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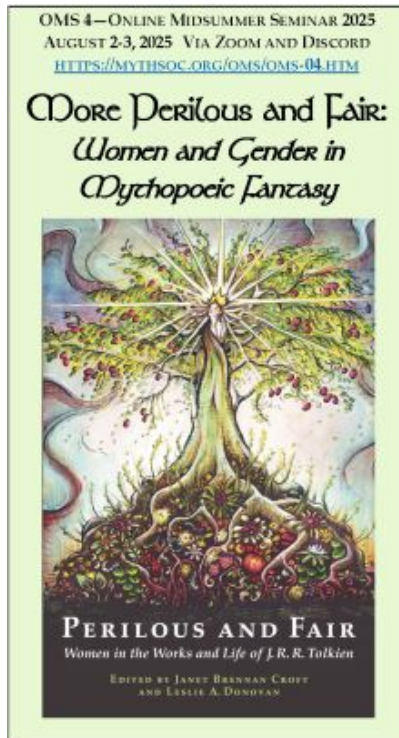
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Abstract

Critics have observed that Beren and Lúthien's tale is a Christian retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The "Harrowing of Hell" tradition is widespread in Italy as attested by the mosaic of San Marco among others, but it is in France that the *Ovid Moralized* reconnects it to Orpheus who descended into the Underworld to save Eurydice (an already late antique parallel) and therefore attests a happy ending version of the story that can be found in medieval England and also in various classical sources, perhaps even in the original legend of Orpheus. The apocryphal Harrowing is also a recurring motif in the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English religious poetry that Tolkien studied. In short, Tolkien has a wealth of precedents in giving his Orpheus and Eurydice, i.e. Beren and Lúthien, a happy ending.

Additional Keywords

Orpheus, Harrowing of Hell, Sir Orfeo, Ovid, Virgil, Plato, Dionysus, Bacchus, Christ, Beren, Lúthien; Orpheus and Eurydice (myth); Harrowing of Hell (myth); Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Lúthien Tinúviel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Beren; Sir Orfeo; Christ-figure in literature; Middle English literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien's works; Anglo-Saxon literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien's works; Celtic mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien's works; Classical literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien's works;

Dionysus (mythical figure)

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ORPHEUS AND THE
HARROWING OF HELL IN
THE TALE OF BEREN AND LÚTHIEN¹

GIOVANNI CARCINE COSTABILE

WRITING IN 1983 IN THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY JOURNAL *DALLORN*, when the only published form of the story of Beren and Lúthien was the chapter published six years earlier in *The Silmarillion*, Iwan Rhys Morus stated:

The story of Beren and Lúthien is at the very heart of Tolkien's mythology of Middle-earth. In a purely narrative sense it is at the centre of the legends which comprise the *Silmarillion*, for here it is that the myth considered as a totality reaches its climax with the eventual recapture of a Silmaril. It is also in many ways a turning point in the mythology for in it many of the various strands of other narratives are brought together and combined to bring about the doom of the Eldar. (Morus 19)

The observation is keen, for indeed the story of the first Elf-Man couple interweaves in its fabric the doom of both races as exemplified by Lúthien's song before the Judge of the Dead, the Vala Mandos. In her song the two themes of Elves and Men in the primordial Music of the Ainur are textually said to have been brought together in harmony, thus devising "the song most fair that ever in words was woven" (*The Silmarillion* XIX.186-7). As widely known, her purpose in pleasing Mandos's ears is to move him to give her back her beloved Beren, who died in the aftermath of his victorious fighting against the hellish wolf Carcharoth.

Such circumstances correctly led many scholars to see a connection between Tolkien's tale and the classical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, for indeed Tolkien himself defined his narrative "a kind of Orpheus-legend in reverse" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 288, #153), highlighting Pity instead of inexorability. Yet a common misconception (e.g. Brunetti, Parissi), suggests Tolkien's rendition of the orphic legend in providing it with a happy ending to

¹The present article is a shortened, revised version of the twelfth chapter of my volume *The Mirror of Desire Unbidden: Retrieving the Imago Dei in Tolkien and Late Medieval English Literature* (Peter Lang, forthcoming).

be an original invention of Tolkien's, almost as though it should therefore be indexed among bizarre curiosities and intellectual trivialities such as the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin.

Fortunately, though, in the wider world of Tolkien scholarship it has long been speculated that Tolkien was inspired by a medieval retelling of the Classical myth surviving in the Middle English version of a lost Breton lay, and titled *Sir Orfeo*. It is undisputable that Tolkien drew much from this rendition of the legend in his devising the tale of Beren and Lúthien, because it was a work he was familiar with, having translated it into Modern English, and additionally into a different Middle English dialect than the original. Furthermore, the parallels between *Sir Orfeo* and the tale of Beren and Lúthien abound, not to mention those with others among Tolkien's works. Finally, such an inspiration is especially relevant to the present purpose because *Sir Orfeo* features a joyous, even triumphal happy ending, leading many scholars to assume Tolkien must have gotten the idea for his "Orpheus-legend in reverse" from this specific work.

Although academician Jane Beal does not contradict such a notion, instead even listing parallels between *Sir Orfeo* and Tolkien's story spotted by previous researchers (4), she further states that the tale of Beren and Lúthien is involved with "orphanic powers," but ultimately "the symbolism of Tolkien's legend points beyond itself and the mythology of Middle-earth to the apotheosis of Tolkien's own faith: Christ" (25). I think this is correct, but Beal only pronounces it as a general statement by which to conclude her essay, whereas much can be documented concerning such assumptions, discovering what can be called the Orphic Christ through the motif of the Harrowing of Hell.

Besides, such a reconstruction calls for the re-evaluation of the history of the Orpheus myth, always keeping in mind what we may know, or infer, to have been Tolkien's understanding of the subject, and by way of such an endeavour we may discover unsuspected parallels between the original Orpheus and what we call the Orphic Christ that find their roots in ancient Paganism and Shamanism centuries before Christ's birth.

This way, one may see how the tale of Beren and Lúthien also interweaves the strands of Paganism and Christianity, however the Catholic faith of the author gives preeminence to the latter.

TOLKIEN AND THE HARROWING OF HELL

As far as I am aware, the motif of the Harrowing of Hell was first and only connected to Tolkien's narratives by Robert Steed in another article published in *Mallorn*, this one in 2017, under the title "The Harrowing of Hell Motif in Tolkien's Legendarium." Although Steed connects the motif, among other instances, with the story of Beren and Lúthien, he considers any dark prison to be roughly equivalent to Hell in what one may define as his symbolic

approach, leading his analysis of the tale to focus exclusively on Beren's imprisonment in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, without a word dedicated to Lúthien's rescue of her lover from an actual Otherworld, the Halls of Mandos. My focus instead lies in the actual call of deceased souls who are thus freed from the abode of the dead to come (back) to life, either earthly or eternal, thus entailing that my treatment of the matter is going to both diverge from Steed's broader definition of the motif and fall out of Steed's (admittedly) limited scope in his study of specific cases. However, his general introduction to the topic at the very opening of his article is finely conceived, well suits the needs of the present explanation, and so certainly deserves a full quote:

The Nicene Creed states that Jesus was "[c]rucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures . . ." This statement leads to a particular question: what was Jesus doing in the time between his death on the cross and his resurrection? One answer provided by the Harrowing of Hell narratives depicts Jesus descending to Hell, described as a subterranean fortress-prison, to liberate the captive souls of the (usually righteous) dead held captive therein by Satan and his minions. While not generally considered part of dogmatic orthodoxy, accounts of The Harrowing of Hell captured medieval Catholic interest. (Steed 6)

The first occurrence of the word "harrowing" to describe Christ's subduing of Hell dates back to the 10th century, in the *Easter Sunday Homily* by Ælfric: "Hell oncnæow Crist, ðaða heo forlēt hyre hæftlingas ūt, þurh ðæs Hælendes *hergunge*"; in Modern English "Hell acknowledged Christ, when it let forth its captives, through the *harrowing* of Jesus" (Thorpe 228-229, emphasis mine²). Almost its contemporary is the *Easter Day Homily* among the *Blickling Homilies*, where one reads: "Ure Drihten [...] mannum gecyþde on þas ondweardan tīd ealle þa þing þe æfre ær from witgum gewitgode wæron, be his þrowunga & be his æriste, & be his *hergunga on helle*"; in Modern English: "Our Lord [...] hath made known to men at this present time all the things that were ever before prophesied by the prophets concerning his passion, his resurrection, and his *harrowing of hell*" (Morris 82-83, emphasis mine³). Nonetheless, descriptions of the Harrowing of Hell occur in earlier texts attributed to Cynewulf (*The Descent to Hell* in the Exeter Book) and Cædmon (*Christ and Satan* in the Junius Manuscript), as well as in an incomplete Latin liturgical play in the early 9th century *Book of Cerne*, ultimately all deriving from oblique references in

² Listed in Oronzo Cilli's *Tolkien's Library* as A.9, p.2.

³ The 1880 edition is listed in Cilli's *Tolkien's Library* (A.1640, p.199). A study on the language of the *Blickling Homilies* owned by Tolkien is also listed (A.1585, p.192).

New Testament texts (Matthew 12.40; Acts 2.24, 2.31; Colossians 1.18; Ephesians 4.9; 1 Peter 3.18-19; 4, 6), and mostly the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, notably featuring Hades beside Satan. Tolkien owned an edition of a Welsh *Gospel of Nicodemus*, titled *Evengyl Nicodemus*, with a translation in Modern English appended,⁴ and in Middle English the same apocryphal text has a translation included in the Auchinleck Manuscript,⁵ another by John Trevisa,⁶ and it is paraphrased in *Cursor Mundi*.⁷ A mystery play on the *Harrowing of Hell* is included in the York⁸ and Wakefield cycles,⁹ in the Chester and Coventry cycles,¹⁰ as well as in the Cornish Mystery Plays. A Middle English prose narrative of the *Harrowing* is included in MS Harley 2253, certainly known to Tolkien as one of the three manuscripts preserving the romance of *King Horn* (*Letters* 505, #276). Not only the motif was known to Tolkien, but he had very likely read a great deal about it.

Furthermore, Tolkien's lifelong friend C.S. Lewis writes in a letter to Audrey Sutherland dated 28 April 1960: "The medieval authors delighted to picture what they called 'the harrowing of hell', Christ descending and knocking on those eternal doors and bringing out those whom He chose. [...] It wd. explain how what Christ did can save those who lived long before the Incarnation" (*The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis* III.1148).

In many versions Christ does not only rescue the Patriarchs and Prophets, but also preaches one last time to all souls, and the converts are also admitted to Heaven. This is founded on an earlier-cited scriptural passage, 1 Peter 4.6, wherein it is stated: "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does." Tolkien was surely familiar with the motif of the Harrowing through his Catholic upbringing and his medieval studies, particularly the Old English texts in the *Exeter Book* and Junius Manuscript where many of his favourite Anglo-Saxon literary works were found.

⁴ Cilli A.2495, p.313.

⁵ The same manuscript wherein the earliest version of *Sir Orfeo* is found.

⁶ Trevisa's main work, his translation of Ranulph of Higden's *Polychronicon*, is twice listed in Cilli's *Tolkien's Library*, in an unspecified edition and in nine volumes (A.1884, pp.235-236; A.1439-1447, pp.174-175).

⁷ Work listed in Cilli's *Tolkien's Library* both in an unspecified edition and in seven volumes (A.512, p.64; A.1641-1647, pp.199-202). Tolkien also supervised two dissertations on *Cursor Mundi* (D.27, p.348; D.51, p.351).

⁸ Cilli A.2145, p.268.

⁹ Cilli A.648, p.81.

¹⁰ Cilli A.922, p.113.



Figure 1: Stained glass from Church of St. Ethelbert, Hessest, Suffolk (15th-century)

More doubtful is the extent to which Tolkien was informed about the Orthodox Church, according to which Holy Saturday is the day of the *Anastasis*, that is, “Ascent” to Heaven, of Christ and the souls he saved from Hell, first of all Adam and Eve. Since they were in Hell until then, sometimes Christ has to snatch them from the devil, who would not want to open the gates to Him, so in some representations Christ crushes the gates, the devil, or both under his feet (Figure 1). The Eastern Church, however, was not separated from the Western until the 11th century. Their influence from the East spread into Italy, which for a while was ruled by Byzantium after the fall of the Roman Empire, although the dominion of the peninsula was always contended, first by Gothic tribes, then by the Longobards, eventually by Arabs, until the conquest by Charles the Great, which, however, did not entirely eradicate the Byzantines. Anglo-Saxon, and then Norman, England, as much as the Franks, were not entirely untouched by Greek influence, as proven by the wide diffusion among them of the stories and legends surrounding Alexander the Great and the cycle of Troy, and even by the existence of a Greek Arthurian knight named Cligés in the romances by Chrétien de Troyes. For medieval authors, under the same, wide Heaven, our little big world was one, so we should not superimpose our Modern, “separatist” lenses onto the Middle Ages, nor onto Tolkien’s medievalism. Dante Alighieri may have his Ulysses attempt to sail to Mount Purgatory, Chaucer tells us about the medieval-flavoured courtly love between ancient Trojans Troilus and Criseyde, the *Beowulf*-Poet may call God an Anglo-Saxon warlord, in the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* King Arthur threatens to invade Rome, and the French author of *Perceforest* says that Alexander the Great conquered Britain.

In this context, and in the context of Tolkien's medievalism, it may appear less peculiar that Tolkien may have been interested in the teachings of the Orthodox Church, and more specifically in the tradition according to which Christ may have been accompanied to Hell by Dismas, the Good Thief who had been crucified by his side and had recognized him as Lord, thus being granted the promise of Heaven. I suspect it may not be too far-fetched to suspect that Beren has something about him of Dismas, being the "Good Thief" of a Silmaril, and being the one who understood Lúthien's worth at first sight without being told, even from afar, in the darkness, pretty much as Dismas realized Jesus was God even though the latter was crucified like the former, as a common criminal. Among many artistic representations of Dismas accompanying Jesus in Hell, two famous ones Tolkien was most likely familiar with were a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (*Figure 2*) and the mosaic of San Marco in Venice (*Figure 3*). Tolkien's hotel during his visit to Venice in 1955 was very close to Piazza San Marco (Scull and Hammond *Chronology* 488), and in 1918 Tolkien had edited his deceased friend Geoffrey Bache Smith's collection of poems *A Spring Harvest*, including a poem titled "To a Dürer Drawing of Antwerp Harbour."



Figures 2 and 3: Woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, 1510 (left) and Mosaic, Church of San Marco, 1617 (right)

TOLKIEN AND ORPHEUS

It is still in the same context of medieval melting-pot that one should understand the origins and significance of *Sir Orfeo*, Tolkien's chief source for the song before Mandos in the legend of Beren and Lúthien. John Block Friedman in 1965 summed up the state of the matter concerning the sources of *Sir Orfeo* as follows:

A variety of sources, all conjectural, have been suggested for the narrative of *Sir Orfeo*. Those positions advanced before 1954 are summarized and discussed in Bliss's introduction. J.B. Severs [...] sees influence mainly

from Alfred's Boethius translation, Celtic legend and Walter Map's tale of the Knight of Little Britain in *De Nugis Curialium*. Constance Davies [...] argues that the poem depends on a mixture of Map and Virgil, whose underworld has an elm of dreams and an architectural description of the gate of hell. She also sees a parallel between the abduction of Heurodis and seasonal abduction stories in Celtic legend such as the story of Culhwch and Olwen and the *Vita Gildae*. Dorena Allen [...] suggests that the living dead people Orfeo sees may come from Irish legends of supernatural substitutions of dead people. (Friedman, *Figure* 360n30)

We shall later see the progress in such source criticism since Friedman's time, but what we are first concerned with is rather what chronologically precedes his account, in order to have shaped Tolkien's story of his lovers in the 1910s-1920s. In this respect, although the cited 1954 work by Tolkien's pupil Alan J. Bliss remains the standard edition of the poem, one should rather consider Kenneth Sisam's edition in his 1921 *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, to which Tolkien appended his *Middle English Vocabulary*:

The story appears to have been translated from a French source into South-Western English at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It belongs to a group of 'lays' which claim to derive from Brittany, e.g. *Lai le Freine*, which has the same opening lines (1-22); *Emaré*; and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice was known to the Middle Ages chiefly from Ovid (*Metamorphoses* x) and from Virgil (*Georgics* iv). King Alfred's rendering of it in his *Boethius* is one of his best prose passages, despite the crude moralizing [...]. The Middle English poet has a lighter and daintier touch. The Greek myth is almost lost in a tale of fairyland, the earliest English romance of the kind; and to provide the appropriate happy ending, Sir Orfeo is made successful in his attempt to rescue Heurodis. (Sisam 13)

Although Sisam does not cite his sources, these probably include the studies by George L. Kittredge¹¹ and Edward E. Hunt.¹² The latter in the "Introduction" to his 1910 translation stated: "The French lay of Orpheus, from which 'Orfeo' is translated, is now lost; but we have references enough to it in other works to establish its previous existence. One, in the French prose romance of Lancelot, is of unusual interest. King Bademagus, we read, 'was seated in an

¹¹ Kittredge is the author of the 1916 volume *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, cited as a reference for bibliography in Tolkien's and Gordon's 1925 edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Tolkien and Gordon xxvi). Kittredge is cited in Bliss xxxiv.

¹² Cited in Bliss li.

arm-chair of ivory, which was very beautiful, and before him was a harper who played (*notoit*) the lay of Orpheus; and it pleased the king so much to listen that there was no one who dared say a word” (Hunt vi-vii). Kittredge instead wrote:

That such a lay once existed is shown by two well-known passages. The first is from the *Lai de l’Espine*, mistakenly ascribed by De la Rue to Guillaume le Normand and by Roquefort to Marie de France. [...] The second is from the first version of *Floire et Blanceflor*. [...] These two passages show that the *Lai d’Orphéy* was well known and popular. (Kittredge 180-181)

In 1962, “an important article by Peter Dronke,” titled “The Return of Eurydice,” showed that the “tradition of the successful recovery persisted in eleventh-century France, and Peter Lucas (alone among critics of the poem) has argued that the poet of *Sir Orfeo* was consciously following it” (Pugh 22). In fact, Peter Lucas wrote in detail about the 11th century French works mentioned by Pugh, and even argued they retrieved the original form of the Orpheus legend, subsequently lost due to later interpolations in the Classical period:

The version of the story in the Middle English poem is the original (Greek) one, the one that lacks the second loss (or death) of Eurydice. This original version evidently survived, as Dronke shows, side by side with the other, modified (and, to us, more familiar) version of Virgil, Ovid, Boethius and their commentators [...]. In particular, the original version survived in at least four eleventh-century poems, the *Liber quid suum virtutis* by Thierry of Saint-Trond, the poem taken to begin *Carmine leniti tenet Orpheus antra Cocyti* by a certain Gautier, the *Dialogue with Calliope* by Godefroy of Reims, and the anonymous lyric *Parce Continuis*, the first three of which are from France. (Lucas 2)

For instance, Wim Verbaal relates that Godfrey of Reims “retells the story of Orpheus (c. 4.184–205). And, a remarkable fact, he does not hesitate to bring Eurydice completely back to the light: ‘and returned to life she fled the doors and anger of Hell’ (*et rediōiva fores Herebi fugit atque furores*, 4.205)” (121). In Dronke’s translation of Thierry, one reads: “So, trusting with all the power of his spirit in the divinity of his art, bravely [Orpheus] took what he desired from Styx by force” (Dronke 199n5). Gautier wrote that “with his songs [Orpheus] has penetrated the waters of wicked Charon, and at the god’s command his wife is restored to him” (Dronke 199-200n6). In *Parce Continuis* one reads: “The poet [Orpheus] laments, his one-and-only Eurydice is not there. He bewails Eurydice. And then the lutanist brought back his one-and-only Eurydice!” (Dronke 212).

At this point, although both Dronke¹³ and Lucas may have written in Tolkien's late years, at the very least one should entertain the hypothesis that in Tolkien's mind *Sir Orfeo's* happy ending was linked to the Christian reinterpretation of the Orpheus myth. Commenting on typological and allegorical medieval interpretations of Scripture, in fact, Thomas Honegger writes:

[T]he story of Orpheus and Eurydice was variously interpreted as either Christ's harrowing of hell (which works, of course, only with the 'happy ending' version), or as a moral tale warning man not to cling to the body or other earthly things (Eurydice), which he is going to lose one day, but to better focus his energies on God and life eternal. [...] Tolkien, as a medievalist, was of course conversant with this tradition—and applies it in a very idiosyncratic way. Fairy-stories are, in Tolkien's 'typological' reading, types that foreshadow (or reflect) the true fairy-story of the Gospels and find their fulfilment in the 'anti-type' of the Christian story. (Honegger 125)

The moral tale cited by the scholar has little importance for our purpose, but it is worth to quote the passage from the 14th century French *Ovid Moralized* reading the Orpheus story as representing the Harrowing of Hell: "by Orpheus and by his harp we must understand the person of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . who played his harp so melodiously that he drew from Hell the sainted souls of the Holy Fathers who had descended there because of the sins of Adam and Eve" (qtd. in Friedman, *Figure* 274). Pierre Bersuire in the same period writes:

Let us speak allegorically and say that Orpheus, the child of the [sun], is Christ the son of God the Father, because he leads Eurydice, that is to say, the human soul, to [himself]. [...] But the devil, a serpent, drew near the new bride, that is, created *de novo*, while she collected flowers, that is, while she seized the forbidden apple, and bit her by temptation and killed her by sin, and finally she went to the world below. Seeing this, Christ-Orpheus wished himself to descend to the lower world and thus he retook his wife, that is human nature, ripping her from the hands of the ruler of Hell himself; and he led her with him to the upper world, saying this verse from Canticles 2:10 'Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away.' (qtd. in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* 127)

The implications are already the same in a later gloss to Arnulfus of Orléans's 12th century commentary on Ovid: "'Orpheus is a type of Christ . . .

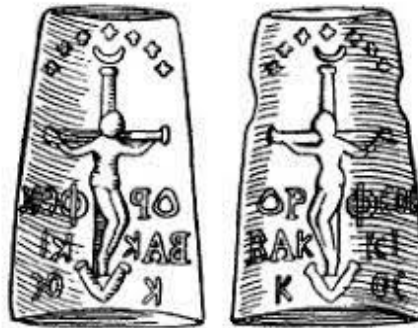
¹³ In 1949, Tolkien had supervised Ursula Mary Brown's thesis *An edition of the Saga of Þorgils and Haflíði (from Sturlungasaga)* (Cilli D.8, p.346). In 1960, she married Peter Dronke and became known as Ursula Mary Dronke.

who provided a wife for himself, but through the teeth of the serpent, *that is to say, by the counsel of Satan*’ lost her” (qtd. in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* 181, italics in original). All these quotes entail the Harrowing, and, as a consequence, Orpheus’s happy ending. We know for sure that C.S. Lewis was an expert in Ovidian readings in medieval France, as in his book *The Allegory of Love* he commented on the theory tracing the origin of courtly love to Ovid, to the effect: “the evidence points to a much stronger Ovidian influence in the north of France than in the south” (11). Northern France suggests Normandy and Brittany, and Ovidian readings were the context of Christian reinterpretations of the Orpheus story, so Lewis’s observation allows room for the notion that the Inklings connected the dots of the medieval Orphic figure way before the times of Dronke, Lucas, or Pugh. Furthermore, one finds another passage suggesting a happy ending even earlier, in 10th century Germany, as the monk Froumund of Tegernsee complains about his students by wishing he could get their attention, if only he was “as Orpheus regaining Eurydice with his song” (*Orpheus ut cantans Euridicen revocat*) (*Poemata*, in *Pat. Lat.* CXXI, col. 1300 C-D¹⁴).

ORPHEUS, DIONYSUS, AND THE ORPHIC CHRIST

Writing in 1899, Gardner claimed that “the secret worship of Dionysus [...] was supposed to have been introduced into Greece by his priest and votary, the Thracian Orpheus,” and advocated “the discovery of a great probability that the Christian doctrine of the Descent into Hades, together with the imagery in which the future world was presented to the early Christian imagination, was derived neither from a Christian nor from a Jewish, nor even a Hellenic source, but from the mystic lore of Dionysus and Orpheus” (Gardner 380, 274). What can be deduced from such references is that Lewis (and quite likely Tolkien) also had Orpheus in mind when they thought of the god the Greeks called Dionysus, the Romans Bacchus. Such an association may be further substantiated by the stone with the inventory number 4939 (*Figure 4*) from the Early Christian Byzantine Collection I at the Berlin Bode Museum, the former Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, although the item is missing since after World War II. Dating from the 3rd century AD and depicting a crucified man, it bore the Greek inscription ΟΡΦΕΟΣ ΒΑΚΧΙΚΟΣ, “Orpheus of Bacchus/Dionysus,” and it was very much an object of discussion in intellectual circles during the 1920s and 1930s, although known since the 19th century.

¹⁴ Also quoted in Godman 35n20, and Delgado 28n61. Most importantly, Tolkien may have known it from Kittredge 185.



HAEMATITE SEAL-CYLINDER OR AMULET
OF THE THIRD CENTURY A.D.,
NOW IN BERLIN. (Scale 2 : 1.)

Figure 4: ΟΡΦΕΟΣ ΒΑΚΧΙΚΟΣ Seal

Although there are other instances of syncretism between Paganism and Christianity, and also Judaism, sometimes as a mediator, involving Orpheus, Christ, and King David, it is especially in this case that the Cross suggests that the connection is founded in the overcoming of death and Hades, so to be concerned with an Orphic Christ involved in the Harrowing of Hell. Concerning Judaism, MacCulloch in a footnote wondered: “In the *Test. of the XII Patriarchs, Gad*, iv. 6, occurs the verse: ‘For love would quicken even the dead and would call back them that are condemned to die.’ Does this point to a knowledge of the Orpheus myth among the Jews?” (MacCulloch 18n1). However, his hypothesis is unnecessary, since Hoseah prophesized: “I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?” (Hoseah 13.14). Furthermore, in Pope’s translation of the Song of Songs one reads: “For love is strong as Death, Passion fierce as Hell” (Song of Songs 8.6).

In another passage commenting on his conversion, Lewis explicitly mentions the Orpheus story, although in its tragic form, and he allegorizes it:

You cannot *study* Pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyze the nature of humour while roaring with laughter. [...] But if I remind you, instead, of Orpheus and Eurydice, how he was suffered to lead her by the hand but, when he turned round to look at her, she disappeared, what was merely a principle becomes imaginable. [...] Now as myth transcends thought, incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. [...] It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place,

followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. (Lewis, "Myth Became Fact" 57-8)

So, if we suppose that Tolkien and Lewis exchanged opinions on the subject, we may put Lewis's notion in Tolkien's own words, "the Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'. [...] So great is the bounty with which [the Christian] has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation" ("On Fairy-stories" 156). In other words, by rewriting, in the tale of Beren and Lúthien, the Orphic Christ, that is, the Orpheus myth in the Christianised, happy ending variant desumed by *Sir Orfeo* but also by its Christian antecedents, Tolkien "hallowed" the Classical tale, "redeem[ed]" both Orpheus and Eurydice from the "Hell" of oblivion of their successful reunion and condemnation of their entire adventure, and "assist[ed] in the effoliation and multiple enrichment" of the original story.

Still, though, the union of the Orpheus legend and the Christian motif of the Harrowing begs a question, both concerning medieval writers and Tolkien: how to reconcile Orpheus's suffering and despair at losing Eurydice, motivating his lamentation and desperate plea to Hades to have her back, with Christ's triumphal entrance into Hell, shattering the gates and subduing the Devil himself, forcing him to release all worthy souls? For medieval Christian writers, the answer is certainly that they thought Orpheus to be *imago Christi*, as we saw, not Jesus himself, although they also conceived that Christ had suffered the temporary loss of the deceased souls he would then rescue. Furthermore, the song of Orpheus was considered to figuratively represent the Word preached by Jesus, not only on Earth but also one last time in Hell. Finally, it was not a problem that Eurydice was a single person whereas the souls saved by Jesus were many, since together these souls composed the single person of the Church, Christ's Bride, whom Orpheus's spouse represented. Instead Tolkien follows the original pagan legend in some respects, such as:

Classical Orpheus legend

- 1) a desperate appeal to a Lord (and/or Lady) of the Dead instead of an entirely triumphal entrance defeating him;
- 2) the release of souls from the dead through singing a heartbreaking song instead of preaching to them or simply calling them;
- 3) the reduction of the number of released souls to only include the releaser's spouse;

- 4) the releaser is partly divine;
- 5) the release of the dead is meant as a return to Earth, not Heaven;
- 6) the release of the dead is conceded as exceptional;
- 7) the release of the dead is conceded upon inescapable conditions.

On the other hand, Tolkien conforms to the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell and to the Christian reinterpretation of the Orpheus legend in the following respects:

Harrowing of Hell and Christian Orpheus

- a) the releaser is partly divine;
- b) the releaser is also a dead person visiting the Underworld, not a living visitor;¹⁵
- c) the releaser voluntarily died, sacrificing themselves for the sake of the dead to be saved;
- d) the releaser, however dead, is technically immortal;
- e) the Lord of the Dead, who is not evil, and the Devil, evil by definition, are two, sharply distinguished, persons, and the former is convinced, while the latter is defeated;
- f) the releaser was always meant to succeed;
- g) the happy ending.

It is possible to appreciate the originality of Tolkien's version of an "Orphic Christ" story by considering the fact that he neither strictly conformed to the pagan tale nor to the Christian narrative. Besides, his take is also different from *Sir Orfeo*, which only includes the features previously labeled as 1), 2), 3), 5), 6), e), and g), and only by assuming that Faërie and the Underworld are the same thing,¹⁶ that Dame Heurodis's abduction is a metaphor for death, and that Pluto is not Satan. Moreover, he does not only double the Lords of Hell in two figures as Lord of the Dead and Lord of Evil, like Hades and Satan in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, but also makes a separate, earthly abode for his Devil, Morgoth, whom Beren and Lúthien there previously descended and defeated. Finally, and

¹⁵ A point on which both Beal and Libran-Moreno seem confused. In all versions with a finished, definite ending (meaning starting from the version that Christopher Tolkien called 'QS(B)' or simply 'B', dated some time before 16 December 1937. See Tolkien, *The Lost Road* 293). Tolkien clearly states that Lúthien visits as a disembodied soul, defining her eventual leaving the world altogether with Beren "a second death" (304).

¹⁶ An intricate matter. For instance, Allen argued that ancient fairy belief, still extant in Celtic countries at the time she was writing, held that death was a very rare occurrence, and most dead people were actually "taken" by fairies just like Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, even at times leaving a fake body behind them to conceal the abduction (104 et seq.).

unprecedented, there is the fact that Tolkien made the releaser be a woman. One might easily imagine Edith singing to him during his time in hospital recovering from trench fever. Weaving all the different threads of references together into a single narrative while still keeping it fresh, endearing, captivating, and moving is a witness to the greatness as a writer of the man who out of love for his wife dared to suggest that she deserved to be taken as his personal inspiration for a character meant to be a figure of the medieval "Orphic Christ." And this statement could settle the matter, if we had not found in Lucas's study the surprising declaration according to which "the version of the story in the Middle English poem [*Sir Orfeo*] is the original (Greek) one, the one that lacks the second loss (or death) of Eurydice" (Lucas 2), begging for further inquiry.

TOLKIEN AND THE ORIGINAL ORPHEUS

In order to construe which original story of Orpheus is referred to by Lucas, it is helpful to consult the footnote he appended to his aforesaid passage, where he specifies his sources: "P. Dronke, 'The Return of Eurydice,' *Classica et Mediaevalia*, XXIII (1962), 198-215, and D. Allen (now Mrs Wright), 'Orpheus and Orfeo: the Dead and the Taken,' *Medium Ævum*, XXXIII (1964), 102-11; also M.O. Lee, 'Orpheus and Eurydice: Myth, Legend, Folklore,' *C&M*, XXVI (1965), 402-12" (Lucas 8n5). Despite Lee's text being the latest, it springs from his 1960 dissertation, which in turn depends on C.M. Bowra's 1952 article "Orpheus and Eurydice," referring to "Heurgon [1932], Norden [1934], Guthrie [1935], Linforth [1935], and Ziegler [1939], who have in different ways supplemented the admirable article by Gruppe in Roscher's *Lexikon* published fifty years ago [1909]" (Bowra 113). By checking the oldest of these sources, the third volume of W.H. Roscher's *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, one finds reference (1158) to Georg Zoëga's 1808 *Li bassirilievi antichi di Roma* (198-199), as well as to C.A. Lobeck's 1829 *Aglaophamus: Sive de Theologiae Mysticae Graecorum Causis* (373). A further, oft-cited treatment of the subject is Otto Kern's 1920 *Orpheus: Eine Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (13; 24-25). The view shared by all these scholars,¹⁷ and by many others both among their contemporaries and followers, is precisely the observation that the earliest clear account of Orpheus's descent to the Underworld strongly suggests a happy ending, thus implying that the version according to which he failed is a late subversion, maybe Hellenistic, or perhaps even Latin. The earliest occurrence they cite is found in Euripides's tragedy of *Alcestis*, Admetus's wife who

¹⁷ The only exception is Ziegler, who is sceptical. His views would later influence Heath, who vehemently argues against the pre-Christian happy ending, although his arguments are later disproved by Merkley.

willingly sacrifices her own life to save her husband's. Upon learning about her selfless choice, Admetus laments:

If only I had the tongue and song of Orpheus, so to charm Demeter's Daughter or her Lord, and steal you back from Hades, I would go down into the Underworld; and neither Pluto's hound nor Charon, Ferryman of the Dead, could hinder me until I had brought you back to light among the living! (*Alcestis* 357-362, my translation)

Surely Admetus's speech would make little, if any, sense, as all the previously-cited scholars agree, unless Orpheus's retrieval of Eurydice was successful, and indeed a later ancient scholiast commented the passage to the effect: "Orpheus's wife Eurydice had died, bitten by a snake, but he went down and brought his wife back to light by enchanting Hades and Persephone through music" (qtd. in Bowra 119, my translation). Since the earliest scholar cited writing in English is Guthrie in 1935, it may still appear doubtful whether Tolkien had read earlier academicians writing in French, German, or Italian, but we should consider him as having full command of the first couple of languages and reading expertise of Italian. Besides, there is the fact that Jane Harrison argued against the claim that Orpheus was successful in her 1908 *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (601-605), while conversely, and even earlier, in his 1894 edition of *Alcestis*, M.L. Earle had appended the scholiast's text as a footnote to line 357, there adding his comment: "It would thus appear that one version of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice had no fatal 'looking backward'" (Earle 116). Since Tolkien was interested in both Orpheus and Euripides, and since most commentators on both subjects between the 19th and 20th centuries either supported or mentioned the theory of the original happy ending, it is more probable that Tolkien was aware of the debate than the alternative. Furthermore, there already is scholarship arguing that *Alcestis* was a source for the story of Beren and Lúthien, although the proponent seems to have been unaware of the connection with Orpheus, which further substantiates the claim (Beal 13-14).

The next author mentioning Orpheus's descent is Plato in his *Symposium*, according to whom Orpheus did bring his wife back from the dead, but what he retrieved was only her ghost:

But Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, the harper, [the gods] sent empty away, and presented to him an apparition only of her whom he sought, but herself they would not give up, because he showed no spirit; he was only a harp-player and did not dare like Alcestis to die for love, but was contriving how he might enter Hades alive (*Symposium* 179)

It is evident, according to most scholars, that Plato is bending the existing story, whatever it was, to suit his own purpose, and anyway the occurrence has no bearing on Tolkien, unless one wishes to consider it a further reason for having Lúthien go to Mandos through death, or, still, unless one connects it to Gorlim's story, which is not the present subject. After Plato, there are five Greek authors implying or clearly stating Orpheus's success. The first one is Isocrates in his *Busiris*, who claims that Orpheus "used to bring back the dead from Hades" (*Busiris* VIII). As the aforesaid Mark Owen Lee observed: "the use of an imperfect verb and a plural object here suggest that Orpheus made a regular practice of restoring the dead" (Lee 25). The author of a fragment from the late fourth century "clearly indicates [...] Eurydice as successfully restored to life" (26) and the *Leontium* by Hermesianax "clearly suggest[s] that Orpheus was successful" (27). In the 2nd century B.C., in his *Epitaphios* for his friend Bion, the pastoral poet Moschus wishes he could descend into the Underworld and bid Bion play an air, because Persephone restored Eurydice to life when Orpheus played and she would do the same for Bion: "she [Persephone] granted Orpheus his Eurydicè's return because he harped so sweetly" (*Epitaphios Bionos* III, l.122). Finally, Diodorus Siculus, another 2nd century author, wrote:

[B]ecause of the love held for his wife he [Orpheus] dared the amazing deed of descending into Hades, where he entranced Persephonè by his melodious song and persuaded her to assist him in his desires and to allow him to bring up his dead wife from Hades, in this exploit resembling Dionysus; for the myths relate that Dionysus brought up his mother Semelè from Hades, and that, sharing with her his own immortality, he changed her name to Thyonè (*Bibliotheca Historica* IV, 25, 4)

The passage just quoted from Diodorus is another instance of the connection between Orpheus and Dionysus/Bacchus, but the Thracian musician was also of Olympian descent as a son of Apollo, and Orpheus's name is also connected in unclear ways to the religion known as Orphism, and to what are called the mysteries, esoteric rituals veiled in secret.

It is noteworthy to point out the further confirmation that Tolkien and Lewis thought of Orpheus as well when discussing pagan Christs, because of the musician's close connection with Dionysus/Bacchus. Jane Harrison in her *Prolegomena* had stated that "[t]he cardinal doctrine of Orphic religion was then the possibility of attaining divine life. It has been said by some that the great contribution of Dionysos to the religion of Greece was the hope of immortality it brought. Unquestionably the Orphics believed in a future life" (Harrison 477). In brief, in ancient Greece from the beginning there had been the Mysteries of Eleusis, celebrating the renewal of vegetation and the

cycles of nature through the myth of the abduction of the daughter of the Mother Goddess Demeter, Persephone, by Hades, and her rescue from the Underworld, upon condition that Hades would have her each autumn and winter. It is doubtful whether, to what extent, and since when such rites may already have promised the cultists immortality, for they seem to have been chiefly concerned with fertility, both of fields and humans. Later, the cult of Dionysus from the East spread into Greece, promising immortality through identification with the god of wine and frenzy in rituals involving intoxication and orgies. Dionysus himself was believed to have been killed and dismembered by the Titans as a child, to be brought back to life by Zeus (Harrison 491). However such myth may recall the similar dismemberment of Osiris to be resurrected by Isis in Egyptian mythology, what is most relevant is that Orpheus made Dionysus's promise of immortality his own, probably for the first time included the return from the dead of a human, i.e. Eurydice,¹⁸ in his legend, but taught restraint and asceticism as ways to achieve immortality instead of bacchanalia: "Consecration (ὁσιότης), perfect purity issuing in divinity, is, it will be seen, the keynote of Orphic faith, the goal of Orphic ritual" (Harrison 477).

It is crucial to underline that the passage above cited attests the existence in Paganism of a tradition contemplating the possibility for a man to achieve immortality, a possibility Tolkien on one hand saw as offered to all men by Christ through his sacrifice, on the other hand was reversed by him in Lúthien's renunciation of Elven immortality for love of one man, Beren. What is even more striking is that Tolkien's treatment of the subject of death and immortality grants to Men immortality in the afterlife through Christ and to Elves the gift of Christlike immortality on Earth, while still allowing that, in the marriage uniting the two races, Men are reminded that immortality exists and is promised to them, and Elves sacrifice everlasting life in the world to join the fate of Men in true eternity.

Besides, we have demonstrated the existence of a tradition, probably the original, seeing Orpheus's descent to save Eurydice as triumphal. Furthermore, as Dorena Allen wrote, "there are indications that this account may have survived into the Middle Ages, alongside the better-loved and more pathetic Vergilian version" (Allen 109). It is then noteworthy also to consider the sequence *Morte Christi celebrata*, a twelfth/thirteenth-century hymn: "8b. Sponsam suam ab inferno / Regno locans et superno / Noster traxit Orpheus" [*His spouse from Hell / Our Orpheus [Christ] stole / For her to dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven*] (Dreves 33, my translation).

¹⁸ Although "the name of Eurydice herself (probably 'the wide-ruling one') is that of the queen of the underworld. Thus she is truly a Korê: not only the victim of the underworld but she who is redeemed from it" (Dronke 204).

What may be seen as a problem is how to connect the dots linking the original Orpheus legend to the 10th–11th century when it was reprised by Christian scholars in Germany and France. This may be done on one hand by examining early Christian art, and on the other hand through literature. Indeed, as Peter Collier observed, in Rome one may find that:

A [4th century AD] fresco from the Cemetery of Callistus [Figure 5] advances the comparison with Christ [exemplified in other representations conflating Orpheus taming wild beasts through music with Christ as the Good Shepherd] by retaining the sheep and adding doves, peacocks and sea monsters. [...] [T]he peacock was a symbol of immortality in Graeco-Roman and Christian funerary art, which points to the divinity of Orpheus/Christ; and the sea monsters remind one of Orpheus and the Sirens [...]. [T]his draws a comparison between Christ's Harrowing of Hell and Orpheus bringing Eurydice up from the underworld. (Collier 14-15)



(Figure 5: Fresco in the Cemetery of Callistus)

In literature, one finds one of Prudentius's hymns, from his *Cathemerinon* (5th century), wherein the original Latin betrays Virgilian influence (see Jimenez 310):

Thence it follows what we all believe:
that, at that time of rest
when the cock crows in exultance,
Christ came back from underworld.
Then the inflexibility of death was crushed,
then the law of Tartarus was subjugated,
then the strength of day, being greater,
forced the night to go away.

(*Cathemerinon* I, 66-73, my translation)

In other words, in writing his version of the Orpheus story, by Celticizing it after *Sir Orfeo* and Christianizing it after the Harrowing of Hell and several Medieval writers, Tolkien was at the same time restoring what may have been something very close to the original form of the legend, echoing through the centuries beside, and despite, the bitter, though better known, Virgilian tale.

From what we gathered from such a survey, it appears that the lists previously compiled should be updated, by also adding the traits Tolkien borrowed from the reconstructed original version:

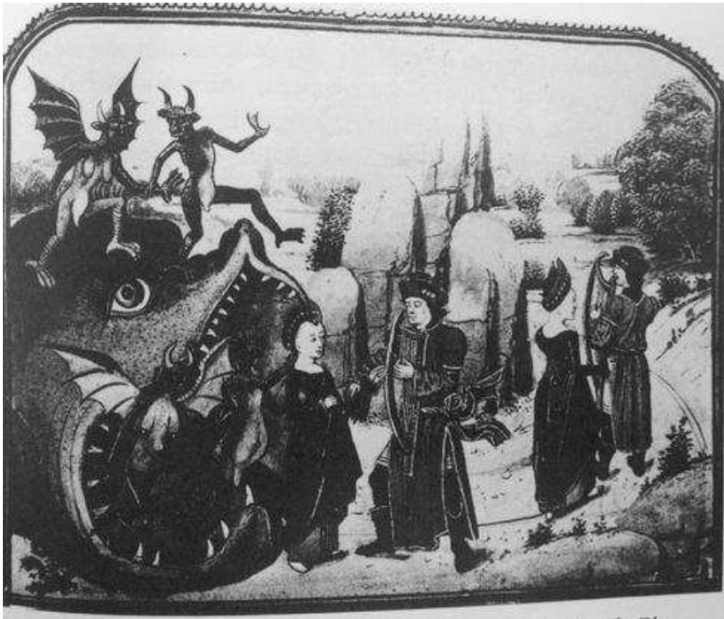
Original Orpheus legend

- I. the release of souls from the dead through singing a heartbreaking song instead of preaching to them or simply calling them;
- II. the releaser is partly divine;
- III. the release of the dead is meant as a return to Earth, not Heaven;
- IV. the happy ending;
- V. the suggestion of an afterlife of bliss for both releaser and released;
- VI. the releaser's enterprise is connected to a mysterious divine plan.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the evidence gathered suggests Tolkien's familiarity not only with the classical legend of Orpheus and *Sir Orfeo*, but also with the Christian tradition of the Harrowing of Hell in its connection with the Orphic Christ, as well as with the original Orpheus story as it may be reconstructed from ancient Greek authors. This finding entails that Tolkien had a wealth of antecedents in giving the story a happy ending, this being the outcome in both the Christian version of the tale and the original Greek legend. What one may further gather from such a survey is that Tolkien here came the closest he could

to portray the Resurrection of Christ in Middle-earth, but at the same time his story is entirely pagan in its essential similarity with the original Orpheus story. *Table 1* may be useful for a complete comparison. This way, I hope to have shown how Tolkien, like Lúthien, wove together the two themes of Christianity and Paganism in “the song most fair that ever in words was woven,” and we can picture him, as in a manuscript illumination (*Figure 6*), like the Orpheus-Christ leading hand in hand his restored Eurydice, the original, now baptized pagan myth, away from Hell and into green, pleasant fields.



(*Figure 6: Manuscript illumination from Christine de Pizan's 'Epistle of Othea to Hector'*)

Table 1.

Motif	Classical Orpheus	Christian Orpheus	Original Orpheus
desperate appeal	√		
heartbreaking song	√		√
spouse	√		
return to Earth	√		√
exception	√		
strict conditions	√		
two Lords		√	
divine plan			√
always meant to succeed		√	
suggestion of an afterlife			√
dead person		√	
died voluntarily		√	
immortal		√	
partly divine	√	√	√
relative			
happy ending		√	√

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