

Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*

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THIS ARTICLE HAS THREE PURPOSES. The first is to consider two kinds of response to myth, which I will call "allegorization" and "remythification," whose interplay sustains a myth, keeping it alive through time. The second is to illustrate these two kinds of responses with examples drawn from the medieval reception of the Orpheus myth and, in particular, through a study of a medieval remythification of the Orpheus story, *Sir Orfeo*, and modern critical allegorizations of that remythification. The third purpose is to indicate the role and significance for literary interpretation of the *merveilleux* or faerie in the medieval author's remythification of the story.

The response to myth which I am calling allegorization consists of two moments.¹ The first moment is the perception of the explanatory or paradigmatic power of a narrative—a recognition of it

¹"Allegorization" is an obvious term for the counter-process to "remythification" (for this term, see below) and has been used in a similar way by Karlfried Froehlich to describe 'a method [which had already been] practiced for centuries in hellenistic scholarship' when it was taken over by Christian exegetes and which aimed at making texts "reflecting a much older culture and state of consciousness" useful and relevant to the interpreter's present ('Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One's Soul' *The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century*," in Earl Miner, ed., *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977] 20). Some people will prefer to retain the term "allegoresis" for this counter-process, the two terms are synonymous and the use of one or the other is largely a matter of taste. "Allegorization" seems to me clearer and more descriptive for an English audience. An important and useful discussion of allegorization is to be found in Morton Bloomfield's essay, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3 (1971/72): 301–17.

as myth This general perception is followed, in a second moment, by the discovery and elaboration of a particular meaning We move from a feeling that "this seems to mean something" to an assertion that "this means that" What permits us to move from the first moment to the second is the discovery or choice of a context and a code which will enable us to produce a meaning In the case of *Sir Orfeo*, for example, some critics have thought that the poem is best read in a Christian context and explain it in terms of Christian history and doctrine Other critics prefer to read the poem in a Celtic context and decode it using Celtic mythology Yet others read the poem in historical, philosophical or poetic contexts

Once we have chosen a context, its corresponding code helps us to produce or elaborate a meaning and assign a place and a value to the narrative within the chosen context This allegorization, however, is not an isolated endeavor It asserts, at least implicitly, the general merit of the chosen context and code and their power to produce meaning and organize a body of narratives To claim that a poem receives its best meaning—or its true meaning—when it is read in a particular context is at some level an attempt to annex or capture that poem for that context The more texts a given context is able to explain and organize—annex and capture—the more powerful, comprehensive and valid it proves itself to be Differences of opinion between critics about the meaning of a particular narrative are thus the concrete and punctual manifestations, the flash points, of a larger, more general conflict between critics over the most appropriate basic contexts and codes for the allegorization of texts

The assertion of the general validity—or perhaps even the universal validity—of an interpretational code and context effectively elevates that code and context to the level of ideology It asserts that our way of making sense out of things is best because it best corresponds to the reality of the texts The proof? Our way of making sense out of things explains and organizes more texts, and does so in a better way, than yours What makes this claim ideological is its more or less understood but unexpressed consequent we therefore legitimately have, or ought to have, more authority and power than you ² To say that a text means this or that, then, is also to argue for

²This is, to be sure, a rather unsophisticated definition of ideology More elegant formulations are provided by 1) Jurgen Habermas (in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans Jeremy

the value of one or another interpretational context and code, one or another way of determining meaning and thinking about the world

If, in the Middle Ages, for example, most allegorizing took place within a Christian context and used a Christian code, this was both an assertion of the value of Christianity as a semiotic system and a world view and a reflection of Christianity's semiotic and ideological predominance. The elaboration of a Christian meaning from a classical myth was a demonstration of the power of Christian doctrine and history to create meaning. The elaboration of meaning in other contexts and according to other codes, moreover, was difficult, dangerous or at least problematic, because Christianity was both hegemonic and imperialist. Other contexts did, of course, exist in the Middle Ages—neo-Platonic philosophy comes immediately to mind—but these contexts had to either establish some, not infrequently uneasy, relationship with the dominant Christian context or exist "underground"

What I am calling allegorization others might prefer to call simply interpretation. I would rather reserve "interpretation"

J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971) 311)

From everyday experience we know that ideas serve often enough to furnish our actions with justifying motives in place of the real ones. What is called rationalization at this level is called ideology at the level of collective action. In both cases the manifest content of statements [our interpretation, our kind of interpretation, makes better sense of this text than yours] is falsified by consciousness' unreflected tie to interests [therefore we can legitimately speak with more authority than you], despite its illusion of autonomy [it is simply a matter of the objectively best interpretation of the text].

by 2) Paul Ricoeur (in *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981] 80) "the concept of ideology [is to be] understood as an allegedly disinterested knowledge [the best meaning] which serves to conceal an interest [our authority and power] under the guise of a rationalisation [we legitimately enjoy more authority and power because our meaning is the best]," by 3) Terry Eagleton (in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983] 14) "By 'ideology' I mean, roughly, the ways in which what we say and believe [our interpretational context and code are better than yours] connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in [therefore we legitimately have superior authority]," and by 4) Samuel Weber (in "Capitalizing History: Notes on the *Political Unconscious*," *Diacritics* 13 [1983] 22) a system of thought is "ideological" when it can be seen as "practicing 'strategies of containment,' that is, . . . drawing lines and practicing exclusions [our code and context vs. your code and context] that ultimately reflect the particularities—the partiality and partisanship—of special interests [us] seeking to present themselves as the whole [the profession]." See also Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971) 121–73.

to designate a general activity, however, whose two species are the interpretation of allegory and allegorization. I can define the distinction I have in mind in the following way. Literary discourse, we believe, points—or at least once pointed—to a first, more or less obvious, referent in the same way as ordinary language and, additionally and more or less directly, to a second referent, an “elsewhere.” This second referent is at least part of what makes a text “literary” and is the locus of the text’s true significance. When we feel that a text points more, rather than less, directly to its second referent, we call the text allegorical. When we feel that it points less to its second referent, so that that referent is not immediately discernible, we feel the need to interpret, to locate the text’s elsewhere on the basis of indications provided in the text. By the interpretation of allegory, then, I mean the enunciation of an allegorical text’s “obvious” second meaning. By allegorization I mean the interpretive response to a discourse that is not perceived to be allegorical, but is nonetheless felt to project another meaning or another level of meaning beyond the literal. Allegorization is the process by which we try to specify that second meaning.³ Myth always provokes allegorization insofar as it is always felt to have a meaning beyond its first, ostensive one, but never has an obvious second meaning. At the opposite extreme we find “realistic” texts which,

³Fr. D. E. Schleiermacher defines “allegorical interpretation” in a similar way (in “*The Hermeneutics: Outline of the 1819 Lectures*,” trans. Jan Wojcik and Roland Haas, *New Literary History* 10 [1978]: 6).

First of all, it is not an interpretation of an allegory, where the only purpose is to understand the figurative meaning without reference to whether there is truth at the base of it or not. Examples of allegories would be the parable of the sower, or the story of the rich man. Rather, allegorical interpretation begins with a presupposition that the meaning is lacking in the immediate context, and so one needs to supply a figurative one. With this supposition one is unsatisfied with the general principle that every speech can have only one grammatical meaning. The dissatisfaction arises, perhaps, from the correct assessment that an allusion in a text does point to a second meaning, one who does not comprehend it could completely follow the whole context, but would still be missing one meaning situated within the discourse.

For further discussion of allegorical interpretation and its distinction from allegory, see Bloomfield 301–02, 308–11, Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979), “Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Deallegorization of Language: the *Roman de la Rose*, the *De Planctu Naturae*, and the *Parlement of Foules*,” in Morton Bloomfield, ed., *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 163–86, Ernst Hellgardt, “Erkenntnistheoretisch-ontologische Probleme uneigentlicher Sprache in Rhetorik und Allegorese,” in Walter Haug, ed., *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie: Symposium Wolfenbüttel 1978* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979) 25–37, and Reinhard Herzog, “Exegese—Erbauung—Delectatio: Beiträge zu einer christlichen Poetik der Spätantike,” Haug 52–69.

we feel, insofar as they are indistinguishable from, and may pass for, historical texts, have no second meaning—although they may have a more or less obvious rhetorical purpose

Remythification also consists of two moments.⁴ Its starting point is an existing allegorization and an imaginative perception or intuitive projection of all the potential meaning which that allegorization necessarily denies or ignores. It then proceeds to a reelaboration of the allegorized material which moves beyond the allegorization and renders it inadequate. This remythification does not seek to imbue the material with a particular new meaning—this would in effect be but one more allegorization—but to make it more meaningful. It starts from a feeling that “this means more than just that” and produces a new narrative that “just means”

The process of remythification is in many ways indistinguishable from the process of any literary creation. To the degree that there is a difference, it lies in the deliberate working against an interpretive tradition which is involved in remythification. Any author may of course write against such a tradition, but the power of that tradition is present to the author of a remythification in a particularly urgent way. *Sir Orfeo* was, as we shall see, a remythification of the Orpheus tale which clearly surpassed and undid the allegorical

⁴I borrow the term “remythification” from an article by Hans Robert Jauss, “Allégorie, ‘remythisation’ et nouveau mythe. Réflexions sur la captivité chrétienne de la mythologie au Moyen Âge,” in *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire, de linguistique et de philologie romanes offerts à Charles Rostand*, ed. Jacques de Caluwé and others (Lige: l'Association des Romanistes de l'Université de Liège, 1974) 469–99. Daniel Poirion uses the similar term “remythologization” to describe this process, a process which he links to the emergence of the *merveilleux* in medieval literature: see his *Le Merveilleux dans la littérature française du moyen âge* (Paris: PUF, 1982) 34–35.

As will become clear, I hope, in the course of the article, I have found Jauss’s “reception theory” to be a useful and powerful means of thinking about the fate of texts through time. I am unable, however, to entirely accept the model of hermeneutic practice it sets up, whose goal is a “fusion” of the “horizons” of the text’s author/audience and of the modern reader, especially when, as in some versions of this hermeneutics, the goal is to hear the “small voice” which still “speaks” to us through the text. I do not think that such fusions are possible or that a text has a stable, unchanging meaning for all its readers. Neither do I, however, go all the way to the other extreme of the “reader-response” camp and declare that the text exists only as it is constituted in the mind of the reader. A text may have no objective, determinable and eternal meaning, but it does have a stable structure which resists our attempts to appropriate it and, through its resistance, enlarges our structures of understanding. On these issues, see Bloomfield 311–17, Hans Robert Jauss, “The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature,” trans. Timothy Bacht, *New Literary History* 10 (1978/79): 181–229, and *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bacht (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), and Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980).

readings which had become associated with the story to that point and did so, interestingly, by recasting a Christianized classical myth as a Breton lay

Remythization and allegorization are forever involved in a tug-of-war which might be described in terms of a struggle between freedom and authority or played out between the notions of multivocal, equivocal, and univocal.⁵ Remythization is always subversive. If it is successful, it undoes existing allegorizations and restores to the myth its full aura of provocative meaningfulness. It removes the myth from the context in which and for which allegorization has captured it and denies that that context and its attendant code have any particular power or merit as semiotic systems. It undoes the work that has been done, destroys an existing order and contests the ability of any context or code to comprehend and control the meaningfulness of myth.

The threat which remythification posed was recognized by a number of churchmen in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. They were wary of the pagan myths even when they had been suitably allegorized, given a fixed place and a known value in the Christian context. Why, asked Theodoret, should Christians bother about the "troubled and muddy trickle" of Greek myth when they had readily available to them "the limpid fountain" of scripture? "It is indeed not right," wrote Gregory of Tours, "to recount false fables or to pursue the wisdom of philosophers which is inimical to God, lest we be sentenced to eternal death by the Lord's judgement. Perceiving that all such fables are built upon sand and are rushing towards ruin, let us rather turn to the divine miracles of the Gospel."⁶

⁵Walter Haug and Maureen Quilligan write similarly about allegory and allegorical interpretation. Haug observes that "allegory and allegoresis belong together, the one can't be thought without the other" ("Einleitung zum ersten Tag," in Haug 7) and Quilligan notes that although "attitudes toward reading peculiar to *allegoresis* are inappropriate for reading allegorical narrative, the two seem to go hand in hand at least historically. Where there is a resurgence of one, there is a resurgence of the other" (*Language* 280-81).

⁶Theodoret is quoted and translated by John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970) 35; Gregory of Tours, *Libri miraculorum*, *Patrologia latina* 71 (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1879) 705. Gregory's full remarks show, however, a certain ambivalence typical of the classically educated Christian. Having written that we should abandon false fables and the philosophers "lest we be sentenced to eternal death," he continues

Wherefore I, fearing God and desiring to make known certain miracles of the saints which up to now have lain concealed, do not wish to bind or twist myself in these nets. I do not recount the flight of Saturn, the wrath of Juno, the disgraceful couplings of Jove, the intractability of Neptune, the scepters of Aeolus, or Aeneas wars, shipwreck and reign. I say nothing of Cupid's mission, of delightful Ascanius, of Dido's wedding, tears or savage death,

There was something seductive and dangerous about these myths, something which made certain churchmen doubt they would stay allegorized, stay in their assigned place in the Christian order. The old wine might undergo secondary fermentation and burst the new wineskins. Antique gods too might be resurrected.

The fifteenth-century prose adaptation of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé* offers a singularly bald illustration of what I mean by allegorization.

By Orpheus and his harp one should understand the persons of our Lord Jesus Christ, son of God and Father, omnipotent in his divinity, and the glorious Virgin Mary in her humanity. He played his harp so melodiously that he drew forth from hell the saintly souls of the saintly fathers who had descended there through the sin of Adam and Eve. And by the harp of the aforementioned Orpheus one should understand twenty-two well-tuned and harmonious strings on which our aforementioned Lord Jesus Christ played while in this world. By ten of these strings one should understand the Ten Commandments of God's law and by the other twelve strings are signified the twelve articles of the faith of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.⁷

King Alfred's translation of Boethius's account of the Orpheus story is an equally clear example of remythification. Boethius's story of Orpheus begins thus:

"Long ago the Thracian poet, Orpheus, mourned for his dead wife. With his sorrowful music he made the woodland dance and the rivers

of Pluto's sad gate, of Proserpina's disgraceful rape, or of Cerberus' triple head. I do not repeat what Anchises related, the ruses of the Ithacan, Achilles' shrewdness or Sinon's lies. I do not publish the counsels of Laocoon, the feats of Amphitryonides, or Janus' struggle, flights or fatal encounter. I do not present the Eumenides, the forms of various monsters nor the fabrications of the other fables which this author [Virgil] one supposes either mendaciously made up or described in heroic verse. Perceiving that all such fables

On the objections and admonitions of the churchmen, see Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions, Bollingen Series 38 (New York: Pantheon, 1953) 87-91, Friedman 35-36, Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 20, Paule Demats, *Fabula. Trois études de mythographie antique et médiévale* (Geneva: Droz, 1973) 37-55, and Poirion 34.

⁷C. De Boer, ed., *Ovide moralisé en prose* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1954) 264. On the *Ovide moralisé* (5 vols., ed. C. De Boer [Amsterdam: North Holland P., 1936]) and its prose version, see Joseph Engels, *Études sur l'Ovide moralisé* (Groningen: Wolters, 1945), Demats 61-177, and Friedman 124-26. These texts are neither so silly nor so simple as this quotation makes them sound. Their treatments of Orpheus begin with rather sensitive and relatively long accounts of the story in which we learn the words of Orpheus's song in hell; there is remythification here as well.

stand still He made the fearful deer lie down bravely with the fierce lions,
the rabbit no longer feared the dog quieted by his song

"But as the sorrow within his breast burned more fiercely, that music
which calmed all nature could not console its maker Finding the gods
unbending, he went to the regions of hell"⁸

Alfred translates these lines as follows

Once on a time it came to pass that a harp-player lived in the country
called Thracia, which was in the kingdom of the Grecas (Greeks) The
harper was so good, it was quite unheard of His name was Orfeus, and
he had a wife without her equal, named Euridice Now men came to say
of the harper that he could play the harp so that the forest swayed, and the
rocks quivered for the sweet sound, and wild beasts would run up and
stand still as if they were tame, so still that men or hounds might come
near them, and they fled not The harper's wife died, men say, and her
soul was taken to hell Then the harpman became so sad that he could not
live in the midst of other men, but was off to the forest, and sate upon the
hills both day and night, weeping, and playing on his harp so that the
woods trembled and the rivers stood still, and hart shunned not lion, nor
hare hound, nor did any beast feel rage or fear towards any other for
gladness of the music And when it seemed to the harper that nothing in
this world brought joy to him he thought he would seek out the gods of
hell and essay to win them over with his harp, and pray them to give him
back his wife⁹

Alfred's version is more than twice as long as Boethius's and is far
more detailed The king begins the story before Euridice's death
and her death is one of the elements of the story Alfred better
circumstantiates the poet's mourning (he went to the forest, sat on
the hills day and night, wept), he insists on Orpheus's marvelous
musical gift, twice describing scenes which testify to the poet's
power, and he is generally more concerned with imagery, with plot
and with the pathos of the episode It is true that he preserves the
Boethian moral ("whoever is conquered and turns his eyes to the

⁸Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. 3, poem 12, trans Richard Green (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1962) 73, Latin text *Philosophiae consolatio*, ed L. Bieler, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 94 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984) 63

⁹King Alfred's Version of the "Consolations" of Boethius, trans Walter John Sedgefield (Oxford: Clarendon, 1900) 116 OE text *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius "De consolations philosophiae"*, ed Walter John Sedgefield (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899) 101-02 Both the portion of the OE text relating the Orpheus story and Sedgefield's translation of it are printed by J. Burke Severs, "The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*," in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P., 1961) 188-90 and n3, 203-04

pit of hell loses all the excellence he has gained") but the story here is much less at the service of the moral than in Boethius's version. One feels that Alfred enjoyed the story for its own sake, that in rewriting it he was responding more to a narrative impulse than a didactic or allegorical one. The story meant more to him, or at least as much to him, as the moral.

It is logical and intellectually appealing to suggest that these processes of allegorization and remythification alternate through time, a period of allegorization being followed by a period of remythification. This is the model some scholars have used to explain the reception of classical myth in the Middle Ages and Renaissance—reduced to skeletal narratives, "wrenched and cannibalized to fit into the Christian message" in the Middle Ages, the myths were remythified in the Renaissance.¹⁰ This model perhaps has merit at the level of broad historical generalization at which these scholars are working, but it does us a disservice, I think, insofar as it obscures the complex interplay between these two processes and suggests that all medieval allegorization was Christian and reductive.

It would be closer to the truth to say that these two processes coexist and are constant. It is undoubtedly true that new narrative and successful interpretation are each a goad to the other and it may likewise be true that one or another of these tendencies may be clearly dominant in a certain place at a certain time. If one had particularly good information, one might even be able to follow a particular chain of allegorization and remythization through a series of writers. At any moment of time, however, and with respect to any traditional tale, one will find examples of both processes. At almost exactly the same moment that the *Orfeo* poet was remythifying the Orpheus story, for example, Pierre Bersuire was allegorically reducing Ovid's version to a series of oral extracts.¹¹ While we

¹⁰John Warden, Introduction, *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982) xi. Similar models or conceptual frameworks for the reception of classical myth in the Middle Ages can be found in Seznec 11–219, in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 41 (1966): 649, and in Jauss, "Allégorie." Porion, on the other hand, locates the beginnings of "remythologization" in the Middle Ages (34–35).

For the history of the Christian reception of the Orpheus legend in antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Gros Louis 644–46, Friedman 13–145, Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 164–207, Eleanor Irwin, "The Songs of Orpheus and the New Song of Christ," Warden 51–62, and Patricia Vicari, "Sparagmos: Orpheus among the Christians," Warden 63–83.

¹¹On Bersuire's treatment of Orpheus, see Friedman 126–32 and Doob 174–75, 182–83.

critics have applied ourselves to allegorizing *Sir Orfeo* over the last few decades, Rilke, Cocteau and Anouilh, to name only three, have remythified the tale

Separate and distinct in our analysis of them, allegorization and remythification are in reality so closely intertwined that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them. WS Anderson has recently shown that Ovid's story of Orpheus was "quite consciously" intended to contrast with Virgil's.¹² One might suggest that we have here a remythification of a remythification, but it would make more sense, I believe, to see Ovid's remythification as implying an intermediate—unrecorded and perhaps relatively incomplete—allegorization of Virgil's version. Ovid, that is, allegorized Virgil's story in his mind and then wrote his version against his own allegorization.

Precisely the opposite operation occurs in Bersuire's allegorizing *Reductorium morale* (1325–37). A single sentence will suffice to indicate the general nature of this work: "Or let us say that Orpheus is a sinner who, by the bite of the serpent, that is, by the temptation of the devil, lost his wife, that is, his soul, when she was indiscreetly collecting flowers, that is, applying her mind to the flux of *temporalia*."¹³ This is, to be sure, a reductive Christian allegorization, but the key word here is the first one, "or." Bersuire allegorizes the myth in several ways and, although each allegory is equally Christian and reductive, the existence of several allegorizations of the same myth is significant. It implies that Bersuire is remythifying the tale for himself between each allegorization. "It means this," he tells us. Then he says to himself, "but it means more than just this." "Or," he tells us, "it means that."

It is especially instructive to consider the treatment the Orpheus story receives in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Fulgentius's *Mythologies* (both sixth-century). These two approaches to the myth had enormous influence on subsequent medieval treatments of it. Neither allegorization, it should be pointed out, is Christian, and although both works abbreviate the tale and find a particular meaning in it, it is difficult and perhaps ultimately misleading to call them reductive.

¹²WS Anderson, "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid *flebile nescio quid*," Warden 25–50.

¹³Petrus Berchorius [Pierre Bersuire], *Reductorium morale, liber XV, cap. u-xv* "Ovidius moralizatus," ed. Joseph Engels (Utrecht: Instituut voor Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1962) 147, translated in Freidman 128.

Of the two, Fulgentius's approach comes closest to the common notion of a "medieval reduction" of myth. He summarized the story in three sentences and then continued "Now this legend is an allegory (*designatio*) of the art of music. For Orpheus stands for oreafone, that is, matchless sound, and Eurydice is deep judgement." ¹⁴ He is, up to this point, reductive and allegorical. What follows however is an analysis of the two stages involved in the acquisition of all the arts and of the "ratio" or purpose of each stage of each art. The end result is a complete, albeit brief, description of a program of education in the arts.

Boethius's account of Orpheus, taken out of context and in and of itself, might also seem to be a typical medieval reduction and allegorization of the myth. He begins it at a point after Eurydice has died and abruptly kills off Orpheus after he has lost his wife for the second time. "Orpheus looked back at Eurydice, lost her, and died." Boethius also, lest our interpretive thoughts wander, begins his account by writing, "Happy is he who can look into the shining spring of good, happy is he who can break the heavy chains of earth," and ends with the moral mentioned above. ¹⁵ As Winthrop Wetherbee has made very clear, however, Boethius's poetic rendering of the tale "has an undertone of suppressed feeling which is at odds with [its] ostensibly exemplary purpose." "Conceived by Philosophy as an admonitory exemplum, it also gives eloquent expression to the very impulse it is intended to curb [and] one is left feeling that the tension between the philosophical context and the poetic interplay within it has not been fully resolved." ¹⁶ Taken by itself the account appears to be a reductive allegorization, but within the context of the *Consolation* it functions as a subversive remythification.

William of Conches's treatment of the myth makes us especially aware of the shortcomings of an unnuanced notion of a common, Christian, reductive reception of antique myth in the Middle Ages. William's allegorization of the myth is psychological and moral rather than Christian. For him, Orfeo represents the sage or philosopher, Eurydice is natural desire. He uses the myth, as he writes,

¹⁴Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *The Mythologies* 3.10, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971) 96. Latin text: *Mitologiarum libri tres in Opera*, ed. Rudolph Helm (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898) 77. On Fulgentius's treatment of myth, see Whitbread 1-11, 15-37, and Demats 36-37, 55-60.

¹⁵Boethius, trans. Green, 73-74, Latin text, 63-64.

¹⁶Wetherbee 78-79, 122.

to show that "it is not possible either to know or to esteem the highest good while one's efforts and attention are directed towards temporal matters" When he has finished his interpretation, aware that it differs significantly from Fulgentius's, he writes,

If anyone, reading Fulgentius, should note that he explains this fable in another way, let not that person therefore condemn our explanation different explanations of the same matter are discovered according to the different considerations [with which it is approached] This diversity of explanations is a cause for rejoicing rather than apprehension, so long as each explanation is free from self-contradiction ¹⁷

These remarks are interesting for three reasons First, we note that the rule which limits interpretation is that of noncontradiction, a logical rule, rather than the Christian rule of orthodoxy Second, William is aware of Fulgentius's allegorization of the poem, is aware that he is working against it, and this implies that William has himself remythified the tale before writing a new allegorization of it, just as Ovid had to allegorize Virgil's version before he could remythify it Third, William foresees and even calls for an endless series of allegorizations of the tale which in turn implies an endless number of remythifications

William's particular treatment of the myth is ultimately a reductive allegorization, but it takes place within a broad vision of the processes under discussion William sees myth as a breeding ground for interpretation He will reduce a myth to a single meaning, but with the understanding that an endless number of such reductions is possible He views allegorization as a way of realizing, of specifying and using, some of the meaning generated by a myth, but in no way seeks to reduce or captivate the myth's generative power He is a husbander of myth and his vision of allegorization as part of a process of endless semiosis, of endless specific remythifications and allegorizations, has something of the subversiveness of remythification about it One is tempted to coin another term to describe William's work, something like "reallegorization"

¹⁷William's allegorization of Orpheus is printed in Edouard Jeuneau, "L'Usage de la notion d'*integumentum* a travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 32 (1957) 45-47 For William's treatment of myth, see also Friedman 104-09, Wetherbee 36-48, 92-98, and Peter Dronke, *Fabula Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden Brill, 1974) 13-78

Let us turn now to *Sir Orfeo* as a particularly brilliant example of remythification. It is impossible to know exactly what versions and treatments of the Orpheus myth the *Orfeo* poet knew, but it is clear he or she was well-versed in the Orpheus tradition. The poem (written before 1330) is roughly contemporary with the *Ovide moralisé* (1291–1328) and Bersuire's *Reductorium morale* (1325–37) and the poet is clearly writing against the tradition of reductive Christian moralization represented by these two works. It seems likely that the poet was familiar with the allegorical traditions inaugurated by Fulgentius and Boethius, perhaps he or she knew the latter in Alfred's translation. The poet tried, in any event, to restore a mythical ambivalence and meaningfulness to the tale and most critics have thought his or her efforts were successful.

The most fundamental and important element in the remythification of the tale was the poet's decision to rewrite an allegorized (and increasingly Christianized) myth as a Breton lay. The poet tells us what this means to him or her at the beginning of the poem. In the first four lines the poet writes that lays such as the one he or she will tell were narrative and musical compositions:

We redeþ oft & findeþ y-write,
& þis clerkes wele it wite,
Layes þat ben in harping
Ben y-founde of ferli þing ¹⁸

In line 13 the poet writes that these lays were "wrougt," in 16 that they were "maked," and in 17–20 that, in the old days, when kings heard of any marvels they took their harps "& maked a lay & ȝaf it name" (20). At the end of the poem, the poet once again returns to this topic and tells us that this lay was "made / & nempned . after þe king" (599–600) by Breton harpers when they "Herd hou þis meruaile bigan" (598) "Gode is þe lay," the poet adds, "swete is þe note" (602).

¹⁸All references to the poem and quotations from it are to and from the version recorded in the Auchinleck Ms. as printed in A. J. Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966). The first thirty-eight lines of the poem are missing from the Auchinleck Ms. and have been reconstructed by Bliss. On the whole question of the prologue, see Bliss xv, xlv–xlviii, and E. C. Ronquist, "The Powers of Poetry in *Sir Orfeo*," *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985) 114–121.

What is stressed and valued in this description of poetic activity is not the invention of a plot or narrative line—the kings and harpers who created the lays were simply reporting or reacting to the marvels they had heard told to them—but the composition of the lay, the choice of words and notes which will commemorate the marvel. The poet emphasizes the artistry which goes into the lay's composition and suggests that his or her position is like that of the royal and Breton harpers of yore: our poet too has heard a marvel and (re)made a lay.

In rewriting the allegorized myth as a lay, the poet brought together a number of mythic paradigms. First, of course, there was the classical paradigm where a story of unconsolable human loss was played out on a stage divided between earth and Hades. In Christian allegorizations of the myth, this paradigm had been assimilated to the Christian story of loss and redemption, Orpheus had become either a figure of Christ (and, thereby, a figure of all Christ's other figures) or a sort of Every soul, and the stage divided into thirds with the addition of Paradise/Heaven. Into this already complex masque the *Orfeo* poet incorporated the Celtic paradigm of a successful journey to the Otherworld—neither Hades, nor Hell, nor Heaven/Paradise, but in some ways like all of them.¹⁹ In his or her stress on poetic artistry, words and music, and its power, the poet also shows an awareness of the Fulgentian tradition of allegorization and, finally, in Orfeo's renunciation of the world, suffering in the wilderness and triumphant return we can detect a similar awareness of the Boethian tradition.

The end result of all this is a hybrid super-myth. *Sir Orfeo* may be interpreted, at least partially, in a number of different contexts and, mythically overdetermined as it is, cries out for interpretation. Yet the various paradigms interfere with one another and effectively eliminate the possibility of a comprehensive allegorization of the poem in any one context. Let me give a few examples of this interference.

¹⁹One should compare here the ideas of Patrizia Grimaldi who discerns in the poem "an elaborate system of parallels to Celtic folklore and mythology, Christian morality, and political ethics" and suggests that the poem has a particular meaning in each of these three contexts ("*Sir Orfeo* as Celtic Folk-Hero, Christian Pilgrim, and Medieval King," Bloomfield 147–61). Porzion likewise remarks that "such a tale makes us understand the syncretism of the marvelous imagination" which combined "antique sources . . . with beliefs of the period, with Germanic legends (the ride of the Elfking) as well as with Celtic legends (the carrying off of a queen)" (44–45).

The conflict between the fairy king and Orfeo, first of all, which one might expect to resolve itself violently, is worked out instead in music. The harper hero echoes the Briton harpers who composed the lay, and the poet, in a sense, becomes the hero of his own poem. The self-referentiality of the poem is vastly increased by this, and the poet seems to be leaning in the direction of Fulgentian allegorization. The hero's harping, however, also opens up the lay to a series of Christian and musical associations. David the harper, David as Christ, Christ the musician, Christ the harp, Orpheus as Christ, Christ as the new Orpheus, harmony as universal order or as the harmony of soul and body, music as spiritual striving, as grace, as eloquence, and so on. These associations cast an interpretive light on the whole poem. Heurodis is Eve, lost beneath a tree, she is the soul, Christ's bride, the fairy king is the devil, the serpent, and so on.²⁰

As part of his lay-icization of the tale, the poet introduced Celtic material into the myth and quite effectively created a "fairy atmosphere" throughout much of the poem. The fairy king's first visit to Heurodis in her sleep, the obscurity of his motives and methods in abducting her, the fairy hunt, ride and dancing in the wilderness all help to create the impression of a marvelous world beyond our apprehension, which touches on ours but by and large escapes us. The introduction of this Celtic material—both splendid and gruesome, fearful and charming—and particularly the substitution of the fairy king and faerie for the serpent, Dis and Hades, also, however, interferes with and prevents a Christian allegorization.

Faerie was never hell in medieval literature and fairies were never devils.²¹ There was, it is true, a certain uneasiness about their identification, but the uneasiness itself indicates a distinction. Heurodis is not dead, she is not in an after- or underworld, the king of faerie is not a serpent or devil. There is some parallelism and a high degree of contrastive tension between Hades, hell, and the

²⁰See Michael D. Bristol, "The Structure of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 6 (1970): 341–47, Friedman 189–90, Doob 165–207, Michael Masi, "The Christian Music of *Sir Orfeo*," *Classical Folia* 28 (1974): 1–20, Edward D. Kennedy, "Sir Orfeo as *rex mutabilis*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 17 (1976): 94–102, and David Lyle Jeffrey, "The Exiled King: Sir Orfeo's Harp and the Second Death of Eurydice," *Mosaic* 9.2 (1976): 48–58.

²¹On this point, especially with respect to Heurodis's abduction, see Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the Taken," *Medium Aevum* 33 (1964): 102–11, and Ronquist 101. For a more general overview, see C. S. Lewis's chapter on "The *Longaevi*" in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964): 122–38.

faerie of the lay, a tension many readers would like to resolve. One cannot do so, however, simply by calling the fairy king Dis (or the devil) and his kingdom Hades (or hell). The substitution of faerie for Hades/hell effectively suspends the Christian interpretation of the poem.

A Celticizing allegorization of the poem is equally insufficient. The Christian, Fulgentian, and Boethian associations are too strong, and the poet actively ironizes and undercuts his or her Celtic material. The fairy atmosphere which the poet creates so well actually begins to dissipate when Orfeo finally enters faerie. This is not to say that the description of the fairy king's country and stronghold is not without its splendor nor that the forecourt of horrors is not without its effect, but somehow that which is concretely realized for us, described in terms that, in spite of the vivid pictures they paint, are nonetheless common terms, is less fairy-like than that which, glimpsed, lies beyond our imagination. When the terrible fairy king is ultimately overcome on a point of etiquette, the dissipation of this atmosphere is complete.

The obscurity of the fairy king's motives in abducting Heurodis and his doing so without trace or clue also effectively undo the quest motif which we might otherwise expect to find in the poem. Orfeo cannot go in quest of her since he does not know where to look and has every reason to believe that she is inaccessible to him (he cannot, that is, find her through an internal quest, like a grail-seeking knight).²² When he does discover her, moreover, it is by chance—or fate, or through grace, or per adventure, depending on one's orientation. But if Orfeo does not go in quest of Heurodis, why does he leave the court and go into the wilderness? The poet perhaps took this element over from Alfred's translation of Boethius, but the same poet also made Orfeo a king. Orfeo not only abandons his fellow humans out of sorrow (as in Alfred's rewrite), he abandons a kingdom. Orfeo's being a king in the lay may enable or encourage us to identify him with David or Christ, but it also puts him in a rather bad light: a king who puts private loss before the public welfare. We are thus goaded into searching for an allegorical explanation for this abandonment. Heurodis must be more,

²²That Orfeo does not, and cannot, leave his city to search for Heurodis has also been noted by Gros Louis, "The Significance of Sir Orfeo's Self-Exile," *Review of English Studies* ns 18 (1967) 245–46, and Doob 184.

somehow, than a wife She must represent _____ (fill in the blank according to your preferred context)

The poet's remythification of his or her material at this fundamental level, the superimposition of classical, Christian and Celtic paradigms, leaves us with the feeling that the poem needs to be interpreted and with a variety of mutually interfering frameworks within which we might interpret it. Most, perhaps all, modern critical reactions to the poem have been attempts to discover the best or most appropriate framework or context for interpretation. *Sir Orfeo* has thus been said to have been modeled upon—to be most intelligible in—such diverse contexts as the myths of Orpheus and/or Proserpina, the Irish *aithed* or abduction story or other Celtic myths, the expulsion and return model of folklore, the *rex mutilis* motif, and the Christian model of redemption.²³

The poet's remythification of the tale involved more, however, than the decision to rewrite the allegorized myth as a lay. The poet, in fact, stresses and takes most pride in his or her composition of what we might call the "surface" of the poem, its textual qualities. At this level, too, the *Orfeo* poet had significant success. Modern critics have unanimously praised the poet's "structural patterning and attention to significant detail [which] reveal conscious literary effort," his or her use of "analogical patterns of repetition and variation . . . to develop meaning," and his or her "strong feeling for symmetry and balance," all of which "reinforce the reader's impression that his [or her] poem is a consciously crafted work."²⁴ Critics have found the artist's deft touch in elements as small as the repetition of words or phrases, as large as the poem's structural divisions, and as basic as the "dynamic [which governs] the

²³See G. V. Smithers, "Story-Patterns in Some Breton Lays," *Medium Aevum* 32 (1953) 85–88, Severs 187–207, Constance Davies, "Classical Threads in *Orfeo*," *Modern Language Review* 56 (1961) 161–66, Howard Nimchinsky, "'*Orfeo*,' *Guillaume*, and *Horn*," *Romance Philology* 22 (1968/69) 2, Bristol 345–47, Friedman 190, Thomas B. Hanson, "Sir *Orfeo* Romance as Exemplum," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 13 (1972) 152–54, Peter J. Lucas, "An Interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*," *Leeds Studies in English* 6 (1972) 2–3, Jean Frappier, "Orphe et Proserpine ou la lyre et la harpe," *Melanges de langue et de litterature medievaux offerts a Pierre le Gentil* (Paris: Societe d'Edition d'Enseignement Superieur Reunis, 1973) 277–94, Doob 172–203, Masi 3–7, Kennedy 88–110, Felicity Riddy, "The Uses of the Past in *Sir Orfeo*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 6 (1976) 15, Grimaldi 147–61, and Vicari 74–76.

²⁴Lucas 2, Mary Hynes-Berry, "Cohesion in *King Horn* and *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 50 (1975) 666–67, Riddy 8, and Seth Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 60 (1985) 107.

poem's literary structure and meaning," and these critics have done an astonishing job of demonstrating the poem's rich and complicated textuality²⁵

The conscious artifice they have discovered is evidence of the poet's desire to remythify the tale, to complicate it, give it a dense texture, increase its self-referentiality. To do so, the poet sacrificed the allegorization's clear reference to a "higher" lesson in favor of references on a horizontal, textual level.²⁶ Here we see the subversiveness of remythification. The clear Christian, ethical, psychological, or philosophical moral has been sacrificed to the ambivalent story, intellectual and ethical order to text.

Drawn by the poet's provocative mixture of mythic paradigms, fascinated by the poem's dense textual patterning, wanting to save and make useful the imaginative productions of a previous culture, we modern critics like Boethius, Fulgentius, William, and Bersuire before us, have allegorized. Our impulse to allegorize is a response to, and evidence of, the remythification in *Sir Orfeo* of the Orpheus story. We feel that the story has grown beyond the older or obvious allegorizations, that new possibilities have been realized. We feel that we need new allegories to account for those new possibilities and to bring the poem closer to us, to make it useful in our culture. Like Boethius, Fulgentius, William, and Bersuire, we look for contexts within which we can specify and decode, realize and use, the potent but equivocal significance we sense in the poem.²⁷

²⁵Lerer 93. See, in addition to the studies mentioned in notes 20–24, D. M. Hill, "The Structure of *Sir Orfeo*," *Medieval Studies* 23 (1961): 136–53; John Block Friedman, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-day Demon," *Speculum* 41 (1966): 22–29; James F. Knapp, "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 29 (1968): 263–73; Lewis J. Owen, "The Recognition Scene in *Sir Orfeo*," *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971): 249–53; Dean R. Baldwin, "Fairy Lore and the Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 40 (1977): 129–42; and Robert M. Longworth, "Sir Orfeo, The Minstrel and the Minstrel's Art," *Studies in Philology* 79 (1982): 1–11.

²⁶On the question of the medieval text's referentiality and "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 73–74; Bloomfield 307–08; Peter Haidu, "Repetition: Modern Reflections on Medieval Aesthetics," *Modern Language Notes* 92 (1977): 875–87; and Quilligan, *Language* 232–41.

For complete discussions of the poem's and the poet's self-referentiality, see Ronquist 100, 110–12, and Lerer 94, 106–09.

²⁷This has always been the task of both allegorical interpreters and remythifiers. Compare Friedman: "Each age has fashioned Orpheus in its own image, giving him new attributes,

What makes *Sir Orfeo* so remarkable is the degree of critical response it has generated, the high praise it has earned, and the almost utter lack of accord among critics as to its interpretation. The poem seems to be remythified with each reading, each reading makes us feel that the previous one, even yesterday's, was inadequate. This leads one to believe that *Sir Orfeo* is in some way a radical remythification, a seminal remythification, by which I mean a remythification for which we possess no adequate interpretational context.

The source of *Sir Orfeo*'s ability to escape contextualization and remythify itself at every reading is, I would suggest, *faerie*, what others might call the *merveilleux*. *Faerie* should not be confused with Celtic mythology, folklore or the Celtic Otherworld. It is an ambivalent, ambiguous sort of *tertium quid* which first appeared in the twelfth century and resulted from the literary use of Celtic materials in the essentially Christian and classical tradition of medieval literature. These Celtic materials did not retain their old significance in their new settings, but neither were they easily assimilated there. There was no context for *faerie* and this is what made it valuable to medieval authors seeking to establish a new, secular, vulgar literary tradition. *Faerie* is the source and distinguishing trait of Arthurian romance, in particular, and *Sir Orfeo* is an example of what we might have called, had it developed, mythological romance.

We still have no adequate context for *faerie* today. The fairy king's abduction of Heurodis is the very heart of *Sir Orfeo*, but the many attempts to determine the meaning of these elements—and of the entire poem—by reference to various mythic paradigms or interpretational contexts have failed to produce agreement among critics about the king's nature or motives, the nature of the poem's *faerie* material, or the poem's significance.²⁸ There is rather an

emphasizing certain of his deeds at the expense of others, and even changing the course of the narrative to make the Orpheus myth conform to the values of the day" (1), Bloomfield "one of the basic functions of allegory [i.e. allegorical interpretation] is to make literary documents relevant. Allegory, in this sense, is the method of modernization, that which has made, makes or keeps modern those literary documents of the past which can bear such a load of continual reinterpretation" (301–02), and Ronquist "in all our versions we are trying to understand Orpheus, to tell his story in a form that will effectively make it known, both immediate and comprehensible" (99).

²⁸For various interpretations, see Davies 161, 163, Knapp 266–67, Bristol 345, 347, Friedman, *Orpheus* 189, 190, Lucas 4, 6, Doob 178–79, Hynes-Berry 655, 664, Kennedy 104, 105, Baldwin 129, 134–36, Vicari 74–76, Ronquist 108–10, and Lerer 105.

endless number of interpretations—and this should give us pause. Can all these interpretations be right? Are none of them right? If we keep working at it will we eventually get the right one?

Our desire—and our inability—to reach an agreement on these questions are a direct result of our attempt to interpret the poem within a Romantic, historicist model of interpretation, and provide excellent evidence of this model's shortcomings. Within this model, as it was enunciated by Fr D E Schleiermacher and W Dilthey, the interpreter's task is "the obverse of an act of discourse, in that one must come to grasp the thought which was at the base of the discourse," "to reconstruct the inner source of the signs which strike our senses," "the process of recognizing a mental state from a sense-given sign by which it is expressed" "It is the primary task of interpretation," according to Schleiermacher, "not to understand an ancient text in view of modern thinking, but to rediscover the original relationship between the writer and his audience"²⁹ The interpreter is to recognize, reconstruct, grasp the author's thought on the basis of its externalization and concretion in a text, and is to do so in the way the author's original audience did.

When we are dealing with literary texts, poems and fictions, our situation as interpreters is even more complicated because, as I mentioned at the outset of this article, we assume that most literary texts have a referent other than and in addition to their ostensive or obvious one. Within the Romantic, historicist model of interpretation, then, we are to recognize and reconstruct—in the way the original audience did—not only the author's first or obvious meaning, but his or her second, figurative meaning, the "elsewhere" which is the text's true or essential reference, as well.

In their corporate response to *Sir Orfeo*, however, modern critics have demonstrated that it is possible to understand a literary text—to imaginatively construct the "elsewhere," the thought or mental state which is its true referent and *raison d'être*—in a practically infinite number of entirely plausible ways. They have also demonstrated that it is not possible to choose between or hierarchize these different imaginative constructions in any compelling way. We cannot convincingly choose the accurate reconstruction of the authorial thought among the potentially infinite number of imaginative con-

²⁹Schleiermacher 2, 5–6, W Dilthey, "The Development of Hermeneutics," in *Selected Writings*, ed and trans H P Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 247, 248. See Bloomfield 301–02, 314–15.

structions There is in fact cause for doubting that any such reconstruction is possible I can never know a past moment the way those who experienced it as a present moment did, and no text, therefore, can be "present" to me as it was "present" to them Interpretation, within the Romantic, historicist model, thus comes to resemble a Greek comedy where critic after critic steps forward in the role of the *alazon*, the swaggering boaster, to announce a truth which is instantly undercut by the ability of the text, in the role of *erron*, to produce other truths

Paul Ricoeur has proposed a way out of this endless irony through a new model for interpretation, a model which explains the endlessness of modern critics' work on *Sir Orfeo* and casts those critics in a positive role Ricoeur begins by asking "What happens to discourse when it passes from speaking to writing?" and then observes that

at first sight, writing seems only to introduce a purely external and material factor fixation, which shelters the event of discourse from destruction In fact, fixation is only the external appearance of a problem which is much more important, and which affects all the properties of discourse The distanciation [between the medieval author and the modern critic, for example] in which this [Romantic, historicist] hermeneutics tends to see a sort of ontological fall from grace appears as a positive component of being for the text, it characteristically belongs to interpretation, not as its contrary but as its condition The moment of distanciation is implied by fixation in writing and by all comparable phenomena in the sphere of the transmission of discourse Writing is not simply a matter of the material fixation of discourse, for fixation is the condition of a much more fundamental phenomenon, that of the autonomy of the text A threefold autonomy with respect to the intention of the author, with respect to the cultural situation and all the sociological conditions of the production of the text, and finally, with respect to the original addressee What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant, verbal meaning and mental meaning [elsewhere Ricoeur refers to these as "textual meaning" and "psychological meaning"] have different destinies This first form of autonomy already implies the possibility that the 'matter of the text' may escape from the author's restricted intentional horizon, and that the world of the text may explode the world of its author What is true of psychological conditions is also true of sociological conditions, even though he [or she] who is prepared to liquidate the author is less prepared to perform the same operation in the sociological sphere The peculiarity of the literary work, and indeed of the work as such, is nevertheless to transcend its own psycho-sociological con-

ditions of production and thereby to open itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in socio-cultural contexts which are always different. In short, the work *decontextualizes* itself, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, and is able to *recontextualize* itself differently in the act of reading. It follows that the mediation of the text cannot be treated as an extension of the dialogical situation. For in dialogue, the *vis-a-vis* of discourse is given in advance by the setting itself, with writing, the original addressee is transcended. The work itself creates an audience, which potentially includes anyone who can read.³⁰

Having suggested that Romantic, historicist hermeneutics and their quest for original meaning overlook the essential characteristic of the literary work—its ability to decontextualize itself—Ricoeur asks,

If we can no longer define hermeneutics in terms of the search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed *behind* the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted? I shall say to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text. . . . what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. . . . Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations which literature carries out on the real. . . . Ultimately, what I [understand] is a proposed world [which] is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. . . . As a reader, I find myself only by losing myself. Reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the *ego*.³¹

Ricoeur's model—in which interpretation appears as a search for greater self-understanding rather than as a quest for an author's intended meaning—suggests a new way of situating modern critical reactions to *Sir Orfeo* and a new science of interpretation. Modern critics' interpretations of the medieval poem here appear

³⁰Ricoeur 139, 91

³¹Ricoeur 141–44

as the projection and articulation of those critics' "ownmost possibilities" By exposing themselves to the poem and saying what it means to them, these critics enlarge their self-understanding To the degree, moreover, that they share a worldview or sense of the world with others, their efforts to increase their self-understanding will enable others to do so as well The process of interpretation is therefore endless, but not limitless or without rigor It is endless because there may be as many interpretations as there are interpreters, it is not limitless or without rigor, however, because it always takes place in front of the same object the text of *Sir Orfeo* This model also gives us a framework to understand and resolve disputes about textual variants between manuscripts there is a conflict of interpretation because the interpretations have taken place in front of (slightly) different texts and because only one of the texts and one of the interpretations is putatively authoritative If our goal, however, is no longer conceived to be the reconstruction of an authorial meaning, but the exemplary articulation of an increased self-understanding, the question of "authoritative" texts and interpretations is simply set aside That two slightly different versions of a text lead to different interpretations is in fact a sign of how interpretation may be simultaneously endless and yet limited and rigorous There would be more cause for alarm if different texts led to the same interpretation

Ricoeur's model also suggests the possibility of a new science of interpretation, a new hermeneutics, which would study the means by which texts provoke interpretation Such a science would not seek to interpret texts, but to understand the conditions under which such interpretation takes place It would allow us to recuperate the author, not as the originator of meaning, but as the craftsman or craftswoman of an object to provoke interpretation, whose success would be measured, not by the profundity of his or her thought, but by the variety and degree of interpretation his or her work produced One of the first steps for such a science, one supposes, would be the identification of texts that have been inexhaustibly provocative of interpretation, and *Sir Orfeo* would undoubtedly find its place among them *Sir Orfeo* would in fact be a paradigmatic text for such a science, and its creator would undoubtedly be recognized as a master craftsman or craftswoman

This brings me back to the main spring of the poem, faerie and its king The different interpretations of these elements are, in light of Ricoeur's model, all "right" insofar as they are rigorous

elaborations of possibilities different critics experience upon reading the text(s). The number and variety of the interpretations, however, suggest that faerie and its king are important elements, perhaps paradigmatic elements, for a science which studies the means by which texts provoke interpretation. They might well be said to represent or emblemize the obscure impetus to interpret, the text calling interpretation into being, "*ac neuer we nist whider þai come*." The fairy king's abduction of Heurodis might thus be seen as the representation of the allegorization, the capture and reduction, of myth, which is eventually liberated and brought back to full life through the artist's efforts. Faerie is thus the representation of interpretive power which must destroy artistic harmony and a full aura of potential meaning in order to reveal them and thereby achieve a greater understanding, the power the artist must in turn overcome if he or she is to lead him or herself (and others) out of the wilderness and the poem from the sterile frozen state in which the unmastered imp of interpretation would captivate it. This is the lesson of faerie: it is not a secret realm of limitless resources, but only the gaudy obverse of the common realm. The poem has no resources beyond itself, the interpreter no resources beyond him or herself. The rest, as a harper would say, is silence.

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