



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 31
Number 1

Article 4

10-15-2012

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Recommended Citation

Bridgwater, Sue (2012) "The Steward, the King, and the Queen: Fealty and Love in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and in *Sir Orfeo*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 31: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol31/iss1/4>

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The Steward, the King, and the Queen: Fealty and Love in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and in *Sir Orfeo*

Abstract

Finds connections between *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's long professional engagement with the medieval romance *Sir Orfeo*. Orfeo's plot elements of a king's separation from his queen and his testing of his steward are echoed (albeit in a somewhat fragmented way) and re-examined in the relationships of Aragorn, Arwen, and the house of the Stewards of Gondor.

Additional Keywords

Kingship; Sir Orfeo; Stewardship; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Stewards



THE STEWARD, THE KING, AND THE QUEEN:
FEALTY AND LOVE IN TOLKIEN'S
THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND IN *SIR ORFEO*

SUE BRIDGWATER

Introduction

THIS PAPER TAKES ITS ORIGINAL IMPULSE from Colleen Donnelly's analysis of "feudal values, vassalage, and fealty" in an article for *Mythlore* in 2007. Here she discusses the characterisation of Denethor as the Bad Steward, consumed with "hunger for power" (22). In supplement to the ideas in Donnelly's paper, I shall here examine something of the relationship between the King and the good Steward, focusing on Faramir and his immediate predecessors and on one important model for Tolkien's concept of stewardship: *Sir Orfeo*. I shall also consider the relationship between this male based feudal bond and that of the King with his Queen.

The idea that Tolkien's fictions are in part modeled on medieval Romances and their values is not of course new. Tolkien himself writes in his introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

If the most certain thing known about the author is that he also wrote *Patience, Purity* and *Pearl*, then we have in *Sir Gawain* the work of a man capable of weaving elements taken from diverse sources into a texture of his own; and a man who would have in that labour a serious purpose. [...] The story is good enough in itself. It is a romance, a fairy-tale for adults, full of life and colour; and it has virtues that would be lost in a summary, though they can be perceived when it is read at length: good scenery, urbane or humorous dialogue, and a skilfully ordered narrative. (Tolkien, Introduction 4)

This discussion of the *Gawain* poet provides a neat encapsulation of how Tolkien himself shaped traditional elements into exciting tales, while other commentators have drawn attention to his particular pleasure in *Sir Orfeo*. J.S. Ryan discusses *Orfeo* and the Wild Hunt (179-187), first noting Tolkien's relationship to the poem as undergraduate student, tutor, translator and editor — a lifelong involvement. Tom Shippey writes about *Orfeo* as a direct source for the Wood-elves in *The Hobbit*; "the idea [of the Fairies/Elves] is the same [...] a mighty king pursuing his kingly activities in a world forever out of reach of strangers and

trespassers in his domain" (35). And Thomas Honegger opens his study of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation in *Sir Orfeo* with this plot summary:

A King in exile, having spent years in the wilderness, asks for the hand of his beloved lady from the king of Fairy, is finally re-united with her and, after testing the loyalty of his steward, reclaims his throne and lives ever happily with his queen to the end of his days. (Honegger 117)

This reveals a clear parallel between the plot of *Sir Orfeo* and the arc of Aragorn's story within *The Lord of the Rings*. Before looking more closely at the details of these similarities, a definition, or some definitions, of stewardship will be helpful. Kusumita P. Pedersen, in her review of Dickerson and Evans's *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*, has this to say:

The concept of stewardship is an old one. To be a steward is to have responsibility to take good care of something one does not own—a responsibility given by the owner, who puts the steward in charge in the owner's absence. [...] [P]olitically the steward is accountable to the king and must surrender authority to him on his return. (Pedersen 15)

In the book itself, Dickerson and Evans coin the expression *Gandalfrican Stewardship* (1) which emphasizes a model of Stewardship focused on service, "servanthood stewardship" (43). This sets up Gandalf's concept of his own stewardship in opposition to Denethor's sense of lordliness and power, of himself as "Lord of Gondor" (*LotR* V.1.756). Gandalf's lofty, almost exalted version of stewardship stands behind that of Faramir—whom Gandalf is said to have influenced, to the annoyance of Denethor (V.4.813)—infusing it subtly with religious undertones even while the parallel with *Orfeo* fills it with the ethos of medieval feudalism. Looking at Gandalf's much quoted statement about his own stewardship makes this plain:

'Unless the King should come again?' said Gandalf. 'Well, my lord Steward, it is your task to keep some kingdom still against that event, which few now look to see. In that task you shall have all the aid that you are pleased to ask for. But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did you not know?' (V.1.758)

Clearly a responsibility for “all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands” goes far beyond the feudal bond between lord and vassal. Its resemblance to stewardship of the feudal kind lies in their shared responsibility of care. Janet Brennan Croft fills out for us in more detail the nature of that feudal stewardship in her comparison of motifs in *Macbeth* and *The Lord of the Rings*:

One of the key underlying themes treated in both these works is the proper role of a Steward. [...] In *The Lord of the Rings*, the honor of a Steward of Gondor resides entirely in how well he keeps the kingdom for his king. (Croft 221)

Stewardship is—or should be—preservation of the best of the past for the sake of a hoped for future. It should not merely involve keeping things as they are for the sake of unchangingness—misconceived as security—or for personal gain. Tolkien would have known clearly from the parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30) that the teaching of his Christian faith was against the notion of hoarding and neglecting things or abilities of value; good stewardship involves timely and appropriate use of assets. The good steward, therefore, need not feel it a duty to hand things back to their true owner in exactly the state they were in when entrusted to stewardly care; rather, they should show the signs of use, good management, and committed care. They must, however, be handed back ungrudgingly upon the owner’s return.

In order to compare and contrast the two stories of the Steward, the King and the Queen that the chosen texts present to us, I propose to analyze the narratives in parallel under a series of headings that should be self-explanatory.

There and Back Again

The stories of Aragorn and Orfeo both display this common pattern of fairytale narrative: the protagonist must travel away from the safe and ordered place that has always been home and must wander for a significant, although perhaps not clearly defined, period of time in wild and dangerous situations, before overcoming a great challenge and being able to return home. Disorder and change break into the experience and awareness of the hero, and it becomes impossible to remain at rest.

For Aragorn, it is not his childhood home in Imladris that exhibits the signs of disorder and change; rather, he learns from his foster father Elrond that the great disorder in Middle-earth, including the condition of the land of Gondor, is his inherited problem and task. Within hours of this discovery, he meets and falls in love with Arwen Undómiel and a further great change of perspective and ambition falls upon him. He leaves his home (Appendix A.1058).

Orfeo has long dwelt at peace in Winchester with his beloved wife Heurodis; “a Queen of priis [...] the fairest levedy for the nones [...] full of love and godenisse / Ac no man may telle hir fairnise” (Sands ll. 27-34/Tolkien ll. 51-6).¹ The mutual love between Orfeo and Heurodis lies at the heart of the peace and security of their realm. However, disorder and fear break into this security, and Heurodis is first threatened with abduction, and then abducted, by the King of Fairy. Orfeo, in deep distress, also leaves his beloved home.

The Supernatural Cause

“In *Sir Orfeo* the bonds of human society are tested, principally by a mysterious, external, supernatural agent” (Lucas 4). It is the incursion of fairy into the society ruled by Orfeo, and into the environs of his home, that initiates the trouble, sorrow, and adventure of the Romance. In Aragorn’s case, the relationship between the Supernatural Cause and the specifics of his exilic journeys is not so obvious. However, across a far wider timescale, Aragorn too is impelled by the actions of the supernatural adversary, Sauron. By the power of Sauron’s ring Isildur was betrayed to his death, and the long years of exile for the Dúnedain of the north began. The arrival into Aragorn’s awareness of the more positive supernatural agent, Arwen, is the final push in a situation that has been evolving ever since Isildur’s death. And Elrond, as a Lord of Faery, also functions as a Supernatural Cause of the change in Aragorn’s life, insisting that he shall “be betrothed to no man’s child as yet.” Aragorn must prove himself worthy of his inheritance, and achieve it, before any thought of personal happiness can enter his mind (Appendix A.1059).

In both cases the incursion of the supernatural agent calls out a response that the human protagonist has never before been required to supply; what Gibbs calls “the definition of human goodness by the presence of a power that is other than human” (34). Aragorn and Orfeo have both previously lived in a protected environment, and have now to face the test of survival and recovery in a hostile one.

The Love Bond: Wife/Betrothed

Before their time of separation and bitter trial, Orfeo’s life with Heurodis has been blissful for many years (96-106 Sands / 120-130 Tolkien). After the messengers from fairy first approach Heurodis, she says to Orfeo; “ever ich have y-loved thee/ As my lif, and so thou me” (Sands 99-100/ Tolkien 123-4).

¹ I give two line references for *Orfeo*; to Sands’s Middle English version and to Tolkien’s translation. Readers will also like to be aware of Tolkien’s own Middle English edition of *Orfeo*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter. [I have chosen to use Sands out of long habit and affection.]

Their love is at the heart of Orfeo's successful rule and of the prevailing peace and prosperity of Winchester.

By contrast, Aragorn's departure from comfort to the wild follows rapidly upon his first meeting with Arwen (Appendix A.1060). The promise that lies ahead of them, particularly after their betrothal on Ceryn Amroth twenty-nine years later (Appendix A.1060), is in fact a future imaging the shared past that Orfeo and Heurodis have known before their parting. For the medieval pair, all hope seems lost after the abduction; for Aragorn and Arwen, their love lies entirely in hope.

The Love Bond: Male Fealty

It has been argued that "the ultimate concern of Sir Orfeo is not the love between Orfeo and Heurodis but the feudal bond, tested through Orfeo's gyn², between king and steward" (Barnes 122 ff). Orfeo shows a high degree of trust in the Steward, founded in the system of fealty that bound together medieval society; oaths given and received of loyalty and protection. Into the hands of this man, unnamed except as "min heighe steward" (Sands 181/Tolkien 205), Orfeo commits his rule, his wealth, the care and protection of all those lords who also have bonds of fealty with their King, the care and protection of all the other inhabitants of the realm and of the lands that belong to it. An enormous commitment and indicative of a deep relationship, described by Hill as having "subdued parabolic echoes of the New Testament" in its reference to the Master who sets off on a long journey and leaves all in the charge of his servants ("Structure" 141; cf. Matt. 25.14-30).

Against this background of feudal fealty, Hill discusses the structure of *Orfeo* as tripartite:

The first section comprises the introduction, the other two sections containing respectively the major and minor assays. The major assay concerns the testing of Orfeo and Heurodis and through them the quality of human heterosexual (if you like, 'romance') love. The minor assay concerns the testing of the Steward and through him the quality of male (epic, and romance) love. ("Structure" 139)

In Aragorn's story, there is a long background of Stewardly loyalty in Gondor, about to come to a sad anticlimax in the disloyalty of Denethor. Yet as the narrative carries Aragorn toward the resolution of his long years of wandering, we see the outlines of Aragorn's future kingly relationship with the Stewards of Gondor taking shape. We also glimpse two relationships that might

² "Devious and ingenious means" (Barnes, 91ff).

have come to pass, but which fall away as events develop, which I will discuss below. In terms of Hill's "major" and "minor" assays, these are reversed in Aragorn's narrative, at least if considered simply in terms of the proportion of the story that is devoted to them. In the tale of Aragorn and Arwen as presented in *The Lord of the Rings*, the major focus is on the kingly deeds and feudal loyalties of Aragorn, with the romantic assay or trial lying in the background. Nevertheless, it is evident in both tales that the king needs to be in harmony both with his beloved and with his cohorts in order for the realm to be at peace.

Aragorn's first direct relationship with a Steward of Gondor was with Ecthelion II, son of Turgon. To him Aragorn was known as Thorongil, "a great captain [...] swift and keen-eyed, [who] wore a silver star upon his cloak" (Appendix A.1055). In this disguise Aragorn serves both King Thengel of Rohan and his own future kingdom. When he eventually leaves, we learn from the narrator that all felt his loss, except perhaps Denethor son of Ecthelion, who felt himself slighted in the esteem of his father and of others in Gondor in favor of Thorongil. Ironically, we are told that "he was as like to Thorongil as to one of nearest kin [...] though indeed Thorongil had never himself vied with Denethor, nor held himself higher than the servant of his father" (Appendix A.1055). This previous time spent with Denethor is not presented by Tolkien directly in the narrative of *The Return of the King*, but its existence lends deep poignancy to the handling of that return in the narrative—once it is known. For the present, it must be noted that Aragorn's "farewell to his steward" takes place outside the main narrative, by means of a message sent after the departure, under a pseudonym, and has none of the formal qualities nor the lamentation of Orfeo's farewell. Nevertheless, these two departures stand together in considering the similarities between the two narratives.

Departure into the Wild

Both heroes take serious and formal leave of their previous lives and of the people they have known, before departing their homes. Yet beneath the formality each is stirred by deep and painful feelings. Aragorn has learned and tried to absorb many things within a short time, about his identity and his probable future as well as about his feelings for Arwen. However, "he took leave lovingly of Elrond; and the next day he said farewell to his mother, and to the house of Elrond, and to Arwen, and he went out into the wild" (Appendix A. 1060). This is a choice made in the light of information received; it involves depth of feeling, but not the anguish that drives Orfeo away from his home. Orfeo departs without hope and in a state of despair, after an agonising loss. Nevertheless, he gives thought to his duty and responsibility as a king. Before leaving, "He deped togider his barouns, / Erls, lordes of renouns" (Sands 177-178/Tolkien, 201-226). Before this assembly of nobles he speaks calmly and

appoints his Steward to rule the lands on his behalf. The display of grief and agony he has previously shown (Sands 171-6/Tolkien 195-200) is quelled for this solemn ceremony, but the lords themselves take up the theme, kneeling to Orfeo, bemoaning their fate without him and pleading with him not to leave. On the surface, it is he who is decisive and rational, although his decision is an irrational one—to go into the wilderness and live “With wilde bestes in holtes hore” (Sands 190/Tolkien 214).

Experiences in the Wild

The experience of the medieval Romance hero in the wild consisted largely of riding through forests and encountering adventures; succoring maidens in distress or holy hermits, seeking lost treasures or wisdom, and all the while somehow keeping his armor gleaming and his spirits high. Gibbs argues that the wholesale adoption by medieval writers of Romance of the “exotic” Celtic wilderness as a background was “for the specific purpose of providing *aventures* which would illustrate the ideal values of chivalry” (10).

Neither Orfeo nor Aragorn’s wilderness experience follows exactly this chivalric trajectory of the “knight errant.” Orfeo is on foot and ill clad, sick at heart and disturbed in mind. He suffers hunger and loneliness, except for the company of the wild beasts who come to him when, in “clere and bright” weather he plays upon his harp, the sole memento of his previous life (Sands 245-254/Tolkien 269-278). Aragorn too suffers from a sense of alienation from the everyday normalities of life. Although he travels far, on horseback as well as on foot, and mixes with many people of many cultures and races, although he is looking forward to the fulfilment of a great hope, he too can grow weary and lonely. “‘But I must admit,’ he added with a queer laugh, ‘that I hoped you would take to me for my own sake. A hunted man sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship’” (I.10.170). While Orfeo is trapped in the confines of the forest, haunted by his lost past, Aragorn is hunted across the vast and diverse landscape of Middle-earth, unable to rest until he reaches his longed for future.

Honegger says that Orfeo is “mainly about the confrontation with Faërie” (120) and this has some bearing too on Aragorn’s wilderness years. He is already working against his great adversary Sauron, an evil being who was once fair and good; of the order of Maia, even “higher” beings in Tolkien’s cosmos than the Fair Folk. At the same time he is obeying the injunction of Elrond, and has exiled himself for much of the time from the Faërie land where he grew up. Orfeo has yet to find the way into Faërie, while Aragorn is in one sense seeking the way back, on the terms set by Elrond years before, to claim his Faërie Bride as well as his mortal Kingdom.

Both Orfeo and Aragorn adopt disguises during their “wilderness periods”; Orfeo as a minstrel in order to be admitted into the presence of the

King of Fairy (Sands 406/Tolkien 430) and Aragorn as a warrior for hire against Sauron, named Thorongil (*LotR* Appendix A, 1055). In each instance, however, it is a case of alternate rather than false identity for both since Orfeo actually is a minstrel—"A better harper in no plas / In the world was never man born" (Sands 16-17/Tolkien 40-41)—as well as a king, and Aragorn is at once a wandering Ranger and a warrior-King. In a rare moment of respite outside Orthanc, Aragorn says to his companions, "I am Strider and Dúnadan too, and I belong both to Gondor and the North" (III.9.563). Geraldine Barnes confirms this view; "Orfeo's minstrel persona is not so much a question of disguise as of dual identity. [...] When he announces himself to the fairy king as 'bot a pover menstrel' he is giving an accurate account of his circumstances" (121). Similarly, Aragorn is not pretending to be "just Strider" when he patrols the leagues of Eriador; for that time, he *is* Strider.

Identity and Growth

Gibbs says of the Romance genre, "what is essential is the proving, the trial by adventure of the idealism of the knightly hero" (11). This is the testing of the *hero*, rather than specifically the testing of the loyalty shown by the hero's steward in his absence. In terms of the inner growth and sense of identity of the Romance hero, it is during the middle stage of three—departure, wilderness and return—that these developments take place. The likelihood of a good outcome at the return depends as much on the growth and recovery of the hero as it does upon the fidelity of the Steward, and that growth or maturation of the hero often comes in a series of repeated tests or *assays* that pose the question; *what are you like?* (Hill, "Structure" 139 ff, and "Introduction"). The drastic change in circumstance and the attendant new challenges of the hero's altered life combine to reflect himself to himself, perhaps for the first time.

Orfeo learns and grows through a familiar medieval trope of madness in the forest. Except for his continued relationship with his harp, his existence in the forest is as mad and bestial as—to choose a well known example—that of Sir Lancelot (Malory 594). These lines describe Orfeo's condition:

[...] now he must grub and dig all day,
with roots his hunger to allay.
In summer on wildwood fruit he feeds
or berries poor to serve his needs;
in winter nothing can he find
save roots and herbs and bitter rind.
All his body was wasted thin
by hardship, and all cracked his skin.
[...]

His hair and beard all black and rank
down to his waist hung long and lank
(Tolkien 255-268/ Sands 231-240)

Aragorn does not suffer such mental alienation, but at his first meeting with the Hobbits at Bree he tells them, "It would take more than a few days, or weeks, or years, of wandering in the Wild to make you look like Strider [...]. And you would die first, unless you are made of sterner stuff than you look to be" (I.10.171). Like Orfeo, he has traveled far beyond the ordered and elegant society in which his youth was passed. Those given to superficial assessment of other people, like Barliman Butterbur, are uneasy in his company (I.10.168). Although not barred from Imladris, and although he is the leader of a company of Rangers, Aragorn spends much time alone. Joining with the hobbits is a turning point for him, just as the sight of the ladies riding by (see below) is for Orfeo (Sands, 315-318/*LotR* I.10.171). In some sense each of these marks a turn of direction towards escape from the wilderness life and a greatly significant change.

The Challenge to the Supernatural Cause

Eventually, after time spent in the wilderness in whatever mode, events move on to the point at which it becomes possible and appropriate for the Hero/King to mount a challenge to the Supernatural Cause of the discord and trouble in the realm. Orfeo's inspiration is his sight of Heurodis riding with the ladies of the fairy court. He has previously glimpsed the fairy hunt, the knights of fairy armed for battle, and the fairy dance, each of these on more than one occasion. His interest is not stirred until, apparently for the first time, he sees his wife riding among a company of sixty fairy ladies. This recognition rouses him at once to decisive action. He determines to follow the ladies; "'Parfay', quath he, 'tide what betide / Whider-so this levedis ride, / The selve way ichill streche— / Of life no deth I me no reche!'" (Sands 315-319 /Tolkien 339-342).

Aragorn too has had previous experience of the Supernatural Cause, working against Sauron in many ways for many years before the time comes for the war of the Ring. While Orfeo wanders in the forest and in madness before re-emerging into the world of deeds, Aragorn walks and learns and fights and leads, acquiring the skills of kingship to go along with his genetic right of inheritance. The equivalent, for Aragorn, of Orfeo seeing Heurodis in the forest is therefore hard to pinpoint. *The Lord of the Rings* is full of turning points and crises for all its characters; Aragorn's claiming the *palantír* at Helm's Deep is one such staging post on his journey toward his kingship. However, it can be argued that Aragorn's significant turn towards the final challenging of Sauron comes at Bree, when he joins forces with the hobbits and *never once shows any inclination to seek control of the Ring*. Instead he says; "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life

or death I can save you, I will" (I.10.171). Note that he uses the same formulaic assertion that Orfeo uses above; the undertaking is *a matter of life or death*, and implicitly assumes more importance at this moment of commitment than the hero's personal ambition or status. This assertion marks the beginning of Aragorn's journey to Mordor to challenge Sauron at the Black Gate; Nikakis sees it as a "form of sacrifice" by Aragorn as sacral king (87).

While only Orfeo uses music as his main weapon of challenge to the Fairy King, both he and Aragorn use guile. Orfeo, in order to get into Fairy at all and to make the King hear him, claims to be a poor minstrel and nothing else; the audience knows this to be untrue and thus has the pleasure of seeing Orfeo begin to work his plan upon the abductor of Heurodis (Sands 406/Tolkien 430). However, Orfeo also uses the chivalric code as a weapon of challenge, shaming the King into keeping his promise to release Heurodis (Sands 439-444/Tolkien 463-468). Aragorn mounts a military challenge of impressive nature, even though numerically doomed to failure. He does this as a distraction from Frodo's journey with Sam into the heart of Mordor. This deception also relies on the terms of the chivalric code, since even Sauron who has long passed beyond personal honor and chivalry expects the main challenge of the West to be just such a doomed march of armed knights and warriors. Aragorn is of course also challenging the other Supernatural Cause of his exile, Elrond, since if the ruse works and Aragorn plays his part in the salvation of Middle-earth then Elrond, like the Fairy King, must redeem his promise and let Arwen and Aragorn decide their own future (Appendix A.1061).

The Return to the City

Each king continues the use of disguise at some stage during his return to, or assumption of, his rightful place in the society of his kingdom, Aragorn's however being a far less misleading one than Orfeo's. Still, both are present in the towns where they rule, without openly declaring themselves.

Each also makes a staged return, an undeclared visit followed by an official one. Prince Imrahil chides Aragorn for putting himself in the role of a "beggar at the door" when he appears in Minas Tirith as a "cloaked man" (*LotR* V.8.861). Orfeo goes first to the beggar's house and then repeats the same trick that he had played on the Fairy King, by appearing in his own palace as a bearded minstrel (Sands 485-9/Tolkien 509-14).³ However, their motives differ in that Aragorn only enters Minas Tirith at first in order to heal his sick companions, while Orfeo is deliberately testing the loyalty of his steward (*LotR*

³ Similarly, Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar to sound out what is happening at home, and he first visits "the lowly dwelling of Eumaeus, his swineherd, and from him learned all he wished to know" (Guerber, 318).

V.8.862-3; Sands 529-555/Tolkien 552-579). In fact Orfeo's steps toward reclaiming his throne are at all stages more direct, on the surface, than Aragorn's. As soon as he has recovered Heurodis from the clutches of the fairy King, he sets forth and in the space of a few short lines, "to Winchester he is ycome / that was *his owen cité*" [emphasis added] (Sands 454-5/Tolkien 478-9). This is the attitude of someone determined to have his rights, subject to necessary caution and research. Aragorn, by contrast, is at first diffident about entering "his own city" at all; "I fear that if I enter it unbidden, then doubt and debate may arise" (*LotR* V.8.861).

The circumstances of these returns to the city differ in many ways; Aragorn has been to the city before, but not as King, and the last "official" Steward of Gondor has just died. Orfeo returns to the place where he personally has reigned, and where the same man holds the post of steward. However, there is a sense that some of the differences between the actions of the two Kings arise also from a difference of characterization, that in turn arises from the differences between the two narratives. Orfeo's tale is purely a Romance, in spite of its origin in mythology, while Aragorn's is set within the pages of a work of epic nature and depth. Orfeo displays cunning (*gyn*) in relationship to his own people and particularly toward his steward, as well as to his supernatural adversary; while Aragorn reserves his cunning for the battles against Sauron, Saruman and their forces, displaying humility and respect in his dealings with his own people.

The Return to the Love Bond: Male Fealty

The sequence of returns is reversed here to reflect the order in the two narratives. The testing of the steward is a minor feature of both *Orfeo* and *LotR*—Hill calls it "the minor assay" ("Structure" 139)—both in terms of the space given to it in the narrative and in its effect on the outcome of the tales; yet in each case it is deeply significant with regard to the recognition of the true King. Orfeo meets with his steward in the street, presenting himself as a poor harper and asking to be allowed to play at the court. This is a first step in the steward's testing, a typically fairytale test of kindness to the needy and ill clad; the steward passes it easily because it is his practice to show kindness to all harpers for the sake of his missing king. The second stage of his test is to recognize Orfeo, which he does by first recognising the harp. Orfeo claims that he found the harp beside the dead body of a man destroyed by wild animals, and the steward at once bewails the supposed death of Orfeo, falling into a faint. The third test is of his reaction to the reversal presented by Orfeo as a "what if": if he were the lost King and had suffered exile, at last saving his Queen and returning home disguised as a beggar, he would reward such loyalty by making the steward his heir. The steward sees thru the disguise and falls at his lord's feet, overturning the table to get to his side; it is here that the joy of the return and the loyalty of the steward

are celebrated, while the return of Heurodis is disposed of in a few lines following. At this critical point the major and minor essay shift places, although it remains essential that Orfeo should stand in right relation to both beloved and state (Sands 485-555/Tolkien 509-579).

Aragorn's return to a right relationship with his steward is equally emblematic of his right relationship with his Kingdom. However, its stages are more diffuse and diverse and, as we have seen above, partly hidden from the main narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn's shared experiences with Denethor take place before he comes into his kingdom, and are characterized by unease and mistrust between them, despite Aragorn's efforts to avert this. He leaves behind a Denethor who seems unlikely to hold the kingdom safe for a returning king, a stark contrast with Orfeo's parting from his steward (*LotR* Appendix A.1055; Sands 177-203/Tolkien 201-226). Then, when he next meets and becomes comrade to a member of the stewardly house pledged to service *in absentia* to his own house, it is Boromir. A man of potentially heroic stature, Boromir is from the beginning of his acquaintance with Aragorn both resentful and suspicious of the one he should be welcoming with joy. "'[...] the Sword of Elendil would be a help beyond our hope—if such a thing could indeed return out of the shadows of the past.' He looked again at Aragorn, and doubt was in his eyes" (*LotR* II.2.247). Although Boromir plays his part in the fellowship with courage and loyalty, save for the episode of madness shortly before his death, he is fated never to serve his King as Steward. The only clear expression of their feudal bond comes in the last moments of Boromir's life:

'I have failed.'

'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fall!'

Boromir smiled. (*LotR* III.1.414)

The handclasp and kiss of blessing embody the sad potential of a relationship of service that never came to fruition. It is in Aragorn's fourth encounter with a scion of the Stewards that his "return" to a proper feudal relationship occurs.

Faramir makes it clear in his conversation with Frodo at Henneth Annûn that he and Boromir differ in their attitude to stewardship. Faramir relates with regret that Boromir would have liked to see the Stewards assume the Kingship, thus by implication asserting his own dislike for that idea (*LotR* IV.5.670). He has his reward for loyalty at his first encounter with the returning King.

In a scene that is a reverse image of Aragorn's last moments with Boromir, the King comes not to a living vassal who is about to die, but to one who seems already dead, *one that was lost* (*LotR* V.8.865-6). Aragorn uses his own

innate power, and the efficacy of the herb athelas to summon Faramir back from the brink of death. As soon as he awakes, the new Steward knows who has called him and what their rightful relationship is "My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?" (866). At Aragorn's coronation, Faramir plays the same role as Orfeo's steward, although more decorously, in welcoming the King back to his Kingdom, and is confirmed in his inheritance of the Stewardship, along with his heirs. His further reward and charge is the Princedom of Ithilien, the land he has protected for so long in the service of an ideal of Gondor that has now come to fruition (*LotR* VI.5.969). Tolkien explains in a draft letter cited by Hammond and Scull (634-5) that Faramir would serve in this role both as military commander and as chief counselor to the King.

The Return to the Love Bond: Wife/Betrothed

At the beginning of each love story arc, the hero loses his wife/beloved before he loses his settled home and exchanges it for the wilderness. As the stories near the restoration of order after the subjugation of chaos, the order of these events is reversed. Each king reclaims first the allegiance of his steward, then the rule of his kingdom, and finally the love of his wife/betrothed. Orfeo might have chosen to take Heurodis with him for the testing of the steward, but leaves her behind. The presence of his beloved is apparently not significant to Orfeo at his reclamation of the kingship and kingdom, even though the pairing of king with queen may be seen as vital to the sustaining of the renewed health of the land, as will be discussed below.

Orfeo's reunion with Heurodis is abrupt in its brevity; "His wif he took by the hond / And dede him swithe out of that lond" (Sands 449-450/Tolkien 473-4). The couple's first resting place in Winchester is a beggar's humble cot, and when Orfeo has learned from the beggar how things stand in the city and what memory is held of the King who vanished ten years before, he borrows the beggar's ragged clothes and sets off for the palace in that disguise. "He maked his wif ther abide" (Sands 474)—Tolkien translates with the more courteous *bade* (498) but still one speculates on the feelings of the Queen at being left alone in an unkempt dwelling with the beggar for company when only a short walk separated her from all the comforts of home! It is not clear whether Orfeo himself returns to escort his Queen home, since we are told "They brought the Queen into the toun / With all maner menstracy" (Sands 564-5/Tolkien 587-8) after washing, shaving and clothing the King. After this the poem draws swiftly to its close with the recrowning of the royal couple, signifying the restoration of their relationship to the kingdom, and Heurodis again plays her part in Orfeo's private happiness and royal estate.

The first sign of Arwen and Aragorn's reunion comes with the Dúnedain who ride from the north to support their lord in battle; they bear with

them the banner that Arwen has woven for Aragorn,⁴ and the message, “Either our hope cometh, or all hope’s end” (*LotR* V.2.775). Then the story turns again to battle and struggle, and Arwen herself does not appear until a month after Aragorn’s coronation. She comes with her father and with a company of the remaining great ones of the elven race in Middle-earth, but is not presented in the narrative as a speaking individual. Frodo “saw her come glimmering in the evening, with stars on her brow and a sweet fragrance about her.” She comes as a symbol of the waning of her people’s days in Middle-earth and as a blessing upon the restored kingdom. Elrond fulfils his promise by laying “the hand of his daughter in the hand of the King” and the couple are at once married, although the ceremony of marriage is not described. Only in the appendices is anything of their marriage brought alive; in the main narrative, the theme is the healing of the city and the realm (*LotR* VI.5.972).

Back Again: Gondor and Winchester

Both Aragorn’s story and Orfeo’s have been deeply bound up with the notion of the health of a Kingdom and how it depends upon the presence and health of the King as well as upon the royal marriage. We know that in Gondor “all the time of the Stewards was one of slow dwindling and waning both of the power and numbers of the Men of Gondor, and of the lore and skill of Númenor among them” (Tolkien, *The Peoples of Middle-earth* 203). It is not clear how this may compare to the state of Winchester under Orfeo’s steward, since the focus of the poem is upon the experience of Orfeo in the wilderness; the narrative does not return to Winchester until Orfeo does. By contrast, the longer narrative that includes Aragorn’s story encompasses many locations and situations, and it is clear even before we reach Minas Tirith that things are going ill with the city and the realm under the onslaught of Sauron (*LotR* II.2.245). At the return of the King, normal order is restored, and sealed by the arrival/return of the Queen.

Part of the function of the major and minor essays is to posit that the entities signified by Heurodis and by the steward are both essential to a reasonable life. This is why the author has been at such pains to give [...] the exact parallelism between Orfeo’s distress at losing Heurodis and the steward’s at losing (as he thinks) his lord. (Hill, 149)

Aragorn’s quest too reflects both his desire to be at one with Arwen, and the parallel desire to restore the land, signified by the restoration of the Steward. Although Denethor and Boromir are lost in the historical ruin of the land, Faramir is called back to life and with him the realm. The way is open for the physical

⁴ Recalling Penelope’s work upon her tapestry during the absence of Odysseus (Guerber 319).

healing of the city and the lands themselves that Gimli and Legolas discussed in Minas Tirith (*LotR* V.8.873), as well as for moral and social healing. The return to the city is the final trial of the king as well as a test for the steward. Aragorn recognizes the quality and fealty of Faramir just as Ioreth recognizes Aragorn's royalty; Orfeo recognizes the quality of his loyal steward just as the steward recognizes him (Barnes 122; *LotR* V.8.866).

Reflections

This essay has sought for points of similarity in the narrative arcs of a medieval poem and a twentieth century Faërie fiction; the former of less than 600 lines and the latter of well over 1,000 pages, inclusive of the Appendices. Many such points have been illuminated, and doubtless others remain to be discussed in more detail. These similarities are far from surprising if we consider such statements as Honegger's regarding the "important status of the Middle English poem as an almost perfect embodiment of Tolkien's ideas on fairy-stories" (118). It follows naturally from this that the elements in the tale of Aragorn and Arwen that are of fairytale nature should echo the same thematic elements in *Orfeo*. As Tolkien says in *On Fairy-Stories*, "[m]ost good 'fairy-stories' are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches" (32). Both *Orfeo* and Aragorn fulfil this criterion and their wanderings near and within Faërie are critical to their success both as restoring Kings and as fairytale lovers.

Medieval romances often examine the loyalty of stewards and vice-regents. Some are despicably treacherous [...]. Others are loyal [...]. *Orfeo's* steward exemplifies loyalty to perfection. (Shuffelton)

Entangled with the fairytale romance, for both heroes, is a societal theme that recalls Tolkien's expressed preference for "history, true or feigned" (*LotR* Foreword.xxiv). While Laskaya and Salisbury find the "testing of the loyal steward" to be a "folklore motif," to other commentators it is most interesting as a political/historical indicator. Lucas emphasizes that the "bonds of human society are tested" in *Sir Orfeo*, albeit by a "supernatural agent," and that the bonds tested are of feudal loyalty and male love as well as the marriage bond. Not only the Steward, but also all the King's knights, are prepared to die in his service and that of the Queen (Lucas 4). Aragorn too is a leader of his people as well as the betrothed/husband of Arwen, and these bonds are both tested by the supernatural agencies he faces. Each bond is tested twice—by the King's absence and by his return; by the operation of the supernatural force, and by its overcoming.

Another common theme arises in both works from the testing of these societal bonds: the testing of the king/hero himself. The king's exile to and return

from wild and otherworldly locations take place in association with the restoration of order and overcoming of chaos, wilderness and evil. Lerer suggests that the hero's "journey enacts the willing isolation of the hero from society; it helps him to come to terms with himself apart from the demands of feudal and marital life" (98). Orfeo's test of solitude in the forest threatens his sanity, while during Aragorn's test of long years of service in anonymity it is essential that he make no errors of judgement. When Gandalf cautions him regarding the use of the *palantir* he responds, "When have I been hasty or unwary, who have waited and prepared for so many long years?" Gandalf replies: "Never yet. Do not then stumble at the end of the road" (*LotR* III.11.594).⁵

Orfeo and Aragorn both complete their journeys safely, coming through every trial to win their restored kingdoms and their brides. Tested against supernatural adversaries of extraordinary power, each exemplifies Blackburn's view of the Tolkienian hero: "They are loyal to their society, of course, but their primary allegiance is to their own integrity; [they] undergo periods of estrangement from the society they serve" (63). It is that integrity that brings Aragorn and Orfeo alike beyond catastrophe to eucastrophe, recovery, and consolation. Each King has succeeded at the "triple assay" of loss of home and love object; the time in the wilderness; the return to home and to love. Moreover, each steward, or stewardly house, has—after great troubles and misdirections in the case of Gondor—survived a similar tripartite trial; assuming rule at the departure of the king or royal house; ruling as well as in them lies; relinquishing command at the return of the king.

The Absent Queen

However, one further element of these tales remains to be considered in at least a little more detail; the role and function of the Queen: actual or potential, absent or present, abducted or in waiting. There is a sense in which the arc of loss and grief/exile and wandering/victory and return could work its way out in terms of the maturation of the hero without any queen at all. Each hero carried with him a symbol of his rule; the harp that recalls the past and holds the power of harmonising chaos in the future, and the sword reforged that carries the glory of the past into the future. Each pins his faith on a tree; Orfeo as a safe place for his harp until he is ready to return from the wilderness and Aragorn as a symbol of the renewal of the kingdom (*Sands* 243-4/*Tolkien* 267-8; *LotR* VI.5.971). In this context of self referential symbolism, what is there about the Queen that makes

⁵ This recalls the classical original of *Orfeo*, that tale of Orpheus who in fact lost his Eurydice because he did slip up near the end of the road, and looked back at his wife despite the prohibition imposed by Hades (*Guerber* 60-61).

her any more than simply a standard romance emblem of marital heterosexual love, no more important than the artefacts or the tree as an adjunct of kingship?

Christina M. Carlson, in fact, characterizes Heurodis as even less significant than one of these symbols of identity or kingship; she is an absence, a silence, a mere background for Orfeo's kingly rule and musical gift. In losing her, he loses his identity "because his poetic endeavour, his identity as speaker, comes at Herodis' expense. She pays the price of silence" (Carlson 75). Carlson discounts Heurodis's impassioned outburst of fear after the threatening dream of the faery messenger as atypical; the Queen's accustomed role is one of silence. (We have noted above that Arwen is completely silent in the description of her marriage to Aragorn.) Nicholson furthers this view: "the heroine of medieval romance often does seem to inhabit the margin of the text which records her tale" (161). There has been a constant flow of criticism since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* regarding what is seen as a similarly underwritten role for Arwen in Aragorn's story. Yet at least one of the scholars quoted above (Hill, "Structure" 139) regards the love theme in Orfeo as the major assay of the Romance while Aragorn—although crowned alone—clearly yearns for the arrival of Arwen and for their Midsummer marriage to truly crown his achievement (*LotR* VI.5.972).

A.S.G. Edwards suggests a close link between the king's relationships to his kingdom and his wife. "The loss of the king's wife leads directly to the loss of the kingdom [...] the failure of marriage at a literal level leads to a larger, metaphoric failure of the marriage between ruler and people" (283-4, 285). This interpretation points far back into antiquity, to the concept of the *Sacred Marriage* (Frazer 184-193). The identification of the royal marriage with that between the god and the goddess is attested in ritual and symbolizes the assertion of order over chaos as well as control of fertility and growth.

Nikakis notes that "Aragorn and Arwen wed on Midsummer's day—the summer solstice—the day of longest sunlight and shortest darkness. It is a time of year considered extremely potent in many cultures, and one associated with regenerative love, vegetative replenishment and renewal" (89). Chance also makes this association, noting further that the signal for Aragorn to begin looking to the north in expectation of Arwen's arrival, and to begin preparations for the marriage, is the planting of the sapling of the White Tree, symbol of both societal and vegetal renewal and restoration (Chance 122-23). Similarly, in *Sir Orfeo*, it is after the Queen is brought into the town that the festivities begin, and although she and the King are already married, they are together "crowned anew" (Sands 564-570/ Tolkien 586-594).

Verlyn Flieger, considering the nature of Aragorn's heroic status, pulls much of this together:

[A] full understanding of Aragorn as a medieval hero must encompass knowledge of his love story as well as of his epic characteristics. Aragorn's is not simply a political, national or even a personal epic trial. It is also a trial of love, and in the light of the love story, which we come to know only at the end, the struggle and the battles take on a more specific and personal meaning. (Flieger 149)

However little the traditions of the Medieval Romance, and of the romance-like thread of story in Tolkien's work, may seem to be making of the importance of the Queen, there are clues throughout each work to the radical importance of the royal marriage as an emblem of the Sacred Marriage. Tolkien tells us that in the union of Aragorn and Arwen, "the long-sundered branches of the half-elven were reunited and their line was restored" (*LotR* Appendix A.1034). This further example of a theme that is played down in the main text but is actually of deep importance is a clue to an equivalence between the Human/Elven marriages in Tolkien's world and the Sacred Marriage in our world. For within the heritage of this key group of half-elven individuals is also the descent from Melian, who was neither elf nor mortal, but came of the Maiar, the lower order of the two groups of beings who shared with Ilúvatar in the Creation. This marriage brings a supernatural dimension into the restored kingdom; something precious is rescued from Faërie, just as Heurodis is rescued from the King of Fairy and restored to her own kingdom.

It is less clear, maybe, what Heurodis brings from Faërie than what Arwen brings; however, if we look back at the prequel to her abduction, and the abduction itself, this may become clearer (Sands 33-169/Tolkien 57-194). It is easy on a superficial reading to assume that Heurodis is simply hysterical with fear and beyond reasoning with by those who love and serve her, that she is needlessly distraught and enthralled by a mere dream. Carlson, as seen above, assumes that this is an antifeminist stereotype, an instance of hysteria that combines with Heurodis's usual silence to efface her from the serious themes of the Romance. Orfeo tries to reassure her and to assert that all will be unchanged, all will be the same as it ever was; "Whider thou gost ichill with the / And whider I go thou shalt with me." But Heurodis (who by this time is "stille" [Sands 93/Tolkien 117]) at once repudiates this hope. "Nay, nay, sir, that nought nis" (Sands 105-107/Tolkien 129-131). It is Heurodis who understands the terror and relentlessness of this intrusion of Faërie. She knows that she must go, and that no one can save her, while the King refuses to see the truth. She has gone into a dimension beyond his everyday understanding but it is, perhaps unexpectedly, not beyond her own. We are not shown the circumstances of the Queen's stay in Faërie, since the romance focuses on Orfeo's ten years of wandering in the forest. All we see of Heurodis's parallel ten years is directly observed by Orfeo, when he

sees her riding in the forest with the other ladies, and then asleep under the *ympe-tree* within the Faerie King's palace (Sands 295-300, 381-384/Tolkien 319-324, 405-408). Similarly, although Tolkien takes his readers into both the fairylands that Arwen has inhabited, Lórien and Imladris, we see little of her within the main text. At Imladris Frodo has a glimpse of Aragorn standing beside Arwen and speaking with her (*LotR* II.1.238), but after that they do not meet until they marry (VI.5.972).

So, each Queen dwells *in Faërie*; Arwen for her whole life until it is time to enter the Third Age as a mortal, Heurodis for ten years until Orfeo has learned how to come to terms with strangeness, with alterity, with change, and to reunite with her in a new understanding. In both cases there is evidence that it is the Queen who sees more clearly that change must come, and that a future may lie beyond that change. This is the insight from the Otherworld that sustains/restores the personal and political relationships of everyday, but the Queen cannot it bring it out into the full light of day until the King has fulfilled the adventures that make him ready to receive it. Far from being subordinate, the Queen is ahead of the King in insight, and has to wait for him to catch up. This explains why it is toward the beginning of the love-story that we hear most of what we are shown of the Queen in each instance. Just as Heurodis displays, by her reasonable—not unreasoning—terror in the face of the incursion of Faërie, a deeper understanding of the situation than does Orfeo, so at the first meeting between Aragorn and Arwen it is she—so immeasurably older and more experienced than he—who understands the situation and its potential. When Aragorn calls her by the name Tinúviel, and tells her that she is like her ancestress, she replies very seriously. “‘So many have said,’ she answered gravely. ‘Yet her name is not mine. *Though maybe my doom will be not unlike hers*’” [my italics] (Appendix A.1058). This is a startling thing for Arwen to say, even before she has asked Aragorn his name; as astonishing as Heurodis's insistence that she *must* leave Orfeo. Aragorn is as much at a loss as Orfeo; “‘Then Aragorn was abashed, for he saw the elven-light in her eyes and the wisdom of many days’” (Appendix A.1058). This parallels Orfeo's seeing in Heurodis's eyes “‘thy lovesum eyghen two / Loketh so man doth on his fo!’” (Sands 87-88/Tolkien 111-112) Each man is suddenly face-to-face with otherness. The long period of trial and absence is necessary to come to terms with that, and the Queen is ever-present in the mind and heart of her beloved.

Each Queen bestows upon her hero a sign that the time of separation can now be ended, if he has the necessary courage. Arwen sends the banner she has made for Aragorn, and the message already quoted above: “‘Either our hope cometh, or all hope's end’” (*LotR* V.5.775). Heurodis, riding in the forest, looks at Orfeo and he at her; she weeps for his condition (Sands 295-303/Tolkien 318-327).

This time the look in her eye, like the message from Arwen to Aragorn, inspires him to work for change.

Investigation into the deeper implications and parallels that lie behind these two romance marriages of King and Queen and their essential role in the health and stability of the kingdom, as well as of the two people involved, might bring out further interesting roots and beginnings in the origins of the sacred marriage and the association of the feminine with wisdom and mystery; perhaps as far back as the Sumerian mysteries of the sacred marriage between “Innana (goddess of the evening star) [and] Dumuzi (god of vegetation)” —or further (Oelschlaeger 39-40). Suffice it here to emphasize that the Queen in both tales comes to, or back to, the King from Faërie, and brings with her into the everyday life of each restored kingdom some touch of the mysteries of that *Other* realm, some of its wisdom and its deep history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In memory of David Gransby; scholar, mentor, friend.

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