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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Note On
Symbolic Identification in Henryson’s
“Orpheus and Eurydice.”

Modern critics of Henryson’s work have often failed to deal with
his “Orpheus and Eurydice,” and the attempts that have been made
largely misrepresent the poem. Two recent critical studies have done
much to correct this situation. The first of these is John Hollander’s
book The Untuning of the Sky, in which he discusses ideas concerning
music in English poetry. Looking at Henryson’s poem in this regard
he finds that:

... the music of the spheres is seen as educating the questing
Orpheus more completely, and imparting more precious arcana
than he had received so literally at his mother’s breast. Here
again are overtones of Scipio’s dream-journey and the celestial
music which is heard upon it ...

Mr. Hollander seems to be moving in the right direction for under-
standing the poem, but he does not investigate fully the possibilities
he has touched upon—for example, what this “more precious arcana”
might be. His reference to Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis is significant,
but he does not examine this connection in detail. Further, I think he
misunderstands the place of the moralitas in the poem: it is for him
merely “traditional,” which seems to suggest that it is separate from
the main concerns of the poem.

John MacQueen in his study of Henryson sees the cooperation
between the narrative and the moralitas:

... even in his narrative there is evidence to show that (Henry-
son) intended Orpheus to represent intellectual, and Eurydice
appetitive power.

However, he nowhere mentions precisely what this evidence is, nor
does he discuss his implication of the cooperation of moralitas and
fable. I wish to point out how these two elements of the poem are

2. John MacQueen, Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative
cooperating, and to show that it is essential to understand this cooperation if we are to understand the poem.

The basic form of Henryson's poem may be compared to the emblem, in which the picture is also followed by a moralitas in verse. If we associate the fable with the emblematic picture the problem arises as to whether the figures in the fable are asked to represent, to "stand for" more than is overtly expressed. We must agree that they do, if we do not regard the moralitas as "super-imposing" allegorical ideas onto the narrative, and as wrenching the form of the fable so that it will bear a meaning completely alien to that which is apparent in the story. That we are to some extent prepared for the meanings made overt in the moralitas, or, at least, that we might find a basis in the story for the allegorical interpretation offered later, is why we find some interesting departures from the classical sources and from Boethius. These departures are the genealogy of Orpheus (II. 1-65) and the section of the poem that deals with Orpheus's search for Eurydice amongst the seven planets, and his learning of the music of the spheres (II. 184-239). It would seem, then, that these changes were felt to be important by Henryson, and somehow relevant to his moralitas. They are non-pictorial or non-visual details, but seem to possess in their relationship to the moralitas some kind of emblematic or "iconographic" significance.

Before investigating this more fully, I must discuss the tradition of the allegorical interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Henryson names two sources for the moralitas: Boethius in his De Consolatione Philosophiae (Book III Metrum 12) and the commentary on Boethius by Dr. Nicholas Trivet ("Orpheus and Eurydice" II. 413 and 421). Henryson accepts Trivet's widely held allegorical interpretation of the myth, and a reader familiar with the story would be familiar with the interpretation. Any departure from this interpretation would have been considered strange, unusual, or even to force the sense of the fable.

The Ovide Moralise (Book X, II. 196-577) provides evidence of the currency of Henryson's interpretation. In this work Orpheus represents the "regnable entendement" (I. 221) and Eurydice "la sensualité de l'âme" (I. 223).

That Henryson's moralitas is not new or different, but accepted with the fable as it was known, serves to direct our attention away from the moralitas as the "end" or purpose of the work, to the fable.

3. Ovid, Metamorphoses X; Virgil, Georgics IV. 315-338.
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

itself, which Henryson is handling slightly differently from his predecessors. With this viewpoint, we realize that the striking thing about the work is the cooperation between the fable and the moralitas.

In the moralitas we are told that Orpheus is "the paitre intellec't"/Off manis saule" (ll. 428-29) or, as Trivet has it, the "pars intellec'tiva." At the beginning of the fable we have the presentation of Orpheus's genealogy, and as Henryson points out in stanzas 1 and 2 it is important that no "gentil man" should decline from the "vertew" and "worthiness" of his "progenitour." The presentation of the Muses at the beginning of the poem is thus a prelectic presentation of the virtues and qualities of Orpheus himself. He finally attains to this perfection when he has learnt the music of the spheres after searching through the seven planets for his lost Eurydice (stanzas 30-33). Here Orpheus attains the power of his father Apollo, the leader of the Muses, through his mastery of the heavenly harmony.

Through this knowledge Orpheus is linked both with the Muses at the beginning of the poem and with his identification as the "pars intellec'tiva" in the moralitas. The knowledge of the significance of the musical ratios which Orpheus gains in stanzas 30-33 is highly significant to the meaning of the whole. In these stanzas Hollander notes the overtones of Scipio's dream journey. It is essential to realize, however, that Cicero's Dream of Scipio was, for the Middle Ages, inseparable from Macrobius's Commentary on that work. For Macrobius, the dream journey had a special significance in connection with the formation of the soul, a significance, I would suggest, that was also felt by Henryson.

Before looking at this possible larger significance, we must look at the meaning of the individual terms.

The "diatesseron" (l. 233) is defined by Macrobius as:

The sesquitertian is the combination formed by an integer and a number one third greater than it, as four is to three. This numerical relation produced the numerical interval known as the fourth, or dia tesseractum.

The "dyaspon" (l. 234) is defined as:

The double proportion is formed by an integer and a number twice as great, as four is to two, resulting in the interval known as the octave, or diapason.

5. Hollander, p. 87.
7. Macrobius, II, i, 17.
The "dyapency" as:

The sesquialter is the combination formed by an integer and a number one half greater than it, as three is to two, a numerical relation resulting in the interval known as the fifth, or dia peny.8

The "diapenty, componyt with the dysa" (l. 235) as:

The triple proportion is formed by an integer and a number thrice as great, as three is to one, and produces the interval known as the octave and the fifth, or dia pason kai dia pente.9

The "dyapason . . . dowlait" (l. 235) as:

The quadruple proportion is formed by an integer and a number four times as great as four is to one, and produces the interval known as the double octave, or dis dia pason.10

These glosses from Macrobius also explain the "duplare, triplare . . . / . and eik the quadruplait" (ll. 227-28). There is some textual difficulty over the terms "emetricus" and "enolius" (ll. 227 and 228). On "emetricus" the editor conjectures that "the original form was epitirius or sesquitertius"11 which would then be glossed above under the term "diatesseron." "Enolius" is the "hemiolus = Numerus sesquialter" according to the editor's notes12 and is glossed under "diapency" above. The "Epodeus" (l. 229) is the only term I have not yet glossed, and it is, according to the editor, "a whole and an eighth—the proportion of nine to eight (or sesquioctavus)."13

This, of course, provides no more than a bare gloss on the terms mentioned, but it is an important step in finding out the significance of these terms. When we realize that the numbers and ratios that Orpheus learns are those which Plato defines as the World Soul, we see that Orpheus imitates and acquires the divine perfection of this World Soul. The World Soul and the musical harmonies are made up of the same numbers and the same ratios. As Macrobius explains:

. . . the Soul had to be a combination of those numbers that alone possess mutual attraction since the Soul itself was to instill harmonious agreement in the whole world. Now two is double one and as we have already explained the octave rises from the

8. Macrobius, II, i, 16.
10. Macrobius, II, i, 19.
double; three is one and one half times greater than two, and
this combination produces the fifth; four is one and one-third
times greater than three, and this combination produces the
fourth; four is also four times as great as one, and from this
quadruple ratio the double octave arises.\textsuperscript{14}

The harmony which is inherent in the World Soul produces harmony
in the music of the spheres. In learning to imitate the celestial harmony
Orpheus is identified with the World Soul, which in Aristotelian terms,
is the rational soul or "pars intellectiva." This identification is ex-
pounded and made overt in the \textit{moralitas}.

Within the body of the fable Henryson is directing us to such an
interpretation in the line "a heavenly melody and sound . . . / Quilk
of \textit{this word} pluto \textit{the saule} can call" (ll. 220-225), and also in the
lines:

This mirry musick and mellefluat,
Compleit and full of numeris od and evin (11. 237-38).

Henryson is pointing to the composition of the World Soul, but this is
also the type of heavenly love that he refers to in the \textit{moralitas}:

The perfyte wit, and eik the fervent luve
We sild half alway to the hevyn above (11. 449-50).

As Macrobius says:

Since the uneven numbers are considered masculine and the
even feminine, God willed that the Soul which was to give birth
to the universe should be born of the even and the uneven, that
is from the male and the female; . . . \textsuperscript{14}

This, however, is not appetitive love, belonging to the animal or vege-
table soul, but heavenly (i.e., of the heavens) and rational love.

Once we have made ourselves familiar with the terms and the ideas
they necessarily connote, or, even to some extent, denote, then Henry-
son's identification of Orpheus with the rational soul by means of this
musical "iconography" becomes evident before it is made overt in the
\textit{moralitas}. It also serves to define the nature and quality of Orpheus
as the "paitre intellleyte"—his creative power is akin to that of the
creation of the world, and the kind of love that he has is shown as
being above the merely sensual and appetitive.

In Orpheus’s ascent to the heavens he is in some respects renewing
his contact with his ancestors: with "Jupiter his grand schir" (l. 192)
and with "his fadir phebus" (l. 198). But in another sense he is re-
enacting the descent of the soul from the heavens into its material

\textsuperscript{14} Macrobius, II, i, 18.

\textsuperscript{15} Macrobius.
body. The soul, according to Macrobius, descends "from the place where the Zodiac and the Milky Way (i.e., Henryson's "wedlingis streit" (l. 188)) intersect," and thence down through the planetary spheres, acquiring certain attributes which it will exercise later:

In the sphere of Saturn it obtains reason and understanding, called logistikon and theoretikon; in Jupiter's sphere, the power to act, called praktikon; in Mars' sphere, a bold spirit or Thymikon; in the Sun's sphere, sense perception and imagination, aesthetikon and phantastikon; in Venus' sphere the impulse of passion, epiphymetikon; in Mercury's sphere, the ability to speak and interpret, hermeneutikon; and in the lunar sphere, the function of molding and increasing bodies, phytiko. 16

In especially emphasizing the visits to Jupiter (four lines), to "Phebus" (six lines), Venus (eight lines), and to Mercury (four lines), Henryson is perhaps pointing to the receipt of certain qualities, predominantly those which have to do with the making of music and poetry. Perhaps more significant is the place where he does not stop and where he does not search:

On to the mone he maid no resides (l. 216).

Macrobius' quotation shows that the qualities imparted by the moon would come under the category of the functions of the vegetative soul, whose qualities, according to Aristotle, were concerned with growth and the power of reproduction. This would hardly suit with Orpheus's later being identified with "the paire intellelyfe."

In this episode Henryson again identifies Orpheus with the soul by making him take an emblematic journey, a journey which serves to identify the character without overtly "naming" him.

The genealogy of Orpheus presented in stanzas 1-10 of the poem presents proleptically the kind of knowledge which Orpheus attains in his knowledge of the music of the spheres, which I discussed earlier. In his infancy Orpheus sucked

The suet lecour of all musik petfye (l. 70).

Later he is to imitate it.

The marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice is presented as a marriage between the rational and the sensual souls, with the rational soul as ruling, as "king" over the sensual soul (l. 77). As Eurydice sends for him and makes him king of "this province" we can see the soul as taking a body, a province, as well as earthly, or "worldly" dominion.

17. Macrobius, I, xii, 14.
The kiss and the "accord" of the two lovers represents the "accord" of the two parts of the soul.

When Eurydice wanders alone, "solitar" (l. 99), without Orpheus, the sensual soul is set free without its rational parts overruling and guiding her. She is "priket with lus," a phrase which is placed in such a way in the stanza that it can refer either to Areteuss or to Eurydice, or to both. She is prey to both mortal sin and to mortality. It is significant that Eurydice is taken by the "goddes infernall" while Orpheus, deprived of his sensual half, ascends to the heavenly spheres from whence he came, as does the soul on death. From there he re-descends, this time as the untainted, purified rational soul, an embodiment of divine harmony, to woo Eurydice. Eurydice first wooed Orpheus, now Orpheus seeks to woo Eurydice. As Henryson says in the *moralitas*, Orpheus:

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... twiches on his harp and biddis bo,
    Till our desye and ful ich appetye
Bidis leff this warldis full delyte. (11. 611-13).
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That is, he seeks to unite the rational and the sensual in the heavenly sphere. His inability to do this shows the limitations of the sensual. It is attracted only to "this warldis full delyte." It also shows the compromise of the rational—it is a failure in Orpheus that leads to the failure of their reunion. The rational must lead, must rule the sensual; to give in to it, to look back is to destroy the right union of the rational and the sensual, the "perfyr luve" that Henryson speaks of at the end of the poem (11. 449-50).

Henryson's use of iconography within the narrative points directly to certain subleties and ambiguities within the fable which would probably be otherwise lost. This cooperation between fable and *moralitas* makes an unusual and interesting poem.

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