

The Intersection of Music Philosophy, Performance and Genre in the Middle English Breton Lay *Sir Orfeo*

Lisa Myers

University of New Mexico

The Middle English romance Sir Orfeo is a dynamic and creative retelling of the classical Orpheus myth in which the wife of the English king, Orfeo, is abducted by fairies but eventually restored to her position and husband through Orfeo's musical prowess. While any retelling of the Orpheus myth would necessarily contain references to music and would, therefore, likely use music as an important cue within the text, the poet of Sir Orfeo displays a sophisticated understanding of musical philosophy, composition and performance, as well as the Breton lay genre. The intersection of these elements all work together not only to create the impression of an actual performance within a written text, but also to emphasize the nature of music as a representation of cosmic harmony. By weaving music throughout the narrative, the poet reminds the reader that even in Orfeo's most desperate moments there is order and harmony in the universe, an implied foreshadowing of the happy ending, itself wrought through the power of music.

The classical myth of Orpheus was a popular source for writers in the Middle Ages. The versions of both Virgil and Ovid¹ were known to medieval readers, as well as Boethius's retelling of the tale at the end of Book III of the *Consolatio Philosophiae*.² In England, Alfred the Great's translation of Boethius also became a widely known source of the Orpheus myth.³ As with most stories inherited from the classical tradition, medieval writers adapted and transformed

1 Virgil's version of the myth is in *Georgics*, Book IV. The most comprehensive classical version of the Orpheus myth is contained in Books X and XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which tells of Orpheus's adventures as an Argonaut, the death of his wife Eurydice, his unsuccessful trip to the Underworld to recover her and his eventual death at the hands of the Maenads. Kelly, *Love and Marriage*, 91-92, asserts that Orpheus's death finally reunites the lovers as he is not metamorphosed.

2 Boethius uses the myth to emphasize the moral that one should not look back, but always forward.

3 Alfred, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolation of Boethius*. Alfred refashions his Orpheus as a medieval nobleman and expands on Boethius's moral to exhort his readers to turn away from their former sin lest temptation lure them back into iniquity.

the Orpheus narrative to suit their needs.⁴ In the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo*,⁵ the Greek musician becomes an English king whose wife, Heurodis, is kidnapped by a Fairy King and spirited away to the fairy world. Eventually Orfeo, now a dispossessed wild man of the forest, uses his music to make his way into the fairy realm where he successfully recovers his love. They both return to the human world and Orfeo regains his throne.⁶

John Block Friedman declares *Sir Orfeo* the most sophisticated retelling of the Orpheus myth up to the fourteenth century due to its reliance on the author's imagination instead of slavish dedication to the sources.⁷ An important aspect of that imagination is the artistic integration of music in a variety of forms. Scholars have long noted the intimate connection between music and this text. Erik Kooper uses this aspect of *Sir Orfeo* to illuminate its representa-

4 See Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, for a comprehensive overview of the history of the medieval Orpheus.

5 *Sir Orfeo* is contained in three manuscripts: National Library of Scotland MS Advocates' 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck Manuscript), British Library MS Harley 3810, and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61. For a parallel edition of all three poems see Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*. The Auchinleck is the earliest, dating from the 1330s, and is considered the most accurate surviving form of the poem, Bliss, Introduction to *Sir Orfeo*, ix-xvii.

6 This version, considered by many critics to be an exemplary romance, has been examined in many ways. Some areas of scholarship are listed here. For information on the Celtic origins of *Sir Orfeo* see Severs, "The Antecedents of Sir Orfeo," 187-207; Roger Sherman Loomis, "Sir Orfeo and Walter Map's *De Nugis*," 28-30; and Davies, "*Sir Orfeo* and *De Nugis*," 94. Some critics, such as Baldwin, "Fairy Lore and the Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," 129-42, and Mitchell, "The Faery World of *Sir Orfeo*," 155-159, have focused on the fairy aspects of the poem. Others have looked at *Sir Orfeo* as a Christian allegory in which the *impe-tre* is interpreted as the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden and the Fairy King as Satan; Orfeo then becomes Christ performing the Harrowing of Hell. On these Christian aspects see Grimaldi, "Sir Orfeo" 147-161, for the combination of the Celtic and the Christian. See also Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon Day Demon," 22-29, who examines *Sir Orfeo*'s connection to the Genesis story. See also Knapp, "The Meaning of Sir Orfeo," 263-273; and Masi, "The Christian Music of *Sir Orfeo*," 3-20. Psychological interpretations include a general perspective in Veldhoen, "Psychology and the Middle English Romances," 101-28. For a Jungian representation of the anima and the shadow see O'Brien, "The Shadow and the Anima," 235-54; and Martin, "*Sir Orfeo*'s Representation as Returns to the Repressed," 29-46; as well as Mumford, "A Jungian Reading," 291-302. For *Sir Orfeo* as a possible representation of insanity see Cartlidge, "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld," 195-226.

7 Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 178.

tion of medieval political ideology.⁸ E. C. Ronquist notes how the use of music helps to elevate the narrative, making its events more plausible to its audience.⁹ Along with Kooper, D. L. Jeffrey examines the symbolic importance of Orfeo's instrument.¹⁰ Closer to the purposes of this study, Robert M. Longworth¹¹ and Roy Michael Liuzza¹² have discussed the performance aspects embedded within the text and their effect upon the narrative. Although any retelling of the Orpheus myth would necessarily contain references to music and would, therefore, likely use music as an important cue within the text, the poet of *Sir Orfeo* displays a sophisticated understanding of various musical elements including philosophy, performance and composition that he skillfully utilizes within the form of the Breton lay, a genre also grounded in music. The unique intersection of these elements within a single work functions not only to create the impression of an actual performance within a written text, but also to emphasize the philosophical nature of music as a representation of cosmic harmony, thus foreshadowing the happy ending.

In order to investigate the various layers of music in *Sir Orfeo*, some discussion of medieval attitudes and beliefs regarding music is first necessary. In the Middle Ages, music was considered a branch of mathematics, part of the standard education based on the trivium and the quadrivium. In *De institutione arithmetica*, Boethius asserts that the study of mathematics, grounded as it is in factual knowledge, serves to lead the scholar away from sense perception in preparation for philosophical study,¹³ seemingly an odd proposal for a musician, but one consistent with Boethius's beliefs regarding music. His treatise, *De institutione musica*, (*The Fundamentals*

8 Kooper, "Two-fold Harmony," 115-32.

9 Ronquist, "The Powers of Poetry," 99-117.

10 Jeffrey, "The Exiled King," 45-60.

11 Longworth, "Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel's Art," 1-11.

12 Liuzza, "Sir Orfeo," 269-84.

13 Boethius, *De institutione arithmetica*, 7-12.

of Music)¹⁴ was the authoritative text on musical theory from the time of its composition in the fourth century until well into the Renaissance. While much of the text explicates complicated ratios and terminology, the underlying purpose is philosophical in nature. According to Boethius, the study of mathematics is the search for absolute truth. Music is unique in that, unlike the other branches, it penetrates to the soul; therefore, the study of music and music theory is the search for the indisputable truth of the soul.¹⁵ Boethius's most enduring contribution to the study of music is the connection of technical ratios to such philosophical principles, which, according to Henry Chadwick, makes the second chapter of Book I Boethius's most influential passage outside the *Consolatio Philosophiae*.¹⁶

Boethius's ideas were grounded in his belief in three types of music based upon the concept of the music of the spheres.¹⁷ The highest form is *musica mundana*, the music of the cosmos, in which the universe is arranged in a series of fixed modulations and perfect ratios that are in the same proportions as musical harmonies.¹⁸ Boethius's next level of music is *musica humana*, human music, the harmony that exists in the balance and symmetry of the body and between body and soul whose joinings are accomplished by the exact same ratios and modulations that hold the cosmos together:¹⁹

14 This work is available in one modern translation, Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*.

15 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 184-6. In this section of his treatise, Boethius draws examples from the everyday to prove the connection between music and soul. Male and female, young and old, people from different stations in life, all enjoy music. Furthermore, music has the power to express and excite human emotions.

16 Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations*, 81

17 This system of classification was highly influential in music theory throughout the Middle Ages.

18 Although there was some argument among philosophers regarding the concept of heavenly music, Boethius believed quite deeply in it and based many of his principles upon its existence. See Bukofzer, "Speculative Thinking in Mediaeval Music," 165-180, for a nice summary of the two sides of the *musica mundana* debate and its influence on medieval music (165-66). Bukofzer discusses ways in which the influence of Christianity changed the debate and elevated music to a means of spiritual salvation.

19 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 185-6.

“Tota nostrae animae corporisque compago musica coaptatione coniuncta sit” (The whole structure of our soul and body has been joined together by means of musical attachment).²⁰ Boethius’s third category is *musica instrumentalis*, instrumental music, which also includes the human voice. Although this is the lowest form, it reflects the more divine types in that pleasing harmonies employ the same ratios as the cosmos and the joining of body and soul.²¹ For this reason, music has great power over people.²²

Because of music’s connection to the divine, Boethius’s ultimate goal in his discussion of music theory is not the composition of pleasing songs, but an explication of truth that leads the music theorist away from the wavering judgment of sense perception to a method of discernment based upon divine ratios.²³ For Boethius, music should be judged according to these principles, not according to how it sounds to the individual. Citing Plato, Boethius asserts that music that does not utilize the appropriate musical proportions, especially ones that are rough, uncivilized or lascivious, can induce a degeneration of morality and the downfall of the republic.²⁴ Boethius admits that a song might sound good to the ear without the proper ratios, but for him, it would not change the fact that such music is a corruption of divine forms. For these reasons, Boethius exhorts students to study and understand the mathematical principles and ratios that constitute music theory:

Sicut enim in visu quoque non sufficit eruditis colores formasque conspiciere, nisi etiam quae sit horum proprietates investigaverint, sic non sufficit cantilenis musicis delectari, nisi etiam quali inter se coniunctae sint vocum proportione discatur.²⁵

20 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 186.

21 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 186.

22 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 187.

23 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 195-96.

24 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 181.

25 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 187. Boethius admits that the sense of hearing has a role in musical judgment, but he also asserts that, due to the inconsistent nature of personal preferences, reason is the truest method of discernment.

(Indeed, just as in seeing it is not sufficient for the learned to discern colors and figures unless they have also investigated their special qualities, so it is not sufficient for musicians to take pleasure in songs unless also acquiring knowledge of how they are joined together by means of the proper relation of tones.)

Such understanding allows the student of music theory to reach further within to understand the nature and order of the soul and of the cosmos. This is the crux for Boethius. It is not a method of creating pleasing entertainment, but a method of judging artistic works based upon a deeper philosophical purpose, one in which the music underscores the harmony of the soul and the universe. For this reason Boethius prioritizes the theorist over the performer and composer.

Boethius's beliefs were highly influential. In explicating music as an art grounded in mathematical and divine principles and not in the fleeting aspects of performance, Boethius secured it a place in the medieval curriculum not given to the other arts.²⁶ Even as music and the study of music evolved, at times rendering the technical aspects of *De institutione musica* outdated, the philosophical principles of Boethius continued to hold a strong influence well into the Renaissance. Boethius's ideas were disseminated through formal education in mathematics and philosophy, as well as through less academic instruction for composers and performers who would have been exposed to Boethian music philosophy, if not his technical explications of music theory.²⁷ We know nothing of the poet

26 Williams and Balensuela, *Music Theory from Boethius to Zarlino*, 26.

27 Works of music theory and performance, as well as works of philosophy continued to reference Boethius's triad, sometimes modified according to purpose and audience, whether intended for the writer or the performer of music or for the philosopher who required a theoretical knowledge of Boethian principles. See Seay, *Music in the Medieval World*, 22-3. *De Institutione Musica* became the foundation of music and according to Seay, "It is always clear that the essential framework is Boethian and that it is his doctrines that have determined the attitude," *Music in the Medieval World*, 20. As music evolved, Boethius continued to remain relevant. Atkinson, "Some Thoughts on Music Pedagogy" 37-51, demonstrates Boethius's relevance in his examination of ninth-century library catalogues. Additionally, Boethius's "venerated status" is confirmed in his being the most cited music theorist of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Williams and Balensuela, *Music Theory from Boethius to Zarlino*, 25-6. They list at least forty-six subsequent music theorists who were strongly influenced by *De Institutione Musica* including Guido of Arezzo (c. 991-after 1033) who is credited with the development of the musical staff, Roger Bacon (1214-1292), Johannes de Muris (c. 1290-after 1344) whose *Musica Speculativa Secundum Boetium*, which comments on select passages of *De Institutione Musica*, was used as a textbook in Paris and Oxford, and the humanist and leading Italian musician of the Renaissance Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590).

who composed *Sir Orfeo* or of the poem before its appearance in the Auchinleck Manuscript, probably compiled in London in the 1330s,²⁸ but the text of *Sir Orfeo* argues for a poet who received education in these concepts and in composition and performance.

Although utilizing a written medium, the poet of *Sir Orfeo* represents music within the narrative in specific ways that replicate its aural nature, thereby imbuing the text with a musical quality that emphasizes a belief in the ordering aspects of harmony in the universe. He draws upon it as a form of characterization and plot device, embeds performance cues within climatic scenes and references the oral tradition of the written genre, the Breton lay. The intersection of these many aspects of musical forms in one text is unique, even in the corpus of the musically-based genre of the Breton lay.²⁹ Because *Sir Orfeo* is in a written form³⁰ and not an oral form, by embedding Boethian philosophy within the musical motif and by using textual cues and forms related to music, the poet keeps the harmonic and ordering aspects of harmony prominent in the mind of the reader, not only foreshadowing the eventual resolution of the tale, but making it a necessary alteration.

The most obvious use of music in *Sir Orfeo* is as a key component in the characterization of Orfeo and as a specific element of his journey to recover his wife and kingdom, setting the multi-layered importance of music to the text. Particular plot points illustrate this importance. At the beginning of the lay, Orfeo and his kingdom exist in a state of harmony, which is intimately connected to Orfeo's

28 Laura Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript" 592-627.

29 Commonly accepted texts of this genre include: *Sir Orfeo*, *Degaré*, *Sir Gowther*, *Emare*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Launfal*, and Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*. As discussed below, however, the Breton lay can be a difficult genre to define and the inclusion of some of these texts is uncertain. See Note 67.

30 The present discussion is based solely upon an analysis of the text as a written form. Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, discusses *Sir Orfeo* in terms of medieval discourses and examines the political and social purposes of an actual performance event of this text. While I do not dismiss the possibility of a public or private reading of *Sir Orfeo* to an audience large or small, such readings would not be conducted as a musical performance, *per se*.

use of music. The narrative opens in Winchester, the capital of Orfeo's kingdom, and he is introduced as a lover of music who himself is the greatest of harpers.³¹ The poet's description of the king displays the role of music in Orfeo's just rule:

In the world was never man born
That, onus Orpheo sat byforn
And he myght of his harpyng her,
He shulde think that he wer
In one of the joys of Paradys
Suche joy and melody in his harping is.³² (33-39)

Orfeo's music mirrors the melodies of "Paradys," affirming the connection between heavenly and earthly harmony that, according to Boethian principles, helps to preserve peace and concord among Orfeo's subjects and within society. This harmony extends to his marriage; Heurodis's impassioned pleas after the visitation of the Fairy King exhibit their unity and closeness. When, after his wife's capture by the Fairy King, Orfeo feels compelled to leave Winchester with only his harp, the outcry against his departure resounds in court and town emphasizing both a universal love for Orfeo and a need for the stability he creates. It is notable that the most obvious skill the poet attributes to Orfeo is his musical abilities. While his actions later in the poem display his quick wit and political astuteness, the poem highlights Orfeo's musical abilities as if they are the main source of his kingly authority. Although the poem quickly moves into a state of disintegration, the opening supplies enough information to depict a connection between Orfeo's role as a harper king and the harmony of his world. As Alan J. Fletcher articulates, "Harping performs social normality for Orfeo, Heurodis, and their kingdom"³³

31 The harp has a kingly tradition and is most notably associated with Apollo and King David. Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 80-81, discusses the high status of harpers in fourteenth-century England.

32 *Sir Orfeo* quotations are taken from *Sir Orfeo*, in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 174-190.

33 Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 79.

an assertion that is born out in the resolution of the narrative, later accomplished through Orfeo's music.

This characterization situates Orfeo within Boethius's three categories of musician: performer, composer and theorist.³⁴ The text states explicitly that Orfeo is an exemplary performer and his speech near the conclusion, to be discussed below, shows his skill as a composer. The theorist, however, is the highest category as the theorist relies upon cold reason, not the sense of hearing. While there are no direct statements of Orfeo as a music theorist, his ability to propel his listener into the 'joys of Paradys' displays Orfeo's understanding of divine harmonics. In addition, the resolution of his tale through his skill in music argues for his reliance upon the ordering aspects of harmonic ratios.

In the middle section of the poem, the poet creates a disintegration of Orfeo into a wild man of the forest while continuing to use music as an important plot point and aspect of characterization. Orfeo's ten-year, self-imposed withdrawal into the wilderness emphasizes the loss of his wife³⁵ and is illustrated by his collapse into the wild man condition³⁶ as articulated by Richard Bernheimer.³⁷ As a man brought low due to extraordinary circumstances, a wild man will lose some of his humanity, but these deficiencies are replaced by powers that other humans do not possess.³⁸

34 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 224-25. Boethius asserts that harmonics, the faculty that distinguishes between high and low tones, is a mental function that employs reason in order to make sense of the jumbled sounds received aurally, 352-53.

35 Sir Orfeo's retreat into the wilderness at this point is an expansion of a short addition in Alfred the Great's version of the story. The poet accounts for this expansion by Orfeo's desire to escape the company of women: "For now Ic have mi Quen y-lore, / The fairest levedi that ever was bore, / Never eft I nil no woman se" (209-11).

36 Other wild men of medieval romance include Lancelot, Tristan and Ywaine.

37 In *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* Bernheimer describes the wild man as a hairy combination of human and animal traits, but most definitely a human reduced to this state by "outrageous hardships" and certainly not an ape or some separate species. A wild man will live alone on nuts, berries, sometimes raw meat, sleep in wild places and become very hairy," 1-8.

38 Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, 9.

For Orfeo, the poet intertwines the wild man and the musician, heightening Orfeo's already remarkable skills. Not only is music Orfeo's only source of comfort: "his harp, whereon was al his gle" (267), a common aspect of wild man stories,³⁹ it also impacts his interactions with the forest wildlife, since, when he plays, the animals gather about his hollow tree. Although a common aspect of the Orpheus myth, this particular power does not manifest itself in *Sir Orfeo* until he has spent many years as a wild man in the wilderness. This state, therefore, heightens Orfeo's musical abilities and creates a bridge between worlds, highlighting the nature of the forest as a mysterious borderland between realms.⁴⁰ The details regarding the animals mark Orfeo's transcendence beyond the human state.⁴¹ In his newly heightened condition, Orfeo sees what he could not see before when he had futilely attempted to protect Heurodis with a shield wall. Now, he is able to perceive the fairies in the forest. When he sees Heurodis among them, he follows them into the fairy realm. Although his transcendence as a wild man in the forest enables him to find Heurodis, his music, as a representation of order in the universe, is the key to winning her back.

Orfeo's journey into the fairy realm puts him face to face with the very force that has created the degeneration of his world. The fairy realm "is neither an afterworld nor an underworld. It is actually a counter world which exists side by side with the world of man"⁴² resulting in parallels and doubles that emphasize the sinister aspects of the fairy realm. The Fairy Kingdom has a king and queen,

39 Music is a common source of comfort to the wild man as shown in the *Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Its soothing powers are demonstrated in the Old Testament when King David calms Saul with his harp (I Kings 16:16-23). Likewise, Boethius points to the calming powers of music, *De institutione musica*, 186.

40 In romance, the forest functions as the location of mysterious trials that allow the knight to prove himself outside the human world and beyond the calculated risks of the court. See Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*.

41 Other wild men who develop mysterious powers include the Welsh prophets Lailoken and Merlin from *Vita Merlini*.

42 Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 190.

a palace and subjects like the world of Orfeo and Heurodis as well as many heavenly elements:

Within ther wer wide wones,
Al of precious stones—
The werst piler on to biholde
Was al of burnist gold.
...
Bi al thing him think that it is
The proude court of Paradis. (368-68, 375-76)

But Orfeo must also pass by figures kept in a state of suspended animation, contorted and mutilated, reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, creating a sense of unordered chaos.⁴³ Among these figures is "Dame Heurodis, his lef liif, / Slepe under an ympe-tre" (406-7),⁴⁴ just as she had been the last time he saw her, even wearing the same clothes, although it has been ten years. In its depiction of the fairy realm as a twisted reflection of the human world, the text stresses the threatening aspects of this hidden kingdom, already displayed in the kidnapping of Heurodis and the collapse of society in the withdrawal of Orfeo into the forest.

A lack of music, the element that represents divine order, highlights the threatening aspects of this eerie kingdom. Boethius warns that crude rhythms and tones lead to a degeneration of civilization, but here, a complete absence of song marks a hellish society that threatens the stability of the human world. The fairy land is a visual domain, as opposed to Orfeo's world of music, described in blinding terminology: "as bright so sonne on somers day" (352). The castle is "clere and schine as cristal" (358), and is made of red and burnished gold, precious stones, and crystal (355-68). Due to the ever-radiating nature of these materials, night never comes to the fairy world:

43 Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 74-5. See also Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo," 102-111.

44 The exact significance of the *impe tre* is unclear. Sitting under a tree close to mid-day seems to be an invitation to a fairy visitation in medieval romance as evidenced by *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gowther*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. Christian readings see the tree as significant in identifying Heurodis with Eve (see note 6). Also see Jirsa, "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre," 141-151.

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. (369-72)

Even the clothes of the Fairy King and Queen “schine so bright / That unnethe bihold he hem might” (415-16).⁴⁵ The blinding, visual aspects of this world stand in sharp contrast to Orfeo’s musical intentions and even to the auditory features of the human realm represented by the trumpets, tabors, harps, and minstrels of the court in Winchester.⁴⁶ Orfeo gains admittance to the fairy court by identifying himself as a traveling minstrel, though, from the Fairy King’s surprise at Orfeo’s visit, it is apparent that music and musicians are a foreign concept in this land. Orfeo must explain that minstrels travel so that “we mot proferi forth our gle!” (434). If music mirrors and reflects the ordering principles of the universe and the former harmony of Orfeo’s kingdom, the lack of music in the fairy world denotes a sinister society that is out of sync with the harmonious principles of divine organization.

Once admitted to the court, Orfeo uses his skill in music to begin the process of restoring order to his world. Where military tactics had failed in protecting Heurodis, music provides the opportunity of rescuing her. Orfeo penetrates into a magical world and uses the magic of music to conquer it.⁴⁷ His playing is so remarkable that the Fairy King grants Orfeo anything he would like; Orfeo asks for Heurodis, but the Fairy King does not immediately relinquish her. Instead he attempts to persuade Orfeo to a more suitable choice:

“Nay!” quath the king, “that nought nere!
A sori couple of you it were—
For thou art lene, rowe and blac,
And sche is lovesum, withouten lac;
A lothlich thing it were, forthi,
To sen hir in thi compayni.” (457-62)

45 See Lerer, “Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*,” 92-109, for more on the visual ornamentation of the fairy world.

46 The steward’s hall is full of music (521-25) and minstrels are always welcome (515-19).

47 Veldhoen, “Psychology and the Middle English Romances,” 118.

The fairy world's emphasis on the visual prevents the Fairy King from seeing that Orfeo and Heurodis are a perfect match even though Orfeo's appearance has so deteriorated. Although the Fairy King recognizes the beauty of the music, his lack of true comprehension, the fact that Orfeo's music does not actually change the king or alter his perspective, perhaps reflects the fairy world's reliance upon the senses in judging the performance rather than any true understanding of divine ratios, counter to Boethius's injunctions. It also displays the non-human nature of the fairies. Boethius asserts that the human soul and body are joined according to the same ratios as the cosmos and as pleasing music, which explains music's power over mankind. The Fairy King's resistance of the ordering aspects of music displays his threatening Otherness. Orfeo, instead, must insist that the king fulfill his rash promise⁴⁸ and the lovers are finally reunited. Although Orfeo achieves his wife through a loophole, music, nevertheless, is his tool for success.

Orfeo regains his wife, but to complete his quest to restore harmony, he must return to the human world and restore order to his kingdom. Still in disguise, he and Heurodis travel to Winchester where, once again, music is his admittance to a court where he can regain what he has lost. Although he is allowed into the court because he is a minstrel—the steward asserts that minstrels are always welcome in honor of King Orfeo—even when he sings in the hall, Orfeo is not recognized. Instead, the harp he carries is identified as the one belonging to the long-lost king.⁴⁹ The recognition of the harp, and not the man, not only reemphasizes the importance of music to the text, but also reaffirms the connection between musical performance and the action of the poem as well as reasserting the former nature of Orfeo's just rule as being intimately connected to his role as a harper-king. After testing the steward's loyalty, Orfeo stands up and tells the court his story, discussed below, reclaiming his position.

48 As Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 85, notes, the reluctance of the Fairy King to honor his promise is another example of the visual veneer of the fairy world where pretty words are spoken without regard to their underlying consequence.

49 For more on Orfeo's harp see Jeffrey, "The Exiled King," 45-60.

After restoring Heurodis, music now restores order in the kingdom, which follows Boethius's assertion that music is a force of preservation of the republic. The plot of *Sir Orfeo* demonstrates not only the importance of music to the design of the narrative, but also the ways in which music is employed as an integral aspect of the narrative, characterization, and setting of the text. The poet creates a version of the Orpheus tale that relies on Boethius's philosophical principles of music as a force that maintains and restores harmony in a hostile world rather than the original myth's insistence upon human futility in the face of death.

Sir Orfeo also contains within its written text cues of musical performance that are not just vestiges of any possible oral transmission, but an integral aspect of the written text used to underscore the importance of music to the narrative and the ordering aspects of harmony in an uncertain world. The rhyming couplets and rhythm of the poem mimic elements of song, while other specific narrative techniques and plot points recall components of performance. As already demonstrated, the narrative itself, in which art prevails over threatening forces, places a high value upon performance and its ability to restore and heal.⁵⁰ According to Ronquist, the prologue of *Sir Orfeo*, which will be discussed in greater detail below, partly serves to prepare the reader to view the poem in some ways as if it were an actual performance due to its use of direct address and personal pronouns.⁵¹ Also, the first key that Orfeo, through his wild man period of disintegration in the forest, is on the verge of restoring harmony and regaining his wife comes just before he plays for the Fairy King when he "tempreth his harp, as he wele can" (437). Likewise, before his performance for the steward, "He toke his harp and tempred schille" (526).

50 Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 84.

51 Ronquist, "The Powers of Poetry," 100.

The tuning of his instrument symbolizes the bringing of the various aspects of his life, and, in the instance of the court, society, back into harmony.⁵² Furthermore, these elements represent important aspects of a real performance that readers would identify as the prelude to musical entertainment, making the performances in *Sir Orfeo* more realistic by connecting them to an imagined aural event. For Boethius, tuning is more than just a practical matter. He defines consonance, or harmony, as a mixture of high and low sounds that blend together as opposed to dissonance in which intermingled sounds do not blend creating harshness.⁵³ Since consonance is dependent upon adherence to strict ratios, which can only be maintained through the proper tuning, it is an important prerequisite for harmonious music. Therefore, tuning, literally and symbolically, signals Orfeo's return to his former harmonious life.⁵⁴

The only detailed performance in the poem is Orfeo's speech at court that reveals his true identity. None of the songs that Orfeo sings are preserved in the poem; therefore, this speech is the clearest indication of his gifts and abilities⁵⁵ as both a performer and composer. He begins by saying, "Lo, Steward, herkne now this thing" (556-7). This opening of his speech, a call to attention for both the listeners in the hall and the reader anxiously awaiting a resolution, resembles the opening of a narrative song that might be sung by a bard in a royal hall as if Orfeo's own story is an epic tale. Notable is Orfeo's use of the subjunctive voice in which he announces his return in hypothetical statements:

52 Kooper, "Two-fold Harmony," 126.

53 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 195.

54 Romance heroes generally experience a transformative event that prepares them for the completion of their quests. Orfeo's ten years as a wild man in the forest is a sort of period of "tuning" that heightens his skills and gives him the ability to see the fairies.

55 Ronquist, "The Powers of Poetry," 108.

. . . Lo,
Steward, herkne now this thing:
Yif Ich were Orfeo the King,
And hadde y-suffred ful yore
In wildernisse miche sore—
And hadde y-won mi Quen o-wy
Out of the lond of fairy—
And hadde y-brought the levedi hende,
Right here to the tounes ende,
And with a begger her in y-nome—
And were miself hider y-come
Poverlich to the, thus stille,
For to asay thi gode wille,
And Ich founde the thus trewe—
Thou no schust it never rewe!
Sikerlich, for love or ay,
Thou schust be King after mi day—
And yif thou of mi deth hadest ben blithe,
Thou schust have voided, also swithe. (556-574)

His speech gives all the details of his journey, yet always remains conjectural.⁵⁶ He leaves it to the audience of the court to make the connection between the story and the truth. Ronquist feels that this interaction shows the relationship between any poet and audience in which the poet creates a fiction and the audience willingly participates in that fiction.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the use of the subjunctive represents that aspect of a performance in which the audience can choose to either make that connection, by participating in the imagination required to enjoy the performance, or by willingly resisting the imagined world created by the poet. Here, the audience of the hall not only participates in the imagination of performance, but also

56 The role of lyrics in music is not directly discussed by Boethius in *De institutione musica*. He does label the voice as an instrument implying that it functions in concert with other instruments and he does categorize three types of vocal performance: continuous, as used in speaking and recitation, singing and an intermediate form between the two used for heroic poetry, 199. The only conclusion is that Boethius expects the voice to function within his explication of music theory and philosophy. It is not clear, however, how he views the messages conveyed through the words vocalized. In *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Lady Philosophy banishes the Muses of Poetry, and yet, Boethius continues to use meters throughout the work, which may imply ambivalence towards the function of poetry and therefore lyrics.

57 Ronquist, "The Powers of Poetry," 107.

accepts the truth of the tale and restores Orfeo to his throne. The reader, presumably, has already chosen to suspend disbelief and participate in Orfeo's tale, but experiences the suspense of the moment through the conjectural nature of his discourse. The reader knows the truth of the speech, but is forced to wait to see if the court will accept it. The poet creates not only an act, like the tuning of the harp, that would be a familiar aspect of performance, but also a textual representation of the verbal, aural, and imagined aspects of such an entertainment. As the poet employs this speech to call-up a performance situation, he also embeds the echo of musical presentation, thereby emphasizing the order that harmony represents as Orfeo is finally, after this performance, restored to all he has lost.

Self-awareness in the process of musical composition and performance as displayed in the generic form of *Sir Orfeo* is the final element that completes the poet's saturation of the text with markers of musical philosophy. Often considered one of the best and most entertaining of the Middle English romances, *Sir Orfeo* is also clearly a Breton lay,⁵⁸ a form that contains embedded within it a rich heritage and strong basis in musical composition with important distinctions between the *lai*, Breton *lai* and Breton lay.⁵⁹ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, short, lyric poems on traditional and legendary themes called *lais* were composed in France.⁶⁰ Although none of these *lais* survive, A. J. Bliss draws upon evidence from Wace and the *Roman de Tristan*, to describe them as short, lyric songs performed on the harp or rote in which the music is as important as the lyrics.⁶¹ Constance Bullock-Davies uses similar evidence to additionally assert that the term *lai* could also refer to the performed melody, not just the lyrics and could sometimes exist

58 The Breton lay is generally considered a sub category of the romance genre. Vial, "The Middle English Breton Lays," 175-191, identifies the Breton lay as a separate genre.

59 Abrams and Harpham, "Lai," 191, and Murfin and Ray, "Lai," 263. Both draw distinctions between the three forms and identify the forms through the terms and spellings used above.

60 Murfin and Ray, "Lai," 263.

61 Bliss, Introduction to *Sir Orfeo*, xxviii.

separate of any lyrics,⁶² placing more emphasis on the music than the words. Through references in *Floire et Blanceflor*, *Lai de l'Espine*, and the *Prose Lancelot*, it is clear there was at least one oral, lyric *lai* composed on the myth of Orpheus.⁶³

The *lai* form evolved into the genre later used by the *Orfeo* poet. Towards the end of the twelfth century, Marie de France, writing in Old French, although in England, adapted the *lai*, and wrote in the genre known as the Breton *lai*, which is a narrative that draws upon Celtic and Arthurian subject material that involves fairies and supernatural elements and that emphasizes faithful love.⁶⁴ English writers in the fourteenth century adapted this form into the Breton lay, using an Anglicized spelling.⁶⁵ Although some of the Breton lays, such as *Sir Launfal* and *Lay le Freine*, have French antecedents in the form of the Breton *lai*, no such source survives for *Sir Orfeo*, though Bliss feels that circumstantial evidence argues for one.⁶⁶ It is an expression of this complete process from oral song to written narrative that Claire Vial identifies as the key to a true Breton lay and the Breton lay genre. Additionally, she identifies a three-step process of a lived adventure, a song commemorating the adventure and the bestowment of a title upon the song.⁶⁷ Such a process is

62 Bullock-Davies, "The Form of the Breton Lay," 18-31.

63 Bliss, Introduction to *Sir Orfeo*, xxx-xxxii. Using similar methods, Bliss also identifies lost lais devoted to *Chevrefoil*, *Guirun*, *Tristan*, *Graelent*, *Merlin*, *Arthur*, *Brandon*, *Tintagel*, *Thisbe* and *Dido*.

64 Murfin and Ray, "Lai," 263.

65 Murfin and Ray, "Lai," 263.

66 Bliss, Introduction to *Sir Orfeo*, xl-xli. Stewart, "King Orphius," 1-16, recognizes the similarities between *Sir Orfeo* and the sixteenth-century Scottish *King Orphius*. Although not the focus of her argument, much like Bliss's hypothesis, she admits the possibility of a lost French language version. Lyle, "Three Notes on *King Orphius*," 51-68, revisits the relationship between the two texts and the search for a lost common antecedent.

67 Vial, "The Middle English Breton Lays" 176-77. Vial makes a distinction between the earlier, true Breton lays and the later, false lays that claim the form but do not show an awareness of the process of composition. She labels the following as false: *Emare*, *Sir Gowther*, and *The Erle of Tolous*. *Degaré* she labels as problematic and a possible parody of the genre. Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, she classifies as a clever forgery but not a true Breton lay.

detailed in both the prologues and epilogues of *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay Le Freine*, and *Sir Launfal*, displaying an authorial awareness of the generic requirements and the progression of the terms as discussed above.

In this trajectory from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, the myth of Orpheus probably traveled through several versions of these forms to arrive at the Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*. Although the other forms do not survive today, textual evidence argues that *Sir Orfeo* has embedded within it a long tradition that began in the oral lyric. As Vial asserts, this process emphasizes the originality of the new form while also calling upon the authority of the past forms.⁶⁸ Vial uses this layering to define the Breton lay, but it also emphasizes the poet's choice of a very specific genre for a tale that probably originated in a performed piece that included music, and therefore, would conform to harmonic principles.

Within the poem, the generic conventions of the prologue and the epilogue mimic the act of oral performance, reinforce the other musical elements within the narrative and exhibit the process of composition necessary to the Breton lay genre.⁶⁹ The prologue, lines 1- 38,⁷⁰ provides a conduit into the narrative by telling of the ability of music to describe wondrous stories and that Bretons, especially, liked to turn marvelous events into lays:

68 Vial, "The Middle English Breton Lays," 181-82.

69 Seay notes the close connection between language, poetry and music inherited from classical works. He sees this connection as the basis of Western music. "Classical Metrics and Medieval Music," 59-67.

70 While the Auchinleck manuscript contains the definitive text of *Sir Orfeo*, it is missing the prologue to the poem. The accepted practice, supported by Bliss and Shepherd, is to reconstruct the prologue from *Lay le Freyne*, also contained in the Auchinleck manuscript, supplemented with readings from Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61. Other studies of this prologue include Guillaume, "The Prologues," 458-64, as well as Foulet, "The Prologue of *Sir Orfeo*," 46-50.

In Breteyne bi hold time
This layes were wrought (so seith this rime)
Of aventures that fall by dayes—
Wherof Brytouns made her layes;
When kinges might our y-here
Of ani mervailes that ther were,
Thai token an harp in gle and game
And maked a lay and yaf it name.
Now of this aventours that weren y-falle
I can tel sum, ac nought alle—
Ac herkneth, lordinges that ben trewe,
Ichil you telle *Syr Orphewe*. (13-24)

While this opening fulfills the generic requirements of the self-aware Breton lay as defined by Vial, it also uses the performance cue of direct address to prepare the reader for the performance aspects of the poem. In addition, it foreshadows the resolution of the tale in that Orfeo will experience a marvelous adventure and a song will be composed about it. Within the narrative proper, Orfeo's speech to reveal himself in the steward's hall, as given above, creates a meta moment in mirroring this same process of composition in that he himself had lived through a noteworthy experience that he then transformed into a poetic performance. This displays not only the poet's knowledge of the genre, but also his projection of that same process onto his main character, creating a multi-dimensional layering of the generic conventions that are themselves grounded in musical composition. While Orfeo's speech is not sung, the prologue does make the connection between these commemorative performances and music explicit. Within the world of the poem, Orfeo's speech functions as his own Breton lay; for the reader, the surviving Breton lay *Sir Orfeo* functions as the commemorating song.

Likewise, the epilogue concludes the lay by applying the generic process given in the prologue to the narrative of the text, completing the final step in the creation of the Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*:

Harpours in Bretaine after than
Herd hou this mervaille bigan,
And made her-of a lay of gode likeing,
And nempned it after the King.
That lay *Orfeo* is y-hote—
Gode is the lay, swete is the note!
Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care;
God graunt ous alle wele to fare. Amen. (597-604)

In addition to the self-aware conclusion, the poet binds together the narrative and the history of musical performance crucial to this genre, even though this is a written text: “Gode is the lay,” the written word, “swete is the note,” the performed music (602).⁷¹ The prologue and the epilogue, then, bracket the narrative with a reminder of the relationship of a former lai by “harpours in Bretaine” to the current text and to the use of music and performance cues within the narrative itself.⁷² While Boethius is silent on the role of lyrics within his system of harmonics, the *Orfeo* poet’s connection of the verbal aspect of a performance to the aural representation of divine harmony within a tale that itself employs music as a representation and agent of order implies the importance of the lyrics to the integrity of the performance. These elements all replicate features of music within a written medium underscoring a belief in the harmonizing aspects of music.

According to Longworth, *Sir Orfeo* is about the assertion of order in the face of circumstances that cause disorder.⁷³ In the end, Orfeo’s skills restore harmony within the world of the poem by returning both Heurodis and the kingdom to the hero. Due to its consistent presence within the text, however, music also functions as a reminder of divine order, underscoring the eventual happy ending. If the poet had received even a basic education in musical principles,

71 On the interaction between oral and textual composition see Liuzza, “*Sir Orfeo*,” 269-84, and Longworth, “*Sir Orfeo*, The Minstrel and the Minstrel’s Art,” 1-11.

72 For more on the performance aspects see Jeffrey, “The Exiled King,” 45-60, and Ronquist, “The Powers of Poetry,” 99-117.

73 Longworth, “*Sir Orfeo*, The Minstrel and the Minstrel’s Art,” 8.

the resulting influence of the Boethian musical philosophy of completion and harmony makes the poet's changes to the Orpheus myth necessary. Since music represents order, the "greatest of harpers" should have the ability to restore order by regaining his wife and kingdom: "By rearranging of the details, a tragic story about the impotence of art against the processes of nature, becomes a celebration of the powers of harmony over the unregenerate forces that threaten society."⁷⁴ In a Christian world where all must succumb to divine will, music, believed to represent celestial order, triumphs over the sinister forces that threaten a just society. *Sir Orfeo* is a confirmation of hope and faith in divine providence.

Sir Orfeo is a musical text on many levels, the synergistic effects of which work together to reinforce the deeper principles of the poem regarding the loss and reestablishment of internal harmony both personal and social and a belief in the divine ordering of the universe. By weaving music throughout the narrative, the poet reminds the reader that even in Orfeo's most desperate moments, there is a greater force at work in the cosmos, assuring that the completion of the tale, wrought through the power of music, will restore harmony to the hero and the land. All together these components fulfill Boethius's injunction to artists to rise above the merely pleasant in their works by representing divine forms of harmony.

Lisa Myers is a PhD Candidate in Medieval Studies in English at the University of New Mexico. Her primary research focus is environmental literary history and the representation of the wilderness in medieval literature. She has taught courses on Shakespeare and Robin Hood and is the 2014 recipient of the Paul Davis and Cheryl Fresch Literature Teaching Award.

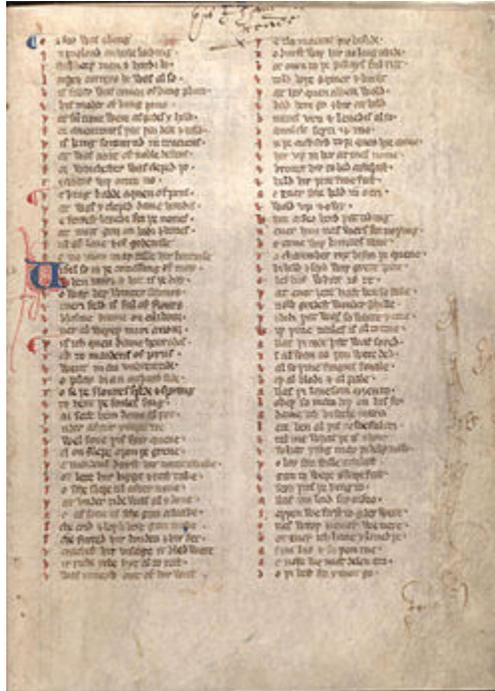
74 Veldhoen, "Psychology and the Middle English Romances," 116.

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First page of Sir Orfeo
from the Auchinleck MS, c. 1330