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There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World

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"Orfeo Out of Care"

The Reception of the Classical Myth of Orpheus from *Sir Orfeo* to Tolkien

Abstract The paper focuses on an example of multiple-step reception: the contribution of the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice and the mediaeval lay *Sir Orfeo* to Tolkien's work.

In the first part, I compare the lay with Virgilian and Ovidian versions of Orpheus's myth. This comparison shows the anonymous author's deep knowledge of the ancient texts and complex way of rewriting them through stealing and hybridization.

The lay was highly esteemed by Tolkien, who translated it and took inspiration from it while describing the Elven kingdom in *The Hobbit* and building the storyline of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion.* Through this key tale, Orpheus's/Orfeo's romance has a deep influence also on Aragorn and Arwen's story in *The Lord of the Rings.* The most important element that Tolkien takes from the *Sir Orfeo* figuration of the ancient story is undoubtedly the insertion of the political theme: the link established between the recovery of the hero's beloved and the return to royal responsibility.

Thus, the second part of the paper is, dedicated to the reception of *Sir Orfeo* and the classical myth in Tolkien. It shows how in his work the different steps of the tradition of Orpheus's story are co-present, creating an inextricable substrate of inspiration that nourishes his imagination.

Keywords Orpheus and Eurydice, *Sir Orfeo,* Reception, Tolkien, Beren and Lúthien

Once and for all, when there's song, it's Orpheus.[1]
Rainer Maria Rilke

INTRODUCTION[2]

The aim of this paper is to focus on an example of what we could provisionally call a "two-step" reception: the relationship among the mediaeval lay *Sir Orfeo*, its classical models (in particular Virgil, Ovid, and Boethius), and Tolkien's work. *Sir Orfeo*, composed in Middle English between the 13th and the 14th century, is a greatly interesting piece of mediaeval reception of the ancient world, which has often been studied by mediaeval philologists in his historical and literary context. To classicists, however, it is almost unknown.[3] It was specifically studied and appreciated by Tolkien, who found in it a long-lasting source of inspiration. The different levels of this relationship have already been the subject of many studies, as it will be seen. However, an overall view can induce fruitful reflection on the mechanisms of reception and literary memory.

First, we will summarize the first steps of how the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was received before *Sir Orfeo*. Later, we will show how the mediaeval lay offers a refiguration[4] with profound modifications of the classical literary incarnations of this myth. What is meant by 'refiguration' is that the lay combines themes and aspects of the plot of the different predecessors, thus creating a new structure. By doing this, it emphasizes certain aspects on which, as we shall see, Tolkien focuses. This will be useful to contextualize how Tolkien revives the story of Orpheus/Orfeo, which will be the theme of the last section of the essay.

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1 "Ein für alle Male / ists Orpheus, wenn es singt" Rainer Maria Rilke, The Sonnets to Orpheus 1. 5. I am indebted for the suggestion to Giaccherini (1994).

2 The title of the paper comes from *Sir Orfeo* 603 (modified). I wish to thank Professor Elisa Romano, who held, the course "Classical Tradition and Reception" at the University of Pavia in 2019; during her lessons I presented the first idea of this paper. I would also like to thank André Faletti for drawing my attention to Tolkien. Finally, I am particularly grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who have been generous with valuable corrections, observations, bibliography, and even pdfs in the post-pandemic difficulties. Any errors and imperfections still present are on me only.

3 Out of curiosity, I put *"Sir Orfeo"* in the search tool of the widely used bibliographical database *L'Année Philologique;* just one result – Friedman (1966) – turned out.

4 As Hardwick (2003) 10 defines it, "selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition".

This introduction will deal with the reception of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice up to the Middle Ages. It is a Greek myth, but it is not presented in an extended form by any Greek source that has come down to us.[5] In its basic form it narrates the premature death of Orpheus's bride. The desperate harpist uses his skills in music to enter the Underworld; he dares to ask the god and goddess of the dead to return his beloved. As a special grace, they give him back Eurydice. In some versions he must comply with one condition: Orpheus must not look at her until they have left the kingdom of the dead. The harpist fails to meet this condition and loses his wife for good.

The love story could be a development of the shamanic figure, traditionally seen as founder of the Orphic doctrine.[6] We can read short allusions, for example, in Euripides's *Alcestis*[7] and Plato's *Symposium*.[8] Euripides seems to allude to a version of the myth with a happy ending, *i.e.,* Eurydice's return to life; other ancient passages seem to point to a similar resolution.[9] Plato's version, which tells that Orpheus obtained a mere simulacrum of Eurydice from the gods, since he was guilty of having tried to save his beloved without sacrificing himself, could be an ironic reinterpretation of the current story,[10] or a reworking of preceding yet lost narratives such as the Orpheus drama by Aristias about which very little is known.[11] There was a tragedy by Aeschylus (*Bassarides*), which probably focused more on Orpheus's death than on the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

That the version known to us, with the famous condition imposed on Orpheus not to turn to look at his beloved and his inexorable loss, was a Hellenistic cre-

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5 There is no claim here to provide a complete bibliography of a broad and strongly debated question. For a first orientation, see *e.g.,* Miles (1999) 61–195, Susanetti (2005) 101 ff., Fletcher (2019) 35–40.

6 On Greek shamanism and the place of Orpheus in it, see Dodds (1951) 135–156. For the history of this notion in classical studies, see Bremmer (2016).

7 Eur. *Alc.* 357–362 (Admetus speaking).

8 Plat. *Symp.* 179d (Phaedrus speaking).

9 See Heurgon (1932), Bowra (1952), Lee (1965). The latter gives short notice of every ancient author dealing with the myth.

10 See Lee (1965) 403: "Plato's private myth-making".

11 See Sansone (1985) 55–56.

ation remains indemonstrable; likewise, it cannot be definitely proven that it is an innovation by Virgil.[12]

Complete narratives of the sad love story of Orpheus and Eurydice only come to us from the Latin world. It plays a key role in two of the most studied works of classical literature Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* In Virgil, the story appears at the end of book 4 of the didactic poem on agriculture.[13] This tale of love and death precedes the final image of resurrection and the rebirth of bees.

In Ovid, the story of Orpheus connects books 10 and 11, containing other narratives and creating a *mise en abyme* of considerable complexity.[14]

The third important author who retells this story is Boethius, in the twelfth song of book 3 of *The Consolation of Philosophy.* Here, the story, told mostly in Virgilian terms, is christianized as an *exemplum* against evil worldly temptations. The three authors are already links in the chain of reception: Virgil receives Greek predecessors, possibly Hellenistic; Ovid receives Virgil;[15] Boethius rewrites the Augustan age poets from another point of view.[16]

Virgil and Ovid, unlike most ancient authors, enjoyed an uninterrupted fortune in the Middle Ages.[17] Scholars have long speculated on the existence of lost French or Old English lays which would have received Orpheus's and Eurydice's story.[18] This would have been the connecting point with the classical texts and

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[12] Otis (1972) 57–58 finds the hypothesis tempting, albeit maybe unnecessary, and admits that there is no proof. See also Perkell (1978) 217 ff.

[13] Verg. georg. 4,457–527.

[14] Ov. met. 10,1–85 (Orpheus and Eurydice), 86–739 (other myths narrated by Orpheus), 11,1–66 (death of Orpheus and final reunion with Eurydice).

[15] It is enough to remember the so-called Ovidian Aeneid, *i.e.,* Ov. met. 13,623–14,608, where Ovid re-narrates Aeneas' story establishing an emulative relationship with its predecessor.

[16] On Boethius (and *Sir Orfeo*) as examples of the reception of the myth, see Lee (1961) 307.

[17] This is no place for a complete bibliography on Virgil's and Ovid's fortune in the Middle Ages. In relation to *Sir Orfeo,* see Davies (1961), Gros Louis (1967) 245–247, Pisani Babich (1998) 477.

[18] Allen (1964) is probably right pointing out that "about the origin of *Sir Orfeo* all that is certain is that in it we have a remote and Celtic descendant of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice; beyond that, everything is a matter of speculation, particularly the exact nature of the imaginative process by which that legend was moulded" 108. On the antecedents of *Sir Orfeo,* see the essential article by Kittredge (1886); furthermore, Davies (1936), Loomis (1936), Lee (1965).

Celtic culture, a connection very evident in *Sir Orfeo.* Other intermediaries could have been relevant, such as the translation of Boethius' *Consolation* into Old English by King Alfred as well as the *Ovide moralisé* of the 13th century.[19] Illuminating convergences between these translations/rewritings and the lay have been studied.[20]

However, the presence of numerous intermediate moments should not make us lose sight of the deep knowledge the unknown author of *Sir Orfeo* displays of the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of Orpheus's romance.[21] Moreover, the author of *Sir Orfeo* does not select and follow one source but combines the gamut of ancient, late antique, and mediaeval sources: what results is, as we said, a refiguration. His work is a proper rewriting, approaching the ancient story with an attitude that we could also define (through the vocabulary of modern reception studies) as "stealing":[22] the plot is closely similar to the classical one despite the introduction of major changes in the order of events and new ethical and political issues belonging to the mediaeval British setting. Considering the convergence of the mediaeval context contemporary with the composition of the lay, its biblical-Christian elements, and the Celtic substratum one can classify *Sir Orfeo* as a hybridization, *i.e.,* "a fusion of material from classical and other cultures".[23]

We will return to Tolkien after analyzing some of the most important correspondences between the ancient sources and *Sir Orfeo,* with "correspondence" used here in its technical sense (an aspect "of the new work which directly relate to a characteristic of the source").[24] This first part will then be employed to show how the lay constitutes an essential link between Orpheus and Middle-Earth.

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19 On the myth of Orpheus in the Middle Ages, see Gros Louis (1966)

20 On King Alfred's translation, see Burke Severs (1961), with rich textual analysis; see also Battles (2010) 181–182 and *passim.* On the *Ovide moralisé,* see Vicari (1982) 69 ff.

21 A knowledge that any educated man of his age must have shared: see Frappier (1976) 215, or. Frappier (1973).

22 As defined by Keen (2019) 12 – referring to Keen (2006): "R. [reception] story derives from ancient S. [source]". The example proposed (Joyce's *Ulysses*) is extremely fitting here, since it is another case of re-telling of the ancient myth with strong modernization in situations, relationship between the characters, and the very names.

23 Hardwick (2003) 9. For the relationship with the Celtic imagery, see, *e.g.,* Grimaldi (1981).

24 I refer again to the very appropriate "working vocabulary for reception studies" by Hardwick (2003) 9–10.

Articles

REFIGURATION AND HYBRID. FROM LATIN ORPHEUS
TO MEDIAEVAL ORFEO

This section will focus on *Sir Orfeo*[25], examining convergences with and divergences from its classical antecedents. The very names of the tale's protagonists point to the overwhelming classical influence on this lay.[26] However, we will focus on other aspects of the Orpheus/Orfeo story, those that most strongly attracted Tolkien's attention. These said aspects are: the image of Eurydice/Heurodis in a *locus amoenus* setting; the character of the antagonist (serpent and god of the dead/King of the Faeries) and his kingdom; the theme of marital love and mourning; the positive relationship of the protagonist with the natural world; the royal role of the protagonist, with the sub-themes of exile and inheritance. This last theme, *i.e.,* the responsibility of king and the fight for recognition, linked with the quest for the lost bride, constitutes perhaps *Sir Orfeo's* greatest innovation with respect to its classical precedent. Undoubtedly, it is the most important one for *Sir Orfeo*'s reception in Tolkien, particularly in the story of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings.*

A first point of interest to be discussed concerns the metamorphosis undergone by the character of Orpheus who, in becoming Orfeo, takes on the title of king and political leader, a trait alien to the classical musician. The politicization of his character aligns with the presentation of the location of capitals of these two protagonists. The author of the lay "poker-facedly"[27] states that Orfeo's city was Winchester, but that at the (unspecified) time of the events it

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25 For the text of the Sir Orfeo I used the edition by Laskaya and Salinsbury (1995) and, of course, the translation by Tolkien himself in *GPO,* on which we shall return.

26 Many have noted that the onomastics are one of the most glaring aspects of classical inspiration behind *Sir Orfeo:* see Smithers (1953) 85, Lee (1960) 92, Burke Severs (1961) 187, Davies (1961) 161. The Italianized name of the main character (Orfeo) has led Lee (1960) 97 to postulate the existence of some form of intermediate Italian text, otherwise untraceable in the material. Even more interesting are the very names of the ancestors of Orfeo, King Pluto and King Iuno (*Sir Orfeo* 29–30), presented as ancient sovereigns once deified in a euhemeristic manner. What we see operating here is something more complex than the simple "refreshing ignorance of classical mythology and geography" – as dismissed by Burke Severs (1961) 197. Relevantly, it is difficult to understand why one should try to correct the text to avoid excessive discrepancy with the classical myth – see Davies (1961) 166.

27 The amusing expression is used by Honegger (2010) 119.

was called Traciens.[28] This name contains a clear allusion to the classical Orpheus's epithet *Threicius vates,*[29] the form Traciens is probably due to a French intermediary.[30] Thrace of the classical myth is a periphery land with close ties to the shamanic side of Orphism. In *Sir Orfeo* it is transposed and hybridized, becoming the heartland of England.[31] What was once a geographical characterization of otherness becomes a centerpiece of the protagonist's royalty. Orpheus, stranger *par excellence* who, unlike many other heroes, was never a king,[32] becomes Orfeo, the protagonist of a story focused on the renunciation and resumption of a king's responsibility.

Both in surviving versions of the classical myth and in *Sir Orfeo,* the story begins with the fall of the female protagonist. The opening scene of *Sir Orfeo,* to which the first appearances of Lúthien and Arwen are indebted, is feminine and idyllic: in the lay, dame Heurodis of Traciens enjoys a peaceful late spring day with her ladies-in-waiting.[33] The mediaeval maidens are the hybridized version of a group of Naiads who accompanied the Ovidian Eurydice.[34] To that point, the scenario closely follows its classical antecedent, but the disappearance of Orfeo's bride happens by different means: if Eurydice falls victim to a snake hidden in the grass,[35] Heurodis is kidnapped by a shining King of the Faeries.[36] Dazzling and merciless, this character threatens horrible repercussions should Heurodis reject him.

The inevitability of Heurodis's destiny resembles the commonplace classical motif of the inevitability of the Manes, *i.e.,* death. At this moment of the lay,

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28 *Sir Orfeo* 47–50 = *GPO* 124.

29 Ov. met. 11,1–2, Boeth. cons. 3,12,6.

30 See Burke Severs (1961) 197.

31 See Davies (1961) 166. On the historical significance of this mention, see Battles (2010) 190 ff. Other historical interpretations of the lay have been proposed, *e.g.,* by Falk (2000).

32 Such as Orpheus's travelling companion Jason, or Odysseus.

33 *Sir Orfeo* 57–76 = *GPO* 124.

34 Ov. met. 10,8–10; for Virgil and Ovid, I used the Loeb Classical Library editions (translations by Henry Rushton Fairclough and Frank Justus Miller, respectively; see bibliography). Eurydice's companions appear also in Verg. georg. 4,460.

35 See Verg. georg. 4,458–459; Ov. met. 10,10 and 23–24.

36 *Sir Orfeo* 131–174 = *GPO* 126–127.

the King is acting as a reproposition of the snake that kills the young woman, while he will then assume the part of the god of the dead who keeps her in his kingdom. It is easily understood if one considers the Christian conflation of the snake with the devil, who, recast as the King of the Faeries, abducts Heurodis both with temptation and cruelty.[37] Relevantly, noon is Satan's time:[38] by falling asleep at that inopportune time, Heurodis is befallen to the same helplessness as her classical antecedent, with her bare feet in the tall grass.[39] The Virgilian-Ovidian image directly adumbrates the fate of Heurodis: a young woman is taken while sleeping soundly in a flowery meadow, snatched from her husband by an invisible threat embodied by a reptile. However, certain less obvious parallels can also be drawn here. Allegorical readings mediate the reinterpretation of the snake as a figure of sin, *i.e.,* of Satan; the tree under which Heurodis falls asleep is also reminiscent of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden.[40]

Another mediation lies in the story of Proserpina's kidnapping.[41] The goddess, snatched from her entourage in a flowery meadow, explicitly comes under the power of the lord of the dead. The superimposition between Proserpina and Eurydice already appeared in Ovid[42] and predates mediaeval culture.[43] Hence, the refiguration in *Sir Orfeo* blends the classical Eurydice, the Eurydice/Eve of Christian allegory (as applied to Ovid),[44] the classical Proserpina (who will also

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37 See Friedman (1966), Jeffrey (1976) 48. Note that the King of the Faeries will use the temptation of beauty also as a final attempt to keep Heurodis in his kingdom (ll. 467–462).

38 As Friedman (1966) 29 puts it: "A mediaeval author such as the *Orfeo* poet need not have been a student of theology to be interested in the idea that the devil appears at noonday".

39 See Kinghorn (1966) 363.

40 See Hill (1961) 140–141.

41 As narrated, *e.g.,* by Claudian, just to mention one text that extensively narrates this myth and was well known in the culture of mediaeval England: see Bloomfield (1976) 728, reviewing Clarke/Giles (1973). For a reprise of *De raptu Proserpinae, e.g.,* in Chaucer, see Turner 2016.

42 See Ov. met. 10,28–29.

43 See Frappier (1976). On the problematic mingling of Eurydice and Proserpina in Heurodis, see Davies (1961) 162.

44 See Vicari (1982) 70.

feature in Eurydice's story) and the Eurydice/Proserpina of other mediaeval narratives. Furthermore, we should not forget that Tolkien, not unlike many named and anonymous mediaeval authors, regularly filtered classical imagery through Biblical and Christian lenses.

In the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of the myth of Orpheus, the loss of Eurydice occurs in two successive moments: the first loss comes about due to the carelessness and innocence of the young woman, the second one comes about due to the failure of Orpheus himself, who is not able to emerge victorious from the ultimate test of character set by the gods of the Underworld. Some have argued that this constitutes one of the most striking differences between the classical story and that of *Sir Orfeo*, where the fall of Orfeo does not occur.[45] That assumption holds true only if a rewriting by "stealing" (like this one) is required to adhere precisely to the scheme and order of events of the original, which is, of course, absurd. The author of *Sir Orfeo* proposes a story that faithfully traces the classic one but changes the order of events.

In the classical myth, the structure is as follows: a) capture/death of Eurydice; b) bereaved wanderings of Orpheus; c) descent to the Underworld, an audience with the god of the dead; d) illusory reconquest of Eurydice; e) failure and definitive loss; f) a new period of wandering characterised by hopeless mourning.[46]

In *Sir Orfeo*[47], the moment in which Orfeo deludes himself to be able to save his bride (but makes a fatal mistake) precedes his wandering and his entry into the world of the dead: it is an Orfeo still fully entangled in his role in the human society who sees Heurodis slipping away from his hands. Both in *Sir Orfeo* and in Virgilian and Ovidian poetry, the measure of his error is disobedience to the explicit instructions given to save his love. Orpheus turns to look at his bride before his time; Orfeo attempts a resistance which the King of the Faeries has already sanctioned as vain.

The hybridization of *Sir Orfeo* means that this failure does not concern only the personal, amorous destiny of the hero but calls into question his role as sovereign: Orfeo's mistake is above all that of having tried to beat the King of the

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45 See, *e.g.,* Burke Severs (1961) 188, Kinghorn (1966) 367. For a wide reflection on this problem, see Jeffrey (1976).

46 Verg. georg. 4: a) 457–463; b) 464–466; c) 467–484 (the meeting is implicit); d) 485–487; e) 488–502; f) 502 ff. Ov. met. 10: a) 8–10; b) 11–12; c) 13–49; d) 50–54; e) 55–63; f) 56 ff.

47 *Sir Orfeo* 175–194 = *GPO* 127.

Faeries on the level of worldly and military[48] power, which will prove useless and counterproductive.[49] We see here the destiny of the lover entwined with an unprecedented destiny as the king.[50] For Orpheus was only a lover, devoid of any royal role, whereas royalty is central to Orfeo's figuration. Orfeo's self-exile and the theme of kinship deserve our attention because they will prove to be relevant to Tolkien's revival of the story.[51]

Faced with the failure of his attempt to restrain Heurodis, Orfeo experiences a moment of pain of unbearable intensity, which seem to rewrite the Ovidian text.[52] He forswears his royal role and follows his voluntary political exclusion with a renunciation of wordly pleasures of love and human society,[53] peremptorily affirming his bereaved chastity in clearly classical terms.[54] Compare *Sir Orfeo* 209–211

> For now ichave mi quen y – lore,
> The fairest levedi that ever was bore,
> Never eft y nil no woman se.

> For now that I have lost my queen,
> the fairest lady men have seen,
> I wish not woman more to see.[55]

to Virgil

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48 A full military interpretation of the passage can be found in Battles (2010).

49 See Pisani Babich (1998).

50 The theme has been often studied: see Gros Louis (1967), Kennedy (1976), Riddy (1976) 7, Edwards (1981), Nicholson (1985).

51 On exile and return from exile in *Sir Orfeo*'s cultural context, see Field (2005); on our lay, see specifically p. 48. See also Battles (2005) 196 ff.

52 Compare Ov. met. 10,75 with *Sir Orfeo* 195.

53 *Sir Orfeo* 201–236 = *GPO* 127–128.

54 In classical models put this theme after the definitive loss of the bride, alongside with the more extensive description of Orpheus's pain; this is in fact, be the reason of Orpheus' death: see. Verg. georg. 4,520–527; Ov. met. 11,3–41. For more information, see Giaccherini (2002) 2.

55 Translation: *GPO* 128.

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> Nulla Venus, non ulli animum flexere hymenaei

> No thought of love or wedding song could bend his soul[56]

and Ovid

> omnemque refugerat Orpheus
> femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,
> sive fidem dederat

> and Orpheus had shunned all love of womankind, whether because of his ill success
> in love, or whether he had given his troth once for all.[57]

Indeed, the voluntary rejection of human society, framed as a rejection of erotic and married life, is profoundly classical.[58] The desperation of Orpheus/Orfeo reflects his lonely seclusion among the hostile forces of nature:[59] a key theme for both Virgil[60] and Ovid[61] as well as the lay. The innovation of *Sir Orfeo* comes through the lay's insistent contrasting of the current, miserable life of the former king and his past splendours.[62] This is consistent with the greater interest in Orfeo's ties with the social and political context mentioned above; Tolkien will reuse this motif while crafting the adventures of Beren and Aragorn.

Another parallel to ancient models is the minstrel's ability to enchant and pacify wild animals and beasts encountered during his wanderings beyond the margins of human civilization.[63] It is a capacity that Orfeo shares with the

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56 Verg. georg. 4,516.

57 Ov. met. 10,79–81. Ovid gives two reasons for Orpheus' renunciation of love (excessive pain or lifelong fidelity); of them, "in *Sir Orfeo* the former […] is given, through the latter is very strongly implied" Hill (1961) 146.

58 See Smithers (1953) 85–86.

59 *Sir Orfeo* 237 ff. = *GPO* 128.

60 See Verg. georg. 4,507–509 and 517–519.

61 See. Ov. met. 10,76–77.

62 *Sir Orfeo* 241–266 = *GPO* 128–129. See Gros Louis (1967) 248.

63 *Sir Orfeo* 272–280 = *GPO* 129.

Virgilian, Ovidian, and Boethian Orpheus,[64] and, as we shall see, with Tolkien's Beren.

In his solitary ten-year wanderings Orfeo shows no intention or hope of recovering his lost bride.[65] By chance, Orfeo enters a world far removed from the human one, the world crossed by tracks of mysterious hunts of the people of the faery, who fascinate Orfeo due to their closeness to the refinement of life, long abandoned by mourning Orfeo. Approaching a group of faery hunters, he is surprised to meet Heurodis. The encounter between husband and wife is marked by his amazement and her compassion. Their strong feelings prevent both from speaking a word, while their mutual love becomes exceptionally evident.[66] Classical ancestry can be recognised in these three themes: the compassion expressed by the shadow of Heurodis/Eurydice for the husband,[67] the issue of incommunicability,[68] and Orpheus's/Orfeo's disregard for endangering his own life. For the third theme, compare *Sir Orfeo* 342 (marking Orfeo's decision)

Of liif no deth me no reche

for life or death no more I care[69]

to Ovid

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64 Verg. georg. 4,510, Ov. met. 10,90, 143–144 and 11,1–2, 44–45, Boeth. cons. 2,12,7–13. While Orfeo just enchants animals, Orpheus is also said to have power over trees and stones: on this point, see Burke Severs (1961) 190–191. Orfeo's skill with the harp is recognized as a major correspondence with classical texts: *e.g.,* by Smithers (1953) 85. Another character who shares this ability is the Biblical David: on the assimilation of Orpheus and David in the Middle Ages, see Gros Louis (1966) 644, Friedman (1970) 148 ff., Jeffrey (1976) 49 ff., Giaccherini (1994) 14.

65 See Gros Louis (1967).

66 On this theme in *Sir Orfeo,* see Bergner (1979).

67 Compare *Sir Orfeo* 325–327 = *GPO* 130–131 with Verg. georg. 4,494–498 and Ov. met. 10,60–61. In Vergil, Eurydice actually talks to Orpheus – the only direct speech in Virgil's account, as Anderson (1982) 29–30 points out – while Heurodis cannot.

68 Compare *Sir Orfeo* 335–337 with Verg. georg. 4,500–502 and Ov. met. 10,62–63.

69 *GPO* 131.

> quodsi fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est
> nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum

> but if the fates deny this privilege for my wife, I am resolved not to return. Rejoice in the death of two.[70]

This aspect will be particularly dear to Tolkien while constructing his own heroes.

Orfeo decides to follow Heurodis's companions regardless of any danger. Orfeo's entry into the realm of the faeries is of interest to us because, as we shall see, it constitutes a foundation of Tolkien's elvish imagery in its characteristic ambiguity, mixing the wonderful and the cruel. Inside a splendid castle[71] that reminds us more of Dante's limbo[72] than the Hades of the ancient, the hero meets a horrible multitude of men and women kidnapped by the King of the Faeries now gathered there in apparent death.[73] Critics have noted[74] the incoherence of the passage. It is said that these figures are dead, then that they are not. It is not clear whether they are blocked in the instant of their departure, or they are prisoners of the atrocious punishments that the King of the Faeries inflicts on those who refuse to follow him spontaneously.[75] This passage reminded most readers of the famous description of the Hereafter in the sixth book of the *Aeneid,* populated with all the world's evils.[76] The Virgilian text featured abstract concepts, while *Sir Orfeo* depicts singular victims of various painful destinies. Yet, these

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70 Ov. met. 10,38–39. Here Orpheus challenges the Underworld gods to take his life if they don't want to give him Eurydice's one.

71 *Sir Orfeo* 343–386 = *GPO* 131–132. On the palaces in *Sir Orfeo* see Battles (2010) 186 ff. The guardian is not a monster like the classic Cerberus (Verg. georg. 4,483), but a very mediaeval figure of gatekeeper. In Virgil and Ovid, the moment of entry into the kingdom of the dead was left implicit; here, it is made clear that it is his minstrel capacity that grants Orfeo access.

72 See *Divine Comedy, Inferno* 4.106–111.

73 *Sir Orfeo* 387–404 = *GPO* 132.

74 See, *e.g.,* Allen (1964) 103 ff. The passage has also been suspected of interpolation: see Mitchell (1964).

75 With the same tortures he had threatened Heurodis, as Allen (1964) 105 highlights. See also Kinghorn (1966) 368–369, Williams (2012).

76 Verg. Aen. 6,273–289. See, *e.g.,* Davies (1961) 164–166, Giaccherini (1994) 18.

two scenes show a striking correspondence. Even more striking is the similarity of this passage to the shorter one in *Georgics,* where the poet describes the dead people Orpheus meets, summarizing the entirety of human pain.[77]

At the end of this review of "horrid authenticity",[78] Orfeo sees his bride again.[79] This time, Heurodis is asleep under a tree – the same position she was in when she met the King of the Faeries and was bound to follow him;[80] furthermore, she wears the same clothes. Therefore, she too is suspended in the decisive moment of her separation from the world of the living; a trait subtly similar to Ovid's text, which underlines marks of the snake's bite on Eurydice's body;[81] that is, her own way to leave her husband and join the Underworld.

What follows[82] is the hybridized version of the backbone of the Orpheus story. The protagonist introduces himself to his wife's powerful captor and his queen, propitiates them thanks to his singing ability and persuades them to grant his spouse a second chance at life.[83] Significant is the presence of the king's bride, which demonstrates that the kidnapping of Heurodis had no erotic motivations.[84] In Celtic fairy tales the kidnapping generally happens because the kidnapper desires to marry his victim. Here this is not the case,[85] with the classical influence proving more dominant than the Celtic models: indeed, the god of the Underworld to whom Orpheus speaks, Pluto, has his wife Proserpina next to him. Pluto and Proserpina's bond is the result of a kidnapping as well, and the Ovidian musician refers to it as a *captatio benevolentiae.*[86]

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77 Verg. georg. 4, 475–477.

78 Riddy (1976) 6.

79 *Sir Orfeo* 405–408 = *GPO* 132.

80 See Davies (1961) 163–164.

81 Ov. met. 10,49.

82 *Sir Orfeo* 409–476 = *GPO* 132–134.

83 This passage is quite elliptic and emotional in Virgil (Georg. 4,467 ff.), while Ovid makes of Orpheus' appeal to Hades a piece of rhetorical ability (met. 10,17–39). See Reed (2013) 170.

84 See Smithers (1953) 88.

85 For an interpretation on the reasonless abduction of Heurodis, see Davies (1961).

86 As a useful aside, Geoffrey Chaucer explicitly calls Pluto the King of the Faeries: see *The Merchant's Tale* 2227 with Giaccherini (1994) 19 and (2002) 6 n. 11: "it may be significant that

The hybridization is very evident: if the scenario is classic and the characters are very close to their classical counterparts, the dialogue between Orfeo and the king retraces the form of a fairy tale (the faery promises the fulfilment of a wish chosen by the mortal, then tries to take back his word[87]) and the rules of behaviour of the good ruler of the mediaeval age. Here, the real victory of Orfeo is brought about: after having enchanted the King of the Faeries with his music, Orfeo teaches him a lesson in true royalty, forcing him to keep his word and to give him Heurodis.

So, the new Orpheus remedies his second fall and gets his reward: the King of the Faeries explicitly allows him to take Heurodis's hand and leave his kingdom. The emphasis on the long-desired physical contact between the two spouses seems to recall the final verses of Ovid's account of Orpheus and Eurydice[88] with a sort of a reparative correction of the reference text: if Orpheus and Eurydice, in the classical world, could walk together again only in Hades, Orfeo and Heurodis leave behind the world of the non-living and return to their own hand in hand. This is a happy ending that pays homage to the rules of the genre and to the Christian *Weltanschauung*[89] rather than restoring hypothetical pre-Virgilian positive resolutions of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, if they ever existed.[90]

The lay ends with a section about Orfeo's return to Traciens, first disguised as a beggar, then as a king.[91] It has very little to do with the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice, with more parallels to Ulysses' fate;[92] to discuss this further would deserve more space. However, we should emphasize that the destiny

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precisely in this tale can be found one of Chaucer's not-too-frequent allusions to Orpheus (1. 1716)".

87 For an example see Smithers (1953) 86.

88 Ov. met. 11,61–66.

89 On the "third Orpheus", the Christian one, see Kinghorn (1966) 360. On other mediaeval stories of Orpheus' success in rescuing Eurydice, and on the significance of the happy ending, see Dronke (1962).

90 And possibly known in the Middle Ages: see Allen (1964) 109. On *Sir Orfeo*'s ending, see also Honegger (2010) 123–124.

91 *Sir Orfeo* 477–592 = *GPO* 134–137.

92 For example, Kinghorn (1966) 368 and Bridgwater (2012) 58 n. 3 see the contiguity between Orfeo and Ulysses (without dwelling on it). For a comparative view, see Parks (1983).

of Orfeo makes his reconquest of power, return to his role as king and enjoy-ment of considerable longevity conditional upon Heurodis's recovery.[93] Their longevity, however, does not go beyond the limits of the human mortal destiny, of which the Ovidian Orpheus was aware.[94] Not a "happily-ever-after",[95] this is an anticipation of the death of Orfeo and the subsequent succession to power of his loyal steward.[96]

TRANSLATION AND EQUIVALENT. *SIR ORFEO* IMAGERY IN TOLKIEN'S FANTASY

Let us now focus on the second step of our analysis – to discuss Tolkien's work: as a whole, as an instance of a reception of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and as a reception of *Sir Orfeo,* with classical myth positioned as an indirect reference for Tolkien.[97] The receiving author's knowledge of the an-cient source/story[98] can be taken for granted here. There is no reason to doubt Tolkien's knowledge of one of the best-known mythical stories of the ancient world, not only to the classicists; Tolkien had a complete classical education, starting at the age of four, the significance of which has been thoroughly studied

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93 See Burke Severs (1961) 199 ff.

94 See Ov. met. 10,32–37 (Orpheus to Pluto and Proserpina): "We are totally pledged to you, and though we tarry on earth a little while, slow or swift we speed to one abode. Hither we all make our way; this is our final home; yours is the longest sway over the human race. She also shall be yours to rule when of ripe age she shall have lived out her allotted years. I ask the enjoyment of her as a boon" (omnia debemur vobis, paulumque morati / serius aut citius sedem properamus ad unam. / tendimus huc omnes, haec est domus ultima, vosque / humani generis longissima regna tenetis. / haec quoque, cum iustos matura peregerit annos, / iuris erit vestri: pro munere poscimus usum). On the matter, see Falk (2000), esp. p. 248.

95 *Contra* Lee (1960) 97.

96 "Now King Orfeo newe coround is, / And his quen, Dame Heurodis, / And lived long afterward, / And sethen was king the steward" (*Sir Orfeo* 593–596 = *GPO* 137).

97 Following the definition of Marshall (2016) 21: "indirect reference acknowledges that while there may be a classical source, its use is derivative, and an intermediate source is to be seen as primary". Tolkien's primary source would be, of course, *Sir Orfeo.* See Keen (2019) 12.

98 See Hardwick (2003) 5 on the importance on this notion in reception studies.

by scholars.[99] In his correspondence, Tolkien explicitly mentions that Ovid (and certainly Virgil[100]) constituted a part of his curriculum:

> "I never learned Finnish well enough to do more than plod through a bit of the original, like a schoolboy with Ovid [...]."[101]

In another letter, Tolkien openly cites the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as his source of inspiration (we will return to this important passage). As far as *Sir Orfeo* is concerned, there is ample evidence of Tolkien's "lifelong involvement"[102] with it, as demonstrated by scholarship.[103] Finally, Tolkien's translation of *Sir Orfeo* was released in 1975 along with the translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*.[104] According to his son Christopher, the translation dated back many years.[105] Tolkien intended to equip it with an appropriate critical and exegetical apparatus to eventually publish it, but the plan was never fulfilled, and Christopher found no extant commentary written by his father.[106] Although Tolkien never completed this and many other projects, his interest in

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99 Swain (2007), Williams (2021). On the importance of classics for Tolkien, see also B. E. Stevens (2017).

100 For the influences of Virgil's *Aeneid* on *The Lord of the Rings* see Swain (2007) 346, Barrella (2007), Cilli (2019) 298–299. For some examples, see Morse (1986), Greenman (1992), Obertino (1993), Freeman (2021).

101 The letter, published in *Letters* 229 (n. 163), is dated 7 June 1955 and addressed to W. H. Auden.

102 Bridgwater (2012) 49. As Shippey (2003) 64 put it, "Many hints from this took root in Tolkien's mind". On the general influence of philological work on his fiction, see Jeffrey (2004).

103 For a brief overview of Tolkien's academic experience on *Sir Orfeo,* see Ryan (1987, now in Ryan 2009). The love for mediaeval romance was shared by C. S. Lewis: see Lazo (2003) 46–47. In 1944, Tolkien prepared a student edition for the naval cadet's course in Oxford: see Hostetter (2007) 487 and Hammond/Anderson (1993) 299–300 (for bibliographical description). It is noteworthy that the fundamental critical edition of Bliss (1954) was born under his influence.

104 See Hammond/Anderson (1993) 321–322.

105 Tolkien (1975) 7.

106 Tolkien (1975) 8.

Sir Orfeo, as a reader and scholar, is undeniable and has so far inspired several studies on themes and motifs drawn from *Sir Orfeo* in Tolkien's main works.[107]

To those who know Tolkien's works even in a superficial manner, *Sir Orfeo* sounds strangely familiar[108] and recalls the atmosphere surrounding the Tolkienian moments of contact between the human/hobbit and elven worlds, especially in *The Hobbit* and in *The Silmarillion.* The latter work shows clearer parallels with the mediated and non-mediated Orphic story (on which more anon).

Let us begin with the meeting of Thorin Oakenshield's company with the elves of Mirkwood[109] in *The Hobbit,*[110] which leads to their imprisonment by an unnamed Elvenking (named Thranduil in *The Lord of the Rings*[111]). The Tolkienian scholarship noted profound affinities between the fate of Thorin's company and Orfeo's wanderings and highlighted the central role of *Sir Orfeo* in the construction of Tolkien's elven imagery: Orfeo treads into the liminal woods between the human and faery worlds, encounters the faery hunts, and discovers the place where Heurodis is held captive.[112] Evidently, Tolkien draws more prominently on the fairy tale aspects and less prominently on classical narratives, which illustrates a tangible permanence of our intermediate (or central) text in the author's narrative construction.

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107 Tolkien notoriously hated source criticism; but I believe that Shippey is right apologizing for such an approach: "No one can ever tell for sure what someone has thought or is thinking, but in practice we all operate, often successfully, on our best guesses, and degrees of probability are possible, in some cases, as Tolkien conceded, approaching 100 percent. [...] It is true, as they say, that you do not have to have the recipe to appreciate a cake: but it is also true that you can learn a lot from seeing what a great cook has in his kitchen" (2011) 15.

108 Of the same opinion: Hostetter (2007) 487.

109 On this place, which "contributes [...] to the fairy-tale atmosphere of *The Hobbit*" see Evans (2007); the citation comes from p. 429.

110 *Hobbit* 203–204, 218 ff.

111 *LoTR* 240. The name appears also in Tolkien's account of the "Quest of Erebor"; on its publishing history see Anderson in Tolkien (2002) 367–377.

112 See Shippey (2000) 34–36. As Hostetter (2007) 488 puts it, "the Elves of Middle-Earth are certainly far more reminiscent of the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* than they are of those in Shakespeare or Spenser". The problem has been fully studied by Hillman (2018) who highlights very subtly how Tolkien "resolves ambiguities present in the portrayal of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo,* for the fairy king and his people seem crueler [*sic*] than in fact they are" 47.

Before going into the analysis of the two major Tolkienian narratives drawing on *Sir Orfeo* and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is worth briefly mentioning that, in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien mentions Winchester, the city identified in the lay with Orfeo's capital:[113]

> "But to refer to Rivendell as Imladris was as if one now was to speak of Winchester as Camelot, except that the identity was certain, while in Rivendell there still dwelt a lord of renown far older than Arthur would be, were he still king at Winchester today."[114]

As has been pointed out,[115] these few words could create a vague but significant connection with the line of the lay, making *Sir Orfeo* appear particularly vibrant in Tolkien's creative vision.

The "Song of Parting" of Beren and Lúthien. Orpheus/Orfeo in *The Silmarillion*

The influence of the Orphic myth and *Sir Orfeo* is particularly noticeable in the story of Beren and Lúthien. Central to the Tolkienian construction of Arda,[116] it is alluded to several times in *The Lord of The Rings* and narrated in its entirety in chapter 19 of *The Silmarillion.* First, we should bear in mind that within *The Silmarillion* the source is cited several times as "the Lay of Leithian, Release from Bondage"[117] – an imaginary composition of the same literary genre as *Sir Orfeo.* The story of love and death that unites human Beren and elf Lúthien, leading

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113 *Sir Orfeo* 49–50 = *GPO* 124.

114 *LoTR* 1134.

115 Hillman (2018) 38. I am especially grateful to one the anonymous readers for their discussion of this point.

116 On this influence in general, see Librán-Moreno (2007), Brunetti (2011), B. E. Stevens (2021) 113–114, Astrup Sundt (2021). The latter has provided a significant inspiration for this work, even if he focuses only on the Virgilian antecedent. For other classical influences on the tale, see West (2003) 265 (the Calydonian boar hunt), J. Stevens (2004; Pyramus and Thisbe).

117 *Sil.* 19.

them to challenge Morgoth and question their ontological limits, is defined by Tolkien himself as

"a kind of Orpheus-legend in reverse, but one of Pity not of Inexorability."[118]

The story of Beren and Lúthien qualifies as a programmatic rewriting of the myth,[119] albeit with profound differences – concatenation of events and eventual reversal of character roles. The abovementioned definition, even if it comes from Tolkien himself, seems to oversimplify the relationship between the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (and of Orfeo and Heurodis) to that of Beren and Lúthien: in fact, as we will see, at the beginning of the story Beren resembles Orpheus/Orfeo and Lúthien takes after Eurydice/Heurodis; only in the final will there be a role reversal.[120]

The chapter in *The Silmarillion* begins with the betrayal and killing of Beren's father Barahir due to the intrigues of Sauron.[121] Therefore, young Beren is in mourning (albeit not for his wife) and forced to wander, deprived of all security. Some elements of this story stand out:

Thereafter for four years more Beren wandered still upon Dorthonion, a solitary outlaw; but he became the friend of birds and beasts, and they aided him, and did not betray him, and from that time forth he ate no flesh nor slew any living thing that was not in the service of Morgoth. He did not fear death, but only captivity, and being bold and desperate he escaped both death and bonds [...] Beren was pressed so hard that at last he was forced to flee from Dorthonion. In time of winter and snow he forsook the land and grave of his father, and climbing into the high regions of Gorgoroth, the Mountains of Terror, he descried afar the land of Doriath. There it was put into his heart that he would go down into the Hidden Kingdom, where no mortal foot had yet trodden. Terrible was his southward journey. [...] No food for Elves or Men was there in that haunted land, but death only.[122]

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118 Draft of a letter to Peter Hastings of September 1954, published in *Letters* 209 (n. 153).

119 See Brunetti (2011) 59.

120 See Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

121 The story of his traitor, Gorlim, is a smaller story of love, loss, and death, that anticipates the main one.

122 *Sil* 159.

As we can see, Beren's ordeals show echoes of those of Orpheus by Virgil and Ovid and travails of Orfeo in *Sir Orfeo.* Here, we find long solitude, inhospitable and icy territories, and fostering positive relationships with wild animals. These interspecies friendships will be stressed later, with Beren described as "the friend of all birds and beasts that did not serve Morgoth".[123] Beren's journey is also framed as a descent into hell.[124] Within the context of the passage from the classical myth to *Sir Orfeo*, Beren's path into the kingdom of the elf/faeries and the Underworld align very closely. Furthermore, the first meeting between the two protagonists brings to mind the atmosphere of *Sir Orfeo:*

> It is told in the Lay of Leithian that Beren came stumbling into Doriath grey and bowed as with many years of woe, so great had been the torment of the road. But wandering in the summer in the woods of Neldoreth he came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades beside Esgalduin. Then all memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment; for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar. [...] But she vanished from his sight; and he became dumb, as one that is bound under a spell, and he strayed long in the woods, wild and wary as a beast, seeking for her.[125]

The scene easily recalls the meeting between Orfeo and Heurodis in the forest: of course in their case it was not the very first meeting, but Orfeo and Heurodis were seeing each other again after many years, both having been changed in significant ways. Not unlike Tolkien after him, the author of *Sir Orfeo* insisted on the contrast between the miserable conditions of Orfeo and his previous splendour and with the faery companions of Heurodis.

Fundamental to the subsequent development of the plot of *Sir Orfeo* was the sudden disappearance of Heurodis – an afterimage of the classical Eurydice's final death – and the equally sudden decision to go in search of his beloved. This choice, both for Orfeo and for Beren, marks a break with their previous period of wandering without any purpose. In Tolkien's text, the moment of short approach and the abrupt disappearance of the beloved is crafted in terms even closer to the classical antecedents than to those of *Sir Orfeo.* Tolkien takes up

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123 *Sil* 168. See Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

124 As noted by Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

125 *Sil* 159.

themes of deadly sleep (here attributed to the abandoned man) and forced remo-
val of the woman, who reciprocates the love of the protagonist, from his arms.

> Then the spell of silence fell from Beren, and he called to her, crying Tinúviel; and
> the woods echoed the name. [...] But as she looked on him, doom fell upon her,
> and she loved him; yet she slipped from his arms and vanished from his sight even
> as the day was breaking. Then Beren lay upon the ground in a swoon, as one slain
> at once by bliss and grief; and he fell into a sleep as it were into an abyss of shadow,
> and waking he was cold as stone, and his heart barren and forsaken.[126]

This, in turn, leads us to consider two Virgilian passages:

> Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua,
> a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
> Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae

> the disembodied voice and the tongue, now cold for ever, called with departing
> breath on Eurydice – ah, poor Eurydice! 'Eurydice' the banks re-echoed, all along
> the stream.[127]

And

> illa "quis et me' inquit 'miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
> quis tantus furor? en iterum crudelia retro
> fata vocant conditque natantia lumina somnus.
> iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
> invalidasque tibi tendens, heu! non tua, palmas".

> She cried: "What madness, Orpheus, what dreadful madness has brought disaster
> alike upon you and me, poor soul? See, again the cruel Fates call me back, and sleep
> seals my swimming eyes. And now farewell! I am borne away, covered in night's
> vast pall, and stretching towards you strengthless hands, regained, alas! no more".[128]

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126 *Sil.* 160.

127 Verg. georg. 4,525–527.

128 Verg. georg. 4,494–498.

Lúthien thus alternates between traits that bring her closer to the faery image of *Sir Orfeo* and others that bring her back to the devoted wife of classical myth. As we can see, Tolkien decidedly thins the boundaries between his assorted influences across the Orphic tradition. It should also be noted how Lúthien's falling in love at first sight closely recalls[129] the Ovidian tale of the kidnapping of Proserpina, a story that (as we have seen) Ovid himself relates to that of Orpheus.

In the first part of this tale, Beren constitutes a Middle-Earth equivalent[130] of Orfeo, and Lúthien of Heurodis. The role of the King of the Faeries falls to Lúthien's father, Thingol; like the aforementioned Thranduil of *The Hobbit,* Thingol, a powerful elven king, resembles the monarch of *Sir Orfeo.* In this story, the King of the Faeries emphatically does not equal the god of the dead, who will yet appear in a guise much closer to that of the classic Pluto at the end of the chapter. The similarities between stories go beyond the generic attempt to separate two lovers by a typical fairy tale antagonist (mark their classical antecedent: Venus in the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*[131]) who tests the protagonists by giving them an impossible task.[132] Even the mistake made by Thingol resembles that of the king in *Sir Orfeo:*[133]

> Then the King was filled with anger [...]. Therefore he spoke in grief and amazement to Lúthien; but she would reveal nothing, until he swore an oath to her that he would neither slay Beren nor imprison him. [...] But Thingol spoke slowly, saying: 'Death you have earned with these words; and death you should find suddenly, had I not sworn an oath in haste; of which I repent, baseborn mortal, who in the realm of Morgoth has learnt to creep in secret as his spies and thralls.' Then Beren

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129 The textual resemblance with Ov. met. 5,395–396 is striking: "almost in one act did Pluto see and love and carry her away: so precipitate was his love" (paene simul visa est dilectaque raptaque Diti: / usque adeo est properatus amor). I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this precious suggestion.

130 See Hardwick (2003) 9: equivalent is something "fulfilling an analogous role in source and reception but not necessarily identical in form or content".

131 Apul. met. 6,10–21.

132 See Baltasar (2004) 24.

133 On the similarities between Thingol and the King of the Faeries, see Hillman (2018) 49–50.

answered: "Death you can give me earned or unearned; but the names I will not take from you of baseborn, nor spy, nor thrall".[134]

Orfeo was able to obtain Heurodis because the King of the Faeries had taken an authentic "oath in haste" (to use Tolkien's terms), promising him a prize of his choice in exchange for his music. Moreover, the King tried to deny Orfeo his chosen prize by highlighting his unworthiness of her: Thingol repeatedly adopts the same attitude.[135] Even Beren's contempt of death is an explicitly underlined trait of Orpheus in Ovid and Orfeo in the lay. Many of these correspondences are general topoi in fairy tales and fiction; however, their sheer concentration in the discussed narrative, their direct connection to the precedent stories of interest, and Tolkien's adoption of the equivalent literary form of the lay shows their significance as a source of inspiration and reference material.

During their subsequent adventures, Beren and Lúthien search the Silmaril requested by Thingol; relevantly, the Orphic theme of music and its value as an instrument of salvation recurs several times. Initially, Tolkien's story prioritizes Lúthien's singing talent.[136] Nevertheless, one passage has Beren, exactly like Orpheus/Orfeo, express his pain due to one of the many separations from his beloved with music, and manages to reunite with her thanks to his intoned melody:

> Then being now alone and upon the threshold of the final peril he made the Song of Parting, in praise of Lúthien and the lights of heaven; for he believed that he must now say farewell to both love and light. […] And he sang aloud, caring not what ear should overhear him, for he was desperate and looked for no escape. But Lúthien heard his song, and she sang in answer, as she came through the woods unlooked for.[137]

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134 *Sil* 161.

135 *E.g.,* "But Thingol looked in silence upon Lúthien; and he thought in his heart: 'Unhappy Men, children of little lords and brief kings, shall such as these lay hands on you, and yet live?'" *Sil* 161. See on this Honegger (2010) 118.

136 Since her second appearance: "The song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed. Then the spell of silence fell from Beren" *Sil* 160.

137 *Sil* 172.

As Tolkien suggested, the two lovers begin to swap their roles when they approach the conclusion of their quest. Faced with Morgoth, Lúthien fully assumes Orphic prerogatives for the first time. In this way, she gains privileged access to the Great Enemy:[138]

> She was not daunted by his eyes; and she named her own name, and offered her service to sing before him, after the manner of a minstrel. Then Morgoth [...] was beguiled by his own malice, for he watched her, leaving her free for a while, and taking secret pleasure in his thought. Then suddenly she eluded his sight, and out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce; and a blindness came upon him, as his eyes roamed to and fro, seeking her. All his court were cast down in slumber, and all the fires faded and were quenched.[139]

We should remember that the classical Orpheus descended into Hades thanks to his music being able to paralyse monsters, stun the damned, and fill the god of the Underworld with wonder[140] and that Orfeo managed to get himself admitted into the faery king's castle by offering himself as a minstrel.[141] Morgoth's enchantment, however, is short-lived and the couple has to face numerous other tests and travails to achieve their objective.

The conclusion of their quest inexorably leads to Beren's death. For the last time, the couple's fate is played out through the power of a song. Lúthien goes to the halls of Mandos (the equivalent of classical Hades for the people of Arda). As such, she once again takes on the role of the mythical cantor who rejects the death of his beloved and regains her life with singing:

> But Lúthien came to the halls of Mandos, where are the appointed places of the Eldalië, beyond the mansions of the West upon the confines of the world. There those that wait sit in the shadow of their thought. But her beauty was more than their beauty, and her sorrow deeper than their sorrows; and she knelt before Mandos and sang to him. The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that

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138 Morgoth is so called *e.g.,* in *LoTR* 193.

139 *Sil* 174.

140 See Verg. georg. 4,471–484, Ov. met. 10,40–46, Boeth. cons. 3,12,20–39.

141 On the similarity between this passage and *Sir Orfeo,* see Astrup Sundt (2021) 177.

ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear. Unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and listening the Valar are grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda, the Kingdom of Earth amid the innumerable stars. And as she knelt before him her tears fell upon his feet like rain upon the stones; and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since.[142]

The similarity of this passage with the antecedents mentioned above speaks for itself. Note how the motif of customary inflexibility of the god of the dead is entirely Virgilian:

Manisque adiit regemque tremendum
nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda.

[Orpheus] made his way to the land of the dead with its fearful king and hearts no human prayers can soften.[143]

This conclusion is the direct reference of Tolkien's words cited above: since it is the bride who moves death with her song in *The Silmarillion,* the whole story is qualified as "Orpheus-legend in reverse".[144] Tolkien then claims to have composed a tragedy of pity and not of inexorability because Lúthien, as a heroine of the twentieth century (and like many contemporary versions of Orpheus[145]), has the freedom to consciously choose her own destiny; faced with the choice between an eternal oblivion and a mortal life with her beloved Beren, she chooses to renounce immortality. Their chapter closes, like Ovid's narrative and like *Sir Orfeo,* in a happiness tinged by the taint of their upcoming death, which, as is stated in the *Silmarillion,* is "the gift of Ilúvatar to Men".[146]

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142 *Sil* 181.

143 Verg. georg. 4,469–470.

144 West (2003) 265–266 sees a relationship with the story of Orpheus/Orfeo only here.

145 See, *e.g.,* Cesare Pavese's version of the myth (*L'inconsolabile*) in Pavese (1947). For other contemporary Orpheus figurations, see Fletcher (2019).

146 Compare the end of *Sil* 33: "It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither

Lúthien's Doom and Aragorn's Destiny.
Orpheus/Orfeo in *The Lord of the Rings*

The tale of Beren and Lúthien constitutes, as it has been said here, a fundamental nucleus of the Tolkien universe. Tolkien himself admitted its prominence and connected with it personally, to the point of having Lúthien's name inscribed on his wife's grave.[147] In *The Lord of the Rings,* the tale of Beren and Lúthien is a mirror and leitmotif of the romance of Aragorn and Arwen. This does not mean, of course, that one should or can expect an exact correspondence between the two stories, and *a fortiori* of the story of Aragorn and Arwen with Orphic precedents.

Anyway, the bond is evident from the beginning: one of the first moments of rapprochement between Frodo and his friends and Strider/Aragorn takes place through the narration, initially in sung form, of the love story of the two, ancestors of the house of Númenor. Music and the story of Beren and Lúthien are also the intermediaries of the first meeting between Aragorn and Arwen in Appendix A: here Aragorn identifies himself in the song and sees Arwen as the incarnation of Lúthien. Arwen herself reiterates her resemblance to the heroine:

> For Aragorn had been singing a part of the Lay of Lúthien which tells of the meeting of Lúthien and Beren in the forest of Neldoreth. And behold! there Lúthien walked before his eyes in Rivendell, clad in a mantle of silver and blue, fair as the twilight in Elven-home; her dark hair strayed in a sudden wind, and her brows were bound with gems like stars. For a moment Aragorn gazed in silence, but fearing that she would pass away and never be seen again, he called to her crying, *Tinúviel, Tinúviel*! even as Beren had done in the Elder Days long ago. Then the maiden turned to him and smiled, and she said: "Who are you? And why do you call me by that name?". And he answered: "Because I believed you to be indeed Lúthien Tinúviel, of whom I was singing. But if you are not she, then you walk in her likeness." "So many have said," she answered gravely. "Yet her name is not mine. Though maybe my doom will be not unlike hers. But who are you?".[148]

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the Elves know not. [...] Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy".

147 He explains his choice in a letter to his son Christopher dated 11 July 1972, published in *Letters* 463 (n. 340). On the autobiographical aspects of the story, see West (2003), Baltasar (2004) 25, Astrup Sundt (2021) 177–178.

148 *LoTR* 1058.

Aragorn's desire for Arwen is condemned to the same impossibility as Beren's. Of this, he is painfully aware.[149] In replicating the fate of Beren and Lúthien,[150] Aragorn and Arwen become new equivalents of Orpheus and Eurydice/Orfeo and Heurodis. The first eminent parallel is the importance of singing, which creates a bridge between two lovers from different worlds. Aragorn then shares with Orfeo a feature we have thoroughly analyzed here: he is a king in exile, even if he can hide his royalty behind humble disguises.[151] As in *Sir Orfeo,* the distance from Aragorn's beloved and the impossibility of reaching her are combined with the uprooting from the role of king. For her part, Arwen's choice to renounce immortality for the love of Aragorn is now very far from the condition set by the rulers of Hades: it is the result of a resigned awareness that does not imply external impositions.[152]

Other characters in *The Lord of the Rings* share Orphic features, such as love for music and friendship to natural forces: they are, for example, Tom Bombadil and the Ents.[153] But the resemblances between Orpheus and Aragorn are stronger. Like every Orpheus of the millennial history of this myth, Aragorn must be very careful not to be hasty with his gaze and "stumble at the end of the road", when receiving the palatír;[154] most significantly of all, during the War of the Ring, he visits the world of the dead[155]– which is, in Tolkien, a privileged theme

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149 "'I see,' said Aragorn, 'that I have turned my eyes to a treasure no less dear than the treasure of Thingol that Beren once desired. Such is my fate'" *LoTR* 1059.

150 As West (2003) 261 notices.

151 "His ways were hard and long, and he became somewhat grim to look upon, unless he chanced to smile; and yet he seemed to Men worthy of honour, as a king that is in exile, when he did not hide his true shape. For he went in many guises, and won renown under many names" *LoTR* 1060. On the disguising ability of Orfeo and Aragorn see Bridgwater (2012) 55–56. "A king returning from exile to his own land" is what Aragorn seems to Frodo in *LoTR* 393; in the Appendixes, the lexicon of exile is consistently connected to the house of Númeanor, to which Aragorn belongs.

152 "'[…] for I am mortal, and if you will cleave to me, Evenstar, then the Twilight you must also renounce' […] 'I will cleave to you, Dúnadan, and turn from the Twilight […]'" *LoTR* 1061.

153 These similarities have been studied by Astrup Sundt (2021) 180–186.

154 *LoTR* 594. See Bridgwater (2012) 64 n. 5.

155 *LoTR* 786 ff.

Articles

of classical reception.[156] Even in this case, however, Aragorn reveals himself to be more Orfeo than Orpheus, as the contact with the Underworld strengthens him, allowing him to return to his royal role.[157] Significant similarities with the final section of *Sir Orfeo,* which sees the return of the king and the re-establishment of a constructive relationship with the loyal steward, have been recognized.[158] The entire institution of the stewards of Gondor owes much to the more innovative (*i.e.,* far from the classical myth) section of *Sir Orfeo.*

We have repeatedly highlighted how the presence, in the finale, of a mixture of enjoyment of love and the destiny of mortality is a common thread from antiquity (in particular from Ovid's version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice) to *Sir Orfeo,* to the story of Beren and Lúthien. In this respect, too, the tale of Aragorn and Arwen is a point of arrival. In the poignant finale of the section dedicated to them in Appendix A, the narration of Aragorn's death is long and insistent. Here, we find the ancient theme of the inevitability of death, the ultimate goal from which love can only subtract for a brief parenthesis, affirmed splendidly; *Sir Orfeo*'s theme of royal inheritance is also stressed.[159] Faced with the death of her beloved, which she cannot in any way redeem, Arwen refuses to revoke her choice and leaves the re-conquered kingdom.

> But Arwen went forth from the House, and the light of her eyes was quenched, and it seemed to her people that she had become cold and grey as nightfall in winter that comes without a star. Then she said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters, and to all whom she had loved; and she went out from the city of Minas Tirith and passed away to the land of Lórien, and dwelt there alone under the fading trees until winter came. [...] There at last when the mallorn-leaves were falling, but

156 For the reception of classical underworlds in Tolkien, especially in *Hobbit,* see Stevens (2017).

157 There are also clear reminiscences of Odysseus' and Aeneas' voyages in Aragorn's *katabasis:* see Morse (1986) 19, Spirito (2009) 195–196.

158 The correspondence between Aragorn and Orfeo's careers has been noticed, in a famous article, by Honegger (2010). See also Bridgwater (2012).

159 "'Would you then, lord, before your time leave your people that live by your word?' she said. 'Not before my time,' he answered. 'For if I will not go now, then I must soon go perforce. And Eldarion our son is a man full-ripe for kingship.'" *LoTR* 1062.

spring had not yet come, she laid herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth; and there is her green grave.[160]

The Evenstar finds herself wandering, plunged into mourning, in a winter landscape; her disconsolate widowhood after the definitive loss of her beloved is still reminiscent of Orpheus's wandering. In short, Arwen becomes the last Orpheus of Middle-Earth: a disillusioned Orpheus of contemporaneity.

CONCLUSION. RECEPTION OF RECEPTION (OF RECEPTION...)

In conclusion of our analysis, we can see that the path leading from the myth of Orpheus to Tolkien consists not only of two but of several steps, some of which are difficult to reconstruct: a) narratives of the myth of Orpheus within Orphism; b) classical/Hellenistic narratives; c) Virgil's *Georgics;* d) Ovid's *Metamorphosis;* e) Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy,* with f) its translation by King Alfred; g) mediaeval adaptations of the story taken from the classics; h) *Sir Orfeo* (as we know it, with possible antecedents); i) Tolkien's tale of Beren and Lúthien and l) Tolkien's tale of Arwen and Aragorn. Moreover, in the fictional construction of Tolkien's *legendarium,* l) is presented as a moment of reception of i), since, as we have said, the characters (and narrator) know that they are repeating another story already told in poetic texts. It is a creative literary flow full of detours and returns, concerning a mythical story that has permeated through the entire Western culture (as Rilke splendidly reminds us in the lines quoted as epigraph).

In this literary flow, *Sir Orfeo* is just a moment, an example of rewriting with a close relationship with preceding sources. In it, the classical material, as mentioned, is demonstrably hybridized with Celtic and mediaeval motifs contemporary to the lay's anonymous author. This moment becomes particularly significant if we consider Tolkienian work while also looking at the literary flow inspired by Orpheus. Indeed, Tolkien never receives the myth of Orpheus without simultaneously receiving *Sir Orfeo* through translation and allusion. As we have seen, different sources often surface in the same allusions at the same time. This should lead to a reflection on any mechanical attempt to explain intertextuality in terms of a unique and demonstrable transfer from one text to another.

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160 *LoTR* 1063.

Within different contexts in Tolkienian fiction, texts Tolkien had loved and studied (both as a student and scholar) come together and create a web of literary memories, part of the same imaginarium. Tolkienian texts can thus be read as literature fed by other literature, palimpsests, or literature in the second degree, as Genette would put it.[161] One cannot say that Thranduil, Thingol, or even Elrond are Hades or that Beren, Lúthien, Aragorn, and eventually Arwen are Orpheus. But beneath the surface of the Middle-Earth context, the classical myth and its never-ending life are still readable, readily available for the next moment of reception, an Orpheus/Orfeo/Aragorn for the 21st century.

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161 *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* is the original title of the influential work by Gérard Genette (1982). Directly quoting this famous expression, Hutcheon (2013, or. 2006) 6 defines this kind of texts "'palimpsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly". See on this Willis (2018) 40–41.

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