> And beste were for Bretaynes sake.

Disastrously, as it turns out, Arthur's court counselled that Mordred was the 'sekereste to saue
the reme in trews and pees'. Cf. *Morte Arthure*, ll. 639–92; Arthur's arrangements are detailed
and include the promise that Mordred will be crowned for good behaviour. There is an

assembled nobles distinctly conform to the familiar doctrine of kingly obligation. The steward is appointed regent:

> To wite mi kingdom afterward;
> In mi stede ben he schal
> To kepe mi londes ouer-all.   (ll. 206–8)

These lines clearly refer to the typically twofold royal duty to preserve the realm from attack, external and internal, by means of arms and laws. Further, in their emphasis upon agency they may reflect the medieval conception of the king as *Dei vicarius in terra*; by this steward too accounts must eventually be rendered.[9] The verse itself supports the seriousness of the moment, sentences spreading over three lines rather than contained within the basic couplet, after the formal, weighty, fashion of decree.

  Like most medieval romances this one is characterized by a good deal of repetition; unusually we feel that here repetition tends to be purposeful, or at least functional. Orfeo's final order at this point—'Doþ ʒour best wiþ al mi þing'—recalls Heurodys's admittedly more

interesting analogue to Orfeo's departure in Gower's tale of the great law-giver Lygurgus, Prince of Athens: he has his people swear to keep his laws while he is overseas in conference with Mercury, the divine inspiration of his rule of law; he then deliberately 'tok of exil the fortune / And lefte of Prince thilke office', so that his people were obliged by their oaths to keep for ever the good order he had established (*Confessio Amantis*, vii. 2917 ff.). Orfeo intends no such royal trick, of course, yet as we discover, he does make a test of his absence, specifically of his steward, but implicitly of his people.

  [9] The phrase (Augustinian in origin) is from Bracton, *De legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, Vol. II, ed. G. E. Woodbine, rev. and trans. S. E. Thorne (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 305; *vicarius* the king remains *dum facit iustitiam*. Occasionally romances do include definitions of kingship as office, usually at moments when royal power is passing to the hero. In the *Romans of Partenay*, for instance, the King of Cyprus on his death-bed ensures the succession of his daughter Ermyne (as 'enheritour of ryght'). He himself has 'warded and diffend / Ffrom paynymes at point of swerdes crualte' his 'noble rewme Cipresse', and, since Ermyne cannot guarantee that it will be 'kepte truly' against the 'fers stoures' of the Saracens he urges Melusine's eldest son Uriens to marry her and take on the task of defence (ll. 1461 ff.). On the other hand, in *William of Palerne* it is the law which is emphasized finally:

> þan William wiʒtli as a wis king schold
> þes among þe puple he put to þe reaume,
> a-leide alle luþer laws þat long hadde ben vsed,
> & gart holde þe gode   (ll. 5238 ff.)

Arthur and Merlin begins with the king's death-bed settlement of his realm upon his eldest son 'Constaunt'; Constant, because he has been a monk hitherto, is soon called 'King Moyne' and his predictable ineffectuality leads to discontent and his assassination. The barons offer the crown to the treacherous evil steward, 'Fortiger':

> . . . we ʒou witeþ wiʒt and trest,
> of al men ʒe mowen best
> Vs kepen oʒain our fon,
> So ʒe han er þis ydon

(ll. 271–4. *Arthur and Merlin* occurs in the Auckinleck MS and the version of *Sir Orfeo* in MS Ashmole 61 is prefaced by a few lines from just before the quoted passage; Bliss describes their occurrence there as 'curious'.)

plangent parting wish—'Do þi best, for y mot go'. As that was a fare-
well speech so is this, and, however different in expression, Orfeo's
speech at length does declare attachment to his people, just as
Heurodys's expressed her attachment to him. We recognize the
emergence of a patterned plot through the structuring use of
repetition; this story is to be double-plotted, concerned with the royal
pair but also with their people. Orfeo is immediately and profoundly
affected by the prospect of Heurodys's departure, and similarly his
people lament at his banishment of himself to the wilderness. The
quality of both king and queen is affirmed in these moments of
parallel anguish.

   Orfeo's defensive action to meet the threat of the queen's
abduction may not be effective, but his lament at her crazed
behaviour after she wakes from her noontide sleep most certainly is.
In effect, besides being intensely expressive of bewilderment and
despair, the lament which summons her from her madness is also the
first instance of Orfeo's singular eloquence. Heurodys's return to
herself is directly attributed to Orfeo's singular efforts—all the
urgent concern of her attendants and other knights and ladies had
been to no avail. Orfeo's speech is charged with 'grete pite', but it is
also most beautifully ordered. It is not just that he contrasts
affectingly what she has been with how she now appears, but that he
does so in balancing phrases, lines, and couplets. In describing the
ravages upon her once-excellent body the emphasis on wounds, the
colours white and red, perhaps even the use of 'nailes' and 'rode', may
call to mind Christ's passion, or at least catch into the poem responses
formed by the devotional tradition of affective piety. The rhetorical
organization of these lines does seem affective, but it is also decidedly
romantic. Again, in describing Heurodys's present state by contrast
with what she has been the poet may be employing the *ubi sunt* or *quid
profuit superbia mundi* motif.[10] Yet, paradoxically, the primary effect
of the description is to recollect the conventionally idealized forms of
romantic medieval beauty with which Heurodys has been associated
earlier by her brief portrait and her May morning venture into the
garden, 'To play bi an orchard-side'. It seems to me that the
recollection is purposeful in reasserting norms which are rational,

   [10] Lyrics of affective piety are too numerous to warrant illustrative quotation; see Carleton
Brown's anthologies, *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1932) and *Religious
Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1952) for some early examples. Clearly enough the
developed medieval *ubi sunt* motif is employed in ll. 234 ff., where Orfeo's worldly identity is
destroyed in turn, by his time in the wilderness; the precise significance is less clear although we
might remember that Gower's David is exemplary as 'penant', so preserving his people from
God's vengeance. For another, much less elaborate, version of what we might term the
'romantic' *ubi sunt* see *Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 1618 ff.

however romantic. She who was then so 'stille', whose perfect beauty is now destroyed, is virtually refigured by Orfeo's eloquence till she lies 'stille' once more, weeping the tears of release, tears which are intelligible however anguished. Heurodys's ideal beauty has been destroyed, the harmony which that ideal suggested changed into something hostile and alienated: when she wakes she looks at Orfeo as 'mon doþ on his fo'. The change is explained in the following lines as caused one way or another by the necessity of separation from her husband. The laments which precede her explanation (ll. 120–30), resonant by exclamation, repetition and parallel phrasing, and perhaps scriptural echo, indicate that theirs truly is the intensely passionate and harmonious relationship she describes. This justifies for us Orfeo's later rejection of his kingly life and the company of all women, just as that rejection in its turn confirms our sense of the devotion of king and queen for each other.

The passionate element, appropriate to a love romance facing tragedy, is present to an exceptional degree in this lai. This cannot be stressed too much. Extreme feeling and its expression is conventional enough in medieval English romances, but here it dominates incident to the extent of giving the poem real emotional coherence.[11] Passion is declared by both Orfeo and Heurodys in lines such as those to which I have referred, but is expressed also in their silent recognition of each other in the wilderness. It later marks the behaviour and words of Orfeo's court quite extravagantly, especially in the case of the High Steward. Passionate reaction to loss is figured generally by tears; the tears of countervailing happiness are wept not when Orfeo recovers Heurodys from the clutches of the faerie but when he resumes his place on the English throne with Heurodys at his side:

> For ioie þai wepe wiþ her eiʒe
> þat hem so sounde y-comen seiʒe.

> (ll. 591–2)

At this moment the two lines of narrative action coincide finally in festive mood, the return to good order being celebrated fittingly with 'al manner menstraci' and 'grete melody'. The moment of the court's recognition of Orfeo is finely realized in a tumult of action leading to joy-filled words of welcome:

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[11] A slightly unfair but nevertheless instructive comparison might be made with *Guy of Warwick*, which includes within its considerable, incoherent, length some passages which are very similar to lines of passion and lament in *Sir Orfeo*. Cf., for instance, Oisel's grief, ll. 4884–94 ('y se þi neb al blo / þat so white off colour was . . . seþþen þou has þe deþ for me / For soþe dye ichil for þe'), and Guy's, II. st. 29 ('Leue leman . . . / Lete ben alle þis reweful cri'); *Guy of Warwick*, ed. J. Zupitza, EETS ES 49, pp. 278–9, 404.

Ouer & ouer þe bord he þrewe,
& fel adoun to his fet;
So dede euerich lord þat þer sete,
& al þai seyd at o criinge:
'Ȝe beþ our lord, Sir, & our king'.

(ll. 578–82)

Repeatedly here the sentences defy the basic couplet measure, piling up phrases, using the paratactic anaphora—repeated 'ands' in successive phrases—common in romance narration. The pace, the exclamations, and the inversions, contribute to the sensed passionate temper of this climactic moment. Yet the passion itself is expressed by the court in rational form and to rational ends. Orfeo himself has passed judgement: the court is in good order and his appointment of the Steward as regent has proved sound.[12] Again that judgement is validated by his people's reaction to his arrival back in their midst. There is both thematic and historical reaffirmation of good order, as the people re-form him, bathing and shaving him, changing his beggarly clothes for the attire which will display his kingship.[13] No less than Orfeo himself, Heurodys his queen is permitted no private moments after her release from the hold of the faeries, despite the emphasis upon such moments within the body of the poem. Rather she is settled with celebration at the king's side. Her story, which has Orfeo for its hero, is subsumed within the story of the kingdom, which is equally dominated by the kingly hero, Orfeo: 'gret

[12] For an interesting analogue involving both stewardship and a 'rash' promise of grace see Tale 36 of the English *Gesta Romanorum*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, EETS ES 33, pp. 139 ff. Evil stewards abound sufficiently in medieval English romances for the 'asay' by Orfeo to seem real and justifiable, although usually their malice is levelled directly at the hero (e.g. *Amis and Amiloun*, *King Horn*, and *Sir Degrevaunt*). A number of romances include good stewards as well (e.g. *Guy of Warwick* and *Generydes*), and often enough their stewardship is described in conventional detail linking them with the ideal of good rule. *Generydes* (ed. W. A. Wright, EETS 55 and 70) has special interest as a parallel, for its stewards are many. They include Generydes himself who acts as his father's steward in India with such success that eventually the people are happy to agree to his being crowned their king. His father Auferius similarly, after losing his lands to his own steward, Amelok, flees to Thrace where he first becomes the king's steward, and then, on the king's death without heir, is chosen by a 'parlement' ('by voice of the land') to succeed him. Their number also includes an earl related by marriage to the heroine, Queen Sereyne, whom (as 'ware and wise . . . and therwith trew as any creature') she trusts with 'rewle and gouernaunce / Of [her] contre, with all [her] full powre', while she seeks for Auferius with a devotion almost matching Orfeo's. Should she not return from this 'labour and . . . payne' then the earl is nominated as 'lord and souerayn' in her place. Cf. also Mordred in *Le Morte Arthur*, and *Morte Arthure*.

[13] Discussion of kingly display, its frequency and its necessary richness, has a place in tracts on good rule; see, for example, Lydgate's version of the *Secreta Secretorum* where royal array is linked to the public appearances of the king designed to impress upon his people a sense of his virtues and power: 'To kepe the Sogettys verrayly in dede, / Vndir a yerde atwix love and drede' (*Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, ll. 1098–9).

processioun', music, and a 'newe' coronation, properly conclude both. In effect the ceremony stands in for the marriage which so commonly ends lais, and indeed other romances, but is the more complex since it rejoins not only Orfeo and Heurodys but also both with their people.[14]

My purpose in looking at specific passages in the poem has been to identify passionate and rational strains which are separable yet frequently meshed together. Our experience of the poem's characters through the range of moments which represent their adventures is intimate, since the poet's craft effortlessly creates the varying temper of these occasions. At the same time our knowledge is ordered by the formation of these moments into two plots, each of which catches attention, and adds to the interest of the other. To look at the conclusion of the tale is to recognize, also, that while in a real sense there are two plots, nevertheless there is but the one story. While it remains true that analysis of the narrative structure does point to the complication of the basic legend by the testing of the steward, these two plots do form a coherent whole, even if it is adventurous

[14] D. W. Robertson refers to a fourteenth-century commentator on Justinian who described the relationship between prince and people as a moral and political marriage, an earthly, temporal, parallel to the spiritual marriage between a church and its prelate (*A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), p. 375). Elizabeth I, of course, was happy to argue such a prevenient marriage in 1559, but I am unaware of medieval English precedents for the view. Marriage in English romances reconciles the fates of hero and heroine, but further represents good order in the land, particularly with its promise of an assured succession. A 'newe' coronation was not unknown in the medieval period but was scarcely commonplace, especially from the thirteenth century on. It seems possible that in 1387 Richard II was deposed and then recrowned (*iterato*, according to one continuation of *Polychronicon*; see S. B. Chrimes and A. L. Brown, *Select Documents of English Constitutional History* (London, 1961), p. 145); later, Lydgate's promotional poems suggest that, despite the special circumstances, Henry VI's double coronation in London and Paris needed some justification. For the earlier Middle Ages the position is apparently complicated by the repeated 'festival' coronations which had some vogue in England during the eleventh and twelfth centuries; see P. E. Schramm, *A History of the English Coronation* (Oxford, 1937), esp. Ch. III. A notable early instance of a second coronation with reintegrating, maybe even rehabilitating, force is that of Richard I on his return to England after being imprisoned in Austria; see Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* (which incidentally relates the tale attributing the imprisonment not to the Duke of Austria but to the 'feend' (*daemon*) or 'develle contrarious', who claimed the Duke as his servant): 'and so at Wynchestre, whanne þe mescheef of his takynge was i-wyped of, he was neweliche i-crowned as a newe kyng, þe fifte ȝere of his kyngdom.' (Bk. VIII, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, ed. J. R. Lumby, Rolls Series, 1882, p. 131; cf. Gervase of Canterbury (Rolls Series, 1879, pp. 524–7) for detailed notes on the coronation, including the procession from cathedral to palace, and a comparative account of the coronation of Stephen and his wife, beginning: *Rex in veste festiva cum regina ab episcopis et comitibus ductus est in ecclesiam.*) It is tempting to believe that *Sir Orfeo* holds some recollection of this famous event; cf., for instance, Robert of Gloucester's *Metrical Chronicle* version of Richard's return ('þo king richard com to englelond þer was ioye inou. / Mid ioye and procession þat folk aȝen him drou. / He pleyede nywe king at ome . . . '), his treatment of the usurper John ('deseritede him al clene'), and his coronation at Winchester (ll. 10062 ff.). By this time coronations are almost invariably performed at Westminster; 'as þe riȝte crouninge is', Robert of Gloucester says in describing Richard I's on his father's death.

coherence analogous to the 'entrelacement' which has been demon-
strated as crucially important for an understanding of twelfth- and
thirteenth-century French romances. The poem is centred on Orfeo,
it is his 'care', his testing adventure, and finally celebrates his power
as heroic harper and good ruler.

Attempts have been made to explain the formation of the story
according to particular culturally derived narrative patterns or
motifs.[15] However interesting in themselves, such parallels remain
only obliquely relevant to a reading of *Orfeo*. Far more potentially
fruitful is consideration of the compositional practice of short-
narrative poets in structural terms, and it is in this respect that
analysis of *Orfeo* revealing two plots proves particularly interesting.
Quite simply, every surviving Middle English lai clearly contains two
linked plots, not a major and a minor, composing a narrative history
of an individual hero to form the romance.[16] The pattern is clearest in
those lais which have always struck readers as the truest examples of
the genre—they are also the simplest exemplars of this structural
procedure. For instance, in Thomas Chestre's *Launfal* the narrative
history is made up of two phases of almost equal duration; in each
Launfal finds himself in the most wretched condition (imprisoned by
poverty in the first, and in the second impoverished by prison), and
he is released or relieved from his difficulties successively by the
affections and wealth of the faerie dame who becomes his mistress.
His first return to wealth and well-being concludes with a series of
jousts which effectively reintegrate him into Arthurian society. After
his second recovery by Dame Tryamour he disappears from Arthur's
court with her 'ynto Fayrye', only to return annually to undertake
parallel jousting matches with any who challenge. The sets of battles
differ markedly in character, yet for both the stated motives include,
laconically, the opportunity they offer 'To kepe . . . harneys from þe
ruste'. Other lais work much more complexly with the doubled
narrative structure. In particular the extent to which the earlier
narrative is completed before the second gets under way varies
considerably. For instance, in *Lai le Freine* the heroine's recovery
from her disastrous birth is only partially complete before she is
threatened with the banishment from which she is saved ultimately

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[15] The most elaborate attempt known to me is the article by G. V. Smithers, 'Story-Patterns
in some Breton Lays', *Medium Aevum*, xxii (1953), 61–92; however, discovering antecedents in
Celtic and classical literature or tradition is a common form for critical discussion of *Sir Orfeo*
to take.

[16] For the English lais I have used the convenient collection in Vol. I of *The Middle English
Metrical Romances*, ed. W. H. French and C. B. Hale (New York, 1964), and M. Wattie's *The
Middle English Lai le Freine* (Northampton, Mass., 1929). T. C. Rumble's *The Breton Lais in
Middle English* (Detroit, 1965) contains a useful bibliography, but not always the best texts.

by the marriage which also formally completes the first narrative. That is a relatively slight degree of complication. *Degare*, on the other hand, is notably complex. Its narrative divides into the two phases in which the hero successively regains his mother and wins a wife. The complicating element is his quest for his father, which from one point of view constitutes digression from the second narrative phase, but which from another is clearly the culminating action of the first. Narrative incidents interlace to form several distinct histories, yet the lai in its entirety still appears to be firmly structured on the pattern of two successive narrative phases.

Curiously enough Chaucer seems to have been alert or responsive to the customary structural pattern. His 'Wife of Bath's Tale', carefully associated with the genre in its opening lines, possesses two plots in which the youthful, knightly, anti-hero first faces death and then marriage to an ancient hag—death and 'dampnacioun'. The securing of his life precipitates the chamber adventure: a wedding, wedding-night nerves, and resistance to his new wife which proves triumphantly unsuccessful. Chaucer's handling of his source tale is positively manneristic, as we can tell from comparing it with Gower's 'Florent', but at least here he follows the story. The same seems not so true of his 'Franklin's Tale' where he apparently reworks the original narrative into a kind of 'Planct Dorigen'. The first narrative phase sees Dorigen lament but survive her husband's self-imposed honour-seeking 'exile' from Armorica with apparent success:

> Arveragus, with heele and greet honour,
> As he that was of chivalrie the flour,
> Is comen hoom, and othere worthy men.
> O blisful artow now, thou Dorigen,
> That hast thy lusty housbonde in thyne armes,
> The fresshe knyght, the worthy man of armes,
> That loveth thee as his owene hertes lyf.

> (ll. 1087–93)

We then turn from their dancing, jousting, and good cheer, their 'joye and blisse', as Aurelius takes up the impossible task imposed upon him by Dorigen in the first phase as the condition for winning her love. The second phase sees her survive the lamentable peril of Aurelius's success, and finally sees Arveragus reclaim her as his wife in truth:

> Arveragus and Dorigen his wyf
> In sovereyn blisse leden forth hir lyf.
> Nevere eft ne was ther angre hem bitwene.

He cherissheth hire as though she were a queene,
And she was to hym trewe for evermore.

(ll. 1551-5)

Almost without exception the incidents which make up the
narrative phases of these lais, Chaucer's included, correspond to a
pattern which is typical of much romantic writing. Lais are initiated
by disaster or loss (of place, parents, etc.), and they are constituted of
the adventures which eventually conclude in recovery from the loss
suffered (return to place, parents, etc.). It has become customary to
point rather dismissively to the imprecision with which the term
'Breton lai' was applied to Middle English tales by their tellers, but in
this at least they are similar. It may not be wholly appropriate to seek
in them an identifiable Celtic origin, nor to expect an ambience of
mystery and magic, nor indeed formal resemblance to romances by,
for instance, Marie de France.[17] The English lais simply are different
from those of Marie. We might fairly say that they comprise a late
subgenre of the short romance, rather than a late, decadent,
recrudescence of a genre epitomized in Marie's lais. They are
different one from another in many respects, but as a group they are
generically distinctive. Chaucer's Franklin describes himself as a
'burel' man, not interested in 'rhethoryk' (stylish presentation), but
very willing to tell one of the old British stories, 'Of diverse
aventures' told for 'plesaunce'. We might take his adopted stance as
fair indication of how to approach definition of the medieval English

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[17] With respect to their plotting it is perhaps interesting that *Lai le Fresne* is the only one of
Marie's lais which obviously works a doubled-narrative. Her version of *Launfal* like the Middle
English translation *Landavall* does not contain the account of the hero's withdrawal from
Arthur's court as elaborated in Thomas Chestre's version. *Sir Launfal* is described by Bliss in
his edition (London, 1960), and others, as both late and in some sense learned; it is then all the
more interesting that Chestre, like Chaucer, reworks his source narrative so that it conforms to
the double-plot structure which I have described. No manuscript of *Landavall* dates from
earlier than the late fifteenth century, but its precedence is fairly conclusively shown by
Kittredge in his edition ('Launfal', *American Journal of Philology*, 10 (1889), 1-33). Chestre's
dependence upon it is argued persuasively by Bliss in the introduction to his edition of *Sir
Launfal*; he would date the couplet version to the first years of the fourteenth century.
Neither editor notes evidence which suggests that Chestre must have had access to a recension
of the Middle English translation from which all the extant texts deviate. At a number of
points, that is to say, *Launfal* and *Lanval* agree against *Landavall*: e.g. the date, St John's
Mass, of Launfal's return to Arthur's court (l. 618) is just 'Vpon a tyme' in *Landavall*; later the
queen leans out of the tower window to observe the dancing hero (l. 646; cf. *Lanval*, ll. 237-8)
and describes him as 'large' (l. 647; surely derived from Gawain's praise of him in *Lanval*, l.
231); Arthur on the other hand accuses him as 'Fyle' (l. 761; following *Lanval's* 'uilein plat', l.
364); later still Tryamour begins her successful attempt to save him by open display of her
beauties (ll. 979-80; *Lanval*, ll. 605-6), and is then herself greeted by Arthur (the evident
corruption of the manuscript from which the *Landavall* texts are derived is suggested by the
apparent disagreement of the pronoun 'hym' with its referent, the maidens who in this version
do the greeting).

Breton lai. As Breton in performance, not by provenance. It is a story-telling genre, distinguished less by its subject-matter or verse form than by the kind of story it tells (the pleasurable recovery of prosperity or place after a season or more of distress), and its articulation of that story by two linked plots.

Sir Orfeo conforms to this definition, despite being rather unusually sparing in its romantic incidents. I have remarked on the very considerable complication of the basic narrative pattern of the lais; but no lai is plotted in quite the complex fashion of *Orfeo*, which may explain in part at least why it has been so widely regarded as the best and most satisfying of them all. By their incidents, and by clear correspondences of detail, the two narrative phases in Orfeo are moulded so closely together that we feel the development of the one involves in some way the development of the other, until both close, as I have said, in the festive reunion of Orfeo and Heurodys with their people.

The very first lines of *Sir Orfeo* suggest consciousness, however conventional, of genre, and the complex development of the typical plotting of the lai tends to confirm that the consciousness is real enough. If we look more closely at the English lais other, typical, relations between them and *Orfeo* emerge, perhaps the most striking being generic interest in extramarital, or extraordinary, sexuality. Very commonly this takes the specific forms of rape or incest; resolution of the story is then achieved by putting to rights an aberrant sexual situation, by rationalizing it, circumventing or correcting it, but in any case coming to terms with the threat it poses, by the normal social means—i.e. by marriage. In *Lai le Freine* marriage remedies the sin of an unsanctioned sexual liaison (Holy Church commands it in the English, but not in Marie's French), after the threat of a marriage between the heroine's lover and her unknown sister (maybe not incest, but at least edging towards the Church's forbidden degrees); the sisters having been separated at birth because their mother feared the slander that their twinship proved her an adulteress. *Emare* concludes in the heroine's successive reunions with her husband and her father, the former having occasioned her second adventure, while the latter had begun the story by attempting to seduce her. Emare's husband ordered her banishment when he was misinformed by his mother that Emare had given birth to a monster, a demonstration that she was the fiend 'in worldly wede' that the mother had warned him against. Sir Gowther actually is the child of just such a liaison with a demon, and he himself wreaks rape and other havoc among the womenfolk of his lands, before undertaking the penitential adventure which concludes with his marriage to the Emperor's daughter. Degare is the son of the English king's

daughter by a faerie knight who takes her by force as she wanders, lost, in a strange land in the heart of a forest. She reveals her pregnancy to her maid, explaining her distress as fear in part that people will say— 'þat mi fader þe king hit wan / (And i ne was neuere aqueint wiȝ man!)' (ll. 167–8). Later Degare wins the prize of a lady's hand, and the lady is revealed, just in time, as his mother. Rape is threatened in the *Erl of Tolous*, and a charge made that the queen is an adulteress; in *Sir Launfal* the promiscuous queen first attempts to seduce the hero, then, when unsuccessful, charges that he made her adulterous propositions. By this time the hero is actually matched with a faerie mistress who eventually blinds the queen with the blast of her breath—an act of justice which the queen inadvertently called down upon herself, but also as potent an image of active sexual triumph as I can think of. Chaucer's romances depend upon like sexual irregularities. His 'Wife of Bath's Tale' begins with a rape, ends with a forced marriage, and includes prefatory comment on the displacement of fertile demon lovers by friars (who may dishonour women, who may impregnate them presumably, but who will not sire monsters). The 'Franklin's Tale', from one point of view, is almost wholly occupied with the adulterous ambition of Aurelius. Eventually his attentions are regarded by Dorigen as amounting not so much to 'folie' as 'oppressioun'; her second complaint is compounded of recollections of classical victims of sexual assault. Most interestingly Chaucer's 'Man of Law' brings into the foreground Chaucer's refusal to have anything to do with tales of incest, despite his devotion to tales of romance:

> And therfore he, of ful avysement
> Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons
> Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions.   (ll. 86–8)

The 'Man of Law' then tells a tale which is a version of the Emare story from which the threatened incest has been removed while the threat of rape has been multiplied. The accusation that the honourable marriage is in fact a monstrous liaison is retained, proof being the 'horrible . . . feendly creature' to which Constance has given birth:

> The mooder was an elf, by aventure
> Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
> And every wight hateth hir compaignye.
>
> (ll. 754–6)[18]

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[18] Chaucer may well intend the tale to be understood as a Breton lai. Gower's tale of Constance agrees with Chaucer's in placing the main adventure in the north of England, and he has a Welsh bishop officiate at Constance's wedding, but nowhere does he describe the

Although there is no explicitly aberrant sexuality in *Sir Orfeo* it is surely true that the abduction of Heurodys is remarkably like a daemonic rape; her first encounter with the faerie king leaves her 'reueyd', or 'ravysed', out of her wits. The whole treatment of the abduction, including the remarkable destruction and reconstruction of the queen's sexual identity through Orfeo's lament, suggests the poet is presenting his story in conformity with generic practice. Once again, if we recognize a lai convention we also must recognize how distinctive its treatment is in our poem. Further, it may not be entirely far-fetched to suggest that the children who figure quite prominently in the English lais are represented here by the Steward. Certainly it is he who reaps the benefit which normally is theirs by the customary romantic resolution of all sexual and social difficulties: succession to the throne is his in the final lines in accordance with the election made by Orfeo in his last speech.

Disguise is another common feature of the English lais, although we must use the term fairly loosely if we are to include all the means by which identity is concealed or made problematic.[19] There is straightforward disguise in the *Erl of Tolous*. More typically in *Lai le Freine*, *Emare*, and *Degare*, the equivocal names of the principal characters both effect concealment and provide the constant clue to identity; in the case of *Emare* the revelation of true identity is marked by the heroine's readoption of her true name. We might argue reasonably enough that the hero's inspiring change of heart and kind in *Sir Gowther* is capable of analysis in such terms too: his penitential muteness constitutes disguise obviously enough, yet through it he actually achieves his important, final, saintly identity. A similar disguise-transformation occurs in *Sir Orfeo* when the king is in exile, but more ordinary forms of disguise also feature prominently in his adventures. When Orfeo returns to Winchester he puts on the 'beggares clopes' before making his way to his court (lest he be recognized by the 'sclavain' he wore on leaving it ten years before?). Just so he effectively secured entrance to the faerie king's castle, in his

Christians among Alla's people as Britons, whereas Chaucer does at some length (ll. 540–61). Chaucer's familiarity with English lais is argued by L. H. Loomis, 'Chaucer and the Breton lays of the Auchinleck Ms.', *Studies in Philology*, 38 (1941), 14–38. My comments should give some support to her description of Chaucer's complex individual relationship with the talents of romance tradition.

[19] Disguise is common, of course, in romance writing in general. A pleasant modern example can be found in that most romantic of Mr Edmund Crispin's detective novels, *The Long Divorce*, where from the outset Professor Gervase Fen (the 'definitive edition of Langland' some years behind him) assumes the name Datchery from *Edwin Drood*. This disguise is recognized by the real romantic hero who suffers most manfully, and mostly in silence, until he secures happiness and marriage with the heroine, whose beauty is such as to set even Fen's heart racing, and who has so nearly been the victim of sexual assault by the book's major villains.

'sclavain', by pretending to be a 'pouer minstrel'. Orfeo's time in the
wilderness ruins his important (royal) identity, just as the visitation
of the faerie court destroyed Heurodys's; in each case the destruction
is effected poetically in terms of the courtly ideal which represents
their former lives. The recognition in the wilderness, one of the
other, then becomes not only affecting, but generically apt. Later,
and again it is affecting, we learn that within the faerie castle Orfeo
recognized Heurodys by her clothes, she being otherwise in the very
same condition as when taken by the faerie host (under the 'ympe
tre', and her face presumably scored by her own fingernails), like the
other folk who surround her in the various postures of their apparent
deaths.[20] Orfeo's time in the wilderness has left him similarly
ravaged, his body in emaciated guise, wasted and scarred, his beard
falling below his belt, 'blac and rowe'. The faerie king protests at the
harsh mismatching involved in Orfeo's request for Heurodys as his
reward. By it she is 'foule disparaged'? The gift of the lady is not so
much largesse as 'fol-largesse'? Heurodys is 'louesum, wiþouten lac',
but time has marched on for Orfeo and he is 'lene, rowe and blac'; the
beard which in the wilderness powerfully marked the passage of time
now forms the very disguise which makes possible the devious
recovery of the abducted queen. Subsequently, when Orfeo returns
with Heurodys to Winchester, the citizens exclaim at his emaciated
body and at his beard:

> Hou long þe here hongeþ him opan!
> Lo! Hou his berd hongeþ to his kne!

> (ll. 507–8)

As we have noted, they return to him his regal identity by shaving off
that beard, and clothing him in kingly attire.

I have argued that in various notable ways the narrative of *Sir
Orfeo* is artful within the conventions of romance, especially those of
the Middle English lais. It is impressive by any count. The rhetorical
practice of medieval romance-writing, and its phraseology, are
employed throughout *Orfeo*, but with such discretion that we are
struck rather by the lai's efficient poetic power. Again, it shares with
romances any number of fictive devices, objects, and situations, etc.,
which allow for negotiation of the story matter, but here too we are
impressed by its more than romantic success. There is a confidence in
the handling of character and incident which meets expectations of a
compositional economy. As I have noted *Orfeo* is unusually sparing
of incident but paradoxically impresses as more eventful than other

[20] In the Harley 3810 version Heurodys is identified by her 'glowes'; gloves are also
important to the identification of Degare; in other lais robes and/or rings serve this purpose.

English lais. Medieval romances tend to organize incidents into narrative serially; events and lives seeming indefinitely replicable. Narrative in the lais more distinctly spans the life of the hero/heroine, at least to the point where he or she achieves permanent well-being; two adventurous phases create the brief exemplary life of the main character. Clearly *Orfeo* is founded in this latter practice, yet achieves further concentration, by plunging us straight into the hero's life at the point where it becomes important: in the middle of life, and *in medias res*. The compression of time has its part in the compositional economy of the tale, so that we are provided with a significant history, a sense of character, a substantial life. In conclusion, I wish to suggest briefly how the thrust of this significant narrative is supported by the central images of the tree and the harp.[21]

However it is approached the story is that of Sir Orfeo; my argument has insisted further on the important redefinition of the legendary hero as kingly. That makes coherent the poem's purposeful opposition of two worlds: the human world of Orfeo's court, a good society deserving its good king; and the faerie world whose operations are intelligible up to a point, but always as irrational, extra-human force. The fittest images for the second world are derived from experience of dream or nightmare, and popular iconography of Hell. On the other hand, throughout the lai the rational, social, vision is represented, perhaps even preserved, by the harp and the music Orfeo is said to make upon it. Then, finally, there is the tree to articulate the passage from one level of experience to the other.

Orfeo's queen is closely associated by the narrative with the 'ympe-tre'; but Orfeo himself, in his time of abdication from royal authority, is connected even more intimately with the tree. When he turns 'en exile' to the wilderness his harp is lodged ('hidde') in a 'holwe tre';[22] he himself, returning from exile, impresses his people ('Erles and barouns bold / Buriays and leuedis') as 'y-clongen al-so a tre'. The reduction in the wilderness to this remarkable shape is differently presented in the different manuscripts of the tale, but in suggestive detail he becomes in the Auchinleck version 'oway duine' and 'al to-chine'. The gnarled sinewiness of an ancient tree seems not too far away; no further, at least, than his noted return to Winchester. In effect the image of the tree, variously presented at different points of

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[21] Hill, art. cit., has also argued for the centrality of these images, but in rather different terms.

[22] So in the Auchinleck MS. Less suggestively in the other versions the tree is Orfeo's proper habitat—in Ashmole 61 his 'haule'. The later comparison of Orfeo with a tree is absent from Harley 3810, but elaborated in Ashmole 61: 'þei seyd, euery-chon, / How þe mosse grew hym vpon.'

the poem (especially, as I have said, moments of transition), binds the two principal characters together in a single history of quite sacrificial devotion. Orfeo's other story, the political adventure which sees him act not as royally romantic hero, but rather as king, is dominated by the harp. Both images figure in both stories, but if we can agree that the tree associates Orfeo with Heurodys in passion, then essentially the harp represents the individual, rational, quality in Orfeo's life as a king, his *sapientia* especially as that is manifested in his royal eloquence.[23] The harp effects Orfeo's will in the world of the faeries, but in terms which recall the conventional expectation of kingly promise-keeping. It is the harp which so disconcerts the steward when Orfeo in temporary disguise returns with it to his court at Winchester. Once he is returned to his kingdom we hear of 'al maner menstraci', but we hear no more of the harp, for it is no longer necessary to this adventure. The hero is acclaimed: King Orfeo is himself again.[24]

[23] The understanding of wonder-working music as a figure of royal eloquence is quite common; cf. Lydgate on Amphioun in *Seige of Thebes* (ll. 201 ff.). The figurative identification of Orpheus (especially as son of Apollo and Calliope) with wisdom and eloquence is very common; see Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, v. c. 12: *Orpheus quasi aurea phones, id est bona eloquentie vox, que quidem Apollinis, id est sapientie, et Caliopis, que bonus interpretatur sonus, filia est.* Others who read Orpheus similarly include Nicholas Trivet (*Commentary on Boethius*), Dante (*Convivio*), and, eventually, Robert Henryson ('Orpheus and Eurydice').

[24] The suggestion implicit in my title for this article is at best half serious: Nicholas's 'melodie', sung to his 'gay sautrie', might be the lay of 'Orpheo Regis'. More to purpose, perhaps, it is rather curious that Chaucer's Miller couples an Annunciation hymn with some apparently more secular 'Kynges Noote' but still describes Nicholas's 'mery throte' as 'blessed'. His song might be some triumphal part of the *laudes regiae*, which would no doubt be the 'grete melody' which accompanies Sir Orfeo's reinstallment as king. For discussion of the *laudes*, their association with the acclamation, and second or festival coronations, see E. Kantorowicz, *Laudes Regiae* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1958); in an appendix on the music Manfred F. Bukofzer describes the version of the Sarum Use from Worcester as 'the most consistent and artistic variant of the laudes' (p. 194).