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## Allegory and Robert Henryson's "Orpheus and Eurydice"

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ALLEGORY AND ROBERT HENRYSON'S  
"ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE"

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Laury Temple Lof

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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## ABSTRACT

Robert Henryson's poem "Orpheus and Eurydice" is a fifteenth-century retelling of the Orpheus myth. The major critical problem in its interpretation involves the degree to which the allegorical portrait, one of four portraits of Orpheus that emerged from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, should be applied. Kurt Wittig claims that allegory does not apply at all. A. M. Kinghorn and John MacQueen interpret the poem completely allegorically. Allegorical interpretation is substantiated first in that Henryson wrote the poem in two parts, narrative and moralitas, an allegorical gloss of the narrative, second by the allegorical nature of Henryson's sources, Trivet, Boethius, and Boccaccio, third because the narrative makes implicit references to the moralitas, and fourth because of the pervasiveness of the medieval allegorical tradition generally and in reference to the Orpheus myth in particular.

John Block Friedman, Kenneth Gros Louis, and Harold E. Toliver stand between the two extreme positions. Friedman and Gros Louis see the poem as the culmination of the romance and allegorical traditions that lay behind the myth in the Middle Ages. Toliver de-emphasizes Henryson's moral intent by claiming that the two parts stand in ironic relation to each other, the moralitas adding a new dimension to rather than defining the meaning of the narrative.

The issues dividing Henryson's critics involve two objective questions and one subjective issue. First, how strong was the allegorical tradition both in terms of Henryson's fifteenth-century culture and to Henryson personally? And second, what was the meaning of the romance tradition in the Middle Ages? If the allegorical tradition can be shown to have persisted into the fifteenth century and if the romance tradition can be shown to have been an allegorical representation of cupidity as D. W. Robertson contends, then MacQueen's completely allegorical approach is the most convincing interpretation of what Henryson intended and how his fifteenth-century audience read the poem.

But the subjective issue of the appropriate time-perspective from which to interpret medieval literature suggests that Toliver's position that the narrative and moralitas stand in ironic relation to each other is a valid analysis of why the poem appeals to readers today.

ALLEGORY AND ROBERT HENRYSON'S  
"ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE"

Each age has reshaped the ancient Greek tale of Orpheus and Eurydice to reflect its own values and to serve its own purposes. In surveying references to the story in poetry, theological writings, paintings, mosaics, amulets, and sculpture, John Block Friedman establishes four relatively distinct phases in its evolution from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries: Orpheus the monotheist, the psychopomp, the allegorical figure, and the romance hero.<sup>1</sup> The earliest portrait, Orpheus the monotheist, emerges as Jewish and Christian apologists strive to establish the antiquity and so respectability of the Judeo-Christian tradition. After the Church gains prestige, such authority becomes unnecessary, and the emphasis moves away from Orpheus the monotheist to the second of these four phases, to Orpheus the psychopomp, "a leader of souls to an immortal home."<sup>2</sup> Early Christians draw on the iconography of Orpheus in order to portray Christ the psychopomp since Orpheus has already been associated with monotheism and since obvious parallels draw the two figures together: both have peaceful natures, are associated with harmony, are killed by their followers, and are seen as good shepherds.

But it is the third and fourth of these phases, the development of Orpheus the allegorical figure and Orpheus the

romance hero, that establish the two main lines of Orpheus interpretation in the Middle Ages proper. The ethical allegories emanating from Boethius tend to identify Orpheus with reason or man's spiritual, divine nature and Eurydice with passion or man's physical, human nature. Orpheus' ascent from the underworld symbolizes his spiritual education, but he fails to attain the proper relationship between passion and reason in his soul, between earthly and spiritual qualities in his being. The aesthetic allegories derive from Fulgentius. Orpheus' association with eloquence, harmony, and music and Eurydice's association with the secrets of harmony transform Orpheus' search into his attempt to create beauty.

Orpheus as romance hero derives from allegorical commentaries, rhetorical exercises practiced in medieval schools, from the conflation of Orpheus and David in Byzantine psalters, and from medieval romance convention. The Byzantine psalters recall the classical associations of Orpheus with music and the supernatural. The romance convention heightens them as Orpheus becomes a minstrel and as supernatural elements become increasingly important to the story. The romantic treatment of the tale culminates in a thirteenth-century Breton Lai, Sir Orfeo. Its interweaving of Celtic and classical motifs results in a unique, intriguing, and unsurpassed telling of the myth.

Robert Henryson's "Orpheus and Eurydice"<sup>3</sup> is a fifteenth-century retelling of the Orpheus myth. The major

critical problem in its interpretation involves the degree to which the allegorical portrait of Orpheus should be applied. How much of the poem's meaning can be expressed through an allegorical reading? If there are elements for which allegory cannot account, what relationship exists between the allegorical and non-allegorical aspects of the poem? Kurt Wittig lies at one extreme of the critical range: "Orpheus and Eurydice is one of the very few poems of the Middle Ages that tells a classical tale for its own sake, with no allegorical trappings."<sup>4</sup> John MacQueen, at the other extreme, renders a completely allegorical reading of it.<sup>5</sup> Other critics, such as Friedman,<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Gros Louis,<sup>7</sup> and Harold Toliver<sup>8</sup> see a more complex relationship between the two sections of the poem, the narrative and the moralitas.

The narrative begins with a discussion of Orpheus' genealogy and birth (ll. 29-70). As he grows and as his fame spreads, the queen of Thrace, Eurydice, sends for him to be her husband (ll. 71-84). They have been together for a short but joyful time when she, fleeing the amorous embraces of a "hird" (l. 97), is bitten by a snake and taken to hell by Proserpine, the queen of the fairies (ll. 85-112). Orpheus mourns, prays to his forefathers, and searches for her through the spheres, learning the secrets of celestial music and paying homage to Venus as he travels (ll. 120-199). He goes to hell where, pitying Ixion, Tantalus, and Tityus, he plays music to free them



from their suffering (ll. 200-303). When he plays for Pluto and Proserpine, they offer him a reward. He asks for Eurydice (ll. 366-379). With the condition that he may not look at her until they are out of hell, they ascend. Just at the gate he looks back; she returns to hell; and he is left to sing an apostrophe to love (ll. 380-414).

Most of the incidents of the story derive from Ovid and Virgil. Ovid's account in Book Ten of the *Metamorphoses* includes the snake bite, a statement that Orpheus mourned Eurydice's loss, his journey to Hades, the freeing of Ixion and Tantalus, the condition on which Orpheus could have Eurydice, and his losing her.<sup>9</sup> Virgil's retelling of the myth in the *Georgics* contributes the "hird," Aristeus, who pursues Eurydice and an elaboration on Orpheus' mourning.<sup>10</sup> Boethius in Book Three of *The Consolation of Philosophy* adds the freeing of Tityus.<sup>11</sup> Friedman cites the elaborate complaint and final apostrophe to love as romance conventions and suggests that the journey through the spheres may derive from Macrobius' *Somnium Scipionis*, Chaucer's *House of Fame*, or James I's *The Kingis Quair*.<sup>12</sup> What is unique then in Henryson's narrative is not the plot incidents themselves, but the blend of details from Ovid, Virgil, and Boethius, the association of the conventional complaint, apostrophe, and celestial journey with the Orpheus myth, and, as John Speirs points out, the description of hell in terms of Scotland.<sup>13</sup>

The moralitas restates Nicholas Trivet's thirteenth-century allegorization of the tale.<sup>14</sup> All of the characters of the legend symbolize abstract qualities. Phoebus and Calliope, Orpheus' parents, represent wisdom and eloquence (ll. 425-26), while Orpheus represents the intellectual aspect of Man's soul (ll. 27-28), Eurydice the appetitive (l. 431), the "hird" virtue (ll. 35-36), and the serpent's sting sin (l. 441). Orpheus' looking heavenward signifies his seeking the contemplative life (ll. 47-48), and Cerebus' heads represent childhood, middle, and old age (ll. 462-67). The furies stand for evil thought, word, and deed (ll. 475-478). Ixion's wheel symbolizes the wheel of fortune (ll. 483-9); Tantalus, the greedy man (ll. 531-2); and Tityus, the man who wants knowledge of the future (ll. 559-566). Orpheus' music bids the appetite to leave worldly desire, but when the intellect looks back to temporal things, the appetite is again lost to temporal delights (ll. 610-27).

#### The Poem as Allegory

The very presence of the moralitas in all manuscripts of the poem<sup>15</sup> and the lack of evidence that Henryson did not write it<sup>16</sup> seem to require, for the poem as a whole, some degree of allegorical interpretation. MacQueen points out that the two sources that Henryson names, Boethius and Trivet, both allegorize the tale, and Henryson's source for his description of the muses, Boccaccio's De Genealogia Deorum, defends poetry on the basis of its

allegorical meaning. Furthermore, parts of the narrative itself suggest an allegorical reading. That Eurydice takes all initiative in the courtship between the couple suggests that she is Appetite since Appetite must invite Intellect to rule it.<sup>17</sup> The use of courtly love traditions in the poem "indicates a failure, a worldliness, of moral judgement on the part of the persons described."<sup>18</sup> The fire imagery associates the couple's love ("the low of lufe cowth kyndill and incress" l. 87) and Orpheus' anger at losing Eurydice ("This noble king inflammit all in yre,/ . . . With awfull Luke, and Ene glowand as fyre" ll. 120 and 122) with hell ("O dully place [and] grundles deip dungeoun,/ furness of fyre" ll. 310-311).

Even discounting the presence of the moralitas, the inclusion of implicit references in the narrative to it, and the use of allegorical sources, an allegorical interpretation is likely. The most convincing argument for an allegorical interpretation of the poem is the pervasiveness of the allegorical tradition generally and in reference to the Orpheus myth in particular in the Middle Ages. Richard Hamilton Green speaks of "the medieval view of physical phenomena and historical events as the manifestation of invisible truth. . . ." <sup>19</sup> James Wimsatt<sup>20</sup> and Robert Ackerman<sup>21</sup> point out that all of creation was seen as one of God's books, The Book of Nature (the other is the Bible) from which the discerning eye could read truth. That the book of creation was a common metaphor is

demonstrated by Ernst Curtius as he cites uses of it by Alan de Lille, Hugh of St. Victor, and Saint Bonaventura.<sup>22</sup> Charles Baldwin goes so far as to call the allegorical approach "a habit of conception."<sup>23</sup> The degree to which allegory pervaded the medieval mind cannot be appreciated without understanding its ancient roots and its two lines of medieval development, Scriptural exegesis and interpretation of poetry and philosophy.

Jean Seznec cites allegorical interpretation as one of three means by which the ancients themselves reconciled the gods and culture of their past with current philosophy and conscience.<sup>24</sup> At least as early as the Stoics, philosophers sought the "truth" of Homer by stripping away the surface fable.<sup>25</sup> Neoplatonists saw the whole universe as an allegory.<sup>26</sup> As allegorical interpretation developed among the Greeks, the Hebrews formulated the concept of typology. Charles Donahue explains it: a parallel is seen between two concrete, actual things or events. From this parallel an insight springs. The major contrast between the two approaches is that the Greek allegory finds only the inner meaning significant or real whereas the Hebraic typology retains the intrinsic value of the originals as well as pointing to the worth of the insight that springs from their comparison.<sup>27</sup> The distinction gains significance as tradition develops: when allegorical interpretation confronted Christianity, it divided along these very lines. The Greek allegorical method was used

to explicate poetry and philosophy while the Hebraic, typological method was used regarding Scripture.<sup>28</sup>

The tradition of Scriptural exegesis began with Origen in Alexandria and was extended by Ambrose and Jerome.<sup>29</sup> It allowed these Church Fathers to draw moral lessons from unlikely Biblical passages and provided a means of reconciling seemingly contradictory or immoral passages with Christian and New Testament thought.<sup>30</sup> But the most influential formulation of the theory of Scriptural exegesis was Augustine's Of Christian Doctrine.<sup>31</sup> D. W. Robertson maintains that Augustine used allegory as Paul did, to reveal the implication of charity behind every Scriptural passage.<sup>32</sup> The obscurity was pleasing in that it challenged the mind and useful in that it hid the Christian mysteries from those who were unworthy to receive them.<sup>33</sup> The Augustinian approach is repeated and carried on by Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Hugh of St. Cher, St. Bonaventura, Robert Holcot, and, in the Renaissance, by Erasmus. There is no evidence that it died out or lost respectability.<sup>34</sup> Although Augustine did not use these terms, his work led to the interpretation of Scripture on four levels: the literal or historical, the tropological or moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical. The tropological level involves the implications of a passage for the individual Christian; the allegorical level, the implications for the Church; and the anagogical level, the implications in the afterlife.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes the terms

"letter" and sententia designated the literal and allegorical levels,<sup>36</sup> or figures of speech such as fruit and chaff, nucleus, farina, cortex, and candor appeared.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside the tradition of Scriptural exegesis grew that of allegorical interpretation of poetry and philosophy. Since it developed from Greek allegory, the fable or literal level had no significance. The inner meaning, integumentum or involucrum<sup>38</sup> for example, embodied the valuable aspect of the work. Augustine said that a work of art was true only insofar as it was false.<sup>39</sup> Pagan poetry had an "ethical function, but it was not in itself divine philosophy."<sup>40</sup> Servius and Lactantius wrote commentaries on classical works that made them comprehensible to Christian students.<sup>41</sup>

The Mythologiae of Fulgentius brought together and explicated numerous classical myths.<sup>42</sup> And by the beginning of the twelfth century such explication proliferated: Alexander Neckam, William of Conches, Bernard of Chartres, and John of Salisbury participated. Ovid was discovered. Theodulph of Orléans, John of Garland, Giovanni del Virgilio, Robert Holkot, Pierre Bersuire, Thomas Waleys and Giovanni Bonsogni wrote commentaries on his work. But the most important commentary of Ovid remains anonymous: Ovide Moralisé.<sup>43</sup>

As time went on, the two approaches, Greek allegory and Hebraic typology, merged. The four-fold method of Scriptural exegesis "became a habit of mind" and was

applied to all literature.<sup>44</sup> Men challenged the value of the literal level. Dante emphasized the literal as the basis of the allegorical in his discussion of poetry. Further, he insisted that his poetry be subjected to the four-fold method.<sup>45</sup> Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati defended the value of poetry by virtue of its allegorical meaning.<sup>46</sup> They, however, found mythology (synonymous, for them, with poetry) valuable in itself as a "marvelous, mysterious art."<sup>47</sup> Boccaccio also applied the four-fold method to it as well as several other schemes of interpretation.<sup>48</sup>

As Robertson points out, "In the Middle Ages . . . poetry [mythology] was thought of as being by nature allegorical."<sup>49</sup> And so it is not surprising to find a strong allegorical tradition behind the Orpheus myth itself.<sup>50</sup> Boethius and Fulgentius demonstrate the two approaches within this perspective: the ethical and the aesthetic. Boethius' influence emanates from his retelling of the story from Ovid and Virgil in his Consolation of Philosophy. He portrays a man who almost attains spiritual enlightenment, but looks back to material concerns. Eurydice is associated with spiritual darkness. The commentaries on The Consolation develop this approach. Notker Labeo's commentary stresses the seriousness of Orpheus' fall and his error in trying to retrieve Eurydice. William of Conches identifies Eurydice with natural concupiscence, Aristeus with virtue, and Orpheus'

descent with the experience of earthly things. Nicholas Trivet, the major source of Henryson's moralitas, also lies in this tradition. The Ovidian commentaries continue in the same vein. Arnulf of Orléans interprets Orpheus' glance backward as Reason's looking back to Vice and so losing its judgment. John of Garland identifies Eurydice with sensuality, the field through which she runs with the world, and the serpent with the fragility of femininity. Orpheus voluntarily gives her up. Giovanni del Virgilio calls Aristeus the divine mind and the serpent the devil. Looking back is succumbing to temptation. His Orpheus reconciles himself to God and spurns women by becoming a monk. The Ovide Moralisé interprets Orpheus as ruling reason and Eurydice as sensuality. These qualities are married in human beings. The shepherd represents the virtue of right living; the grass symbolizes the delights of the world; and the serpent recalls vice. The strings of Orpheus' harp symbolize virtues. His ascent from the underworld demonstrates the spiritual progress of his soul.

The Fulgentian, aesthetic approach analyzes the etymologies of the names Orpheus and Eurydice to substantiate the interpretation that they stand for best voice (oraia phone) and profound judgment (eur dike) respectively. They represent two aspects of music, and Aristeus symbolizes the man who seeks the secrets of harmony. Remigius of Auxerre gives a Fulgentian interpreta-



tion in his commentary on Boethius: Orpheus loses his ability to sing through neglect of his art, goes into the lower world of study, and is rejected by Eurydice because of his corporeal nature. Boccaccio identifies Eurydice with concupiscence and Orpheus with oratory. Oratory tries to bring Concupiscence back to Virtue, an interpretation that bridges the gap between the Boethian and Fulgentian approaches, uniting ethics with aesthetics.

This tradition of the allegorical interpretation of creation, of literature, and of the Orpheus myth in particular, then, was a pervasive aspect of the medieval world view. Henryson acknowledges the tradition in attaching a moralitas to his poem, in implicitly referring to it in his narrative, and in citing allegorical sources. Therefore Wittig's position that Henryson has retold a classical tale with no allegorical trappings seems highly unlikely.

A. M. Kinghorn<sup>51</sup> and John MacQueen take a far more tenable position: they hold that Henryson's poem is only allegory, that its meaning is wholly contained in the moralitas. Although Kinghorn's analysis is brief and overly simplistic, he states that Orpheus embodies no more than a symbol and that the narrative tells an uninteresting psychomachia, a battle within the soul between man's intellectual and sensual natures. He sees the look backward as merely the triumph of worldly lust over reason. And he calls Orpheus' genealogy, the discussions of music,

and the classical allusions added weight. Fortunately the strictly allegorical interpretation of the poem does not rest with this single, insensitive reading. If its meaning can be encompassed by allegory alone it is an allegory far richer, far more complex than Kinghorn imagines. The "ballast" is an integral part of the narrative and allegorical levels, and the drama enacted is alive and poignant.

After reviewing the equations between the characters and abstractions that the moralitas draws, MacQueen goes on to develop their implications and so to appreciate the poem in more complexity than Kinghorn. He points out that the marriage between Orpheus and Eurydice, between Intellect and Appetite, is morally neutral but precarious without Appetite's acceptance of Virtue. The beasts that the "hird" keeps are carnal passions. Since Eurydice rejects Aristeus, she comes under the power of hell, uncontrolled appetite, rather than Orpheus or Intellect. Without Virtue she cannot be rescued, and he disappears when she flees from him. MacQueen interprets the figures that Orpheus sees in hell as two aspects of uncontrolled appetite. The first group cannot satisfy their appetites, and the second group did not rule as they should have, with Reason in command of Appetite allied with Virtue. He sees Ixion, Tantalus, and Tityus as "aspects of the fallen Eurydice."<sup>52</sup> At this point he demonstrates how genealogy and music, Kinghorn's "weight," play an integral part

in the narrative and allegory. Heretofore, the poem has been the interior psychomachia that Kinghorn mentions. "Two links, genealogy and music . . . connect interior drama with exterior universe."<sup>53</sup> Orpheus' genealogy demonstrates the human intellect's connection with God. Elaborate description of each of the nine muses prepares for the idea that "Orpheus is man, musician, and intellectual power, whose function in the microcosm corresponds to that of the muses in the macrocosm."<sup>54</sup> As Orpheus travels through the heavens, he learns celestial harmony, the soul of the macrocosm as he is soul of the microcosm. He must establish the same harmony among Eurydice, Aristeus, and himself that the spheres share in their realm. Regeneration lies in the music that he learns, and so the discussion of musical terms at once restates his divine descent and illustrates the intellectual discipline that he has lacked. This discipline, harmony, proportion, or intellectual love enables Orpheus to lead Eurydice to the gate of hell; but because he cannot distinguish love from appetite, he cannot finally rule Appetite.

#### The Poem as a Combination of Romance and Allegory

MacQueen has succeeded in unifying the narrative and moralitas and in integrating the seeming digressions into the meaning of the poem. He is able to see the poem as far more than a boring retelling of a traditional psychomachia. The very intricacy of the allegory he describes

engages the reader's interest; and the poignancy of the loss, whether it be Orpheus' loss of his wife or Intellect's inability to attain harmony with Appetite, endures. Kenneth Gros Louis and John Block Friedman maintain, however, that a strictly allegorical interpretation of the poem is not adequate since it fails to account for several of the details of the story and leaves unemphasized a second tradition from which it grows. Gros Louis and Friedman see Henryson's poem as the culmination of the allegorical and romance traditions behind the Orpheus myth. Friedman even calls it "the historical and logically inevitable outcome of the various reshapings of the Orpheus myth which we have observed in the eighteen centuries which lay between it and the Testament [of Orpheus]."55

In tracing the romance tradition, he recalls some of the allegorical interpretations which foreshadowed romantic development. The Fulgentian aspect in general helped to clear the way for the emergence of Orpheus the courtly lover since it upgraded the love relationship by giving Eurydice and the search positive connotations. Peter of Paris, a Boethian commentator, de-emphasized the classical elements in his version; and Giovanni del Virgilio elaborated on the story, suggesting more of an interest in it than in its moral. Thomas of Walsingham saw Orpheus as a Renaissance gentleman, as eloquence that tames savages and brings civilization in its wake. And so the seed of romance lay in the allegorical tradition itself.

The nature of the story also suited it to development in this fashion: classical heroes, extraordinary love between a man and a woman, and exotic circumstances are the elements of romance.<sup>56</sup>

Gros Louis traces the romance background in terms of oral tradition. He points out that the scop enjoyed high status in medieval society, even after the twelfth century. He represented one minstrel-figure while the Biblical David represented another. Orpheus had long been associated with David and Christ,<sup>57</sup> allowing him, as minstrel, to embody both the scop and David at the same time that his prestige was magnified through parallels with Christ. Both Friedman and Gros Louis cite Sir Orfeo as the culmination of the Orpheus myth in the romance tradition and then go on to mention the specifically romantic elements in Henryson's version. Friedman points out such details as Eurydice's love for Orpheus by reputation, the discussion of the growth of their love in courtly terms, the reference to Proserpine as the queen of the fairies, the complaint, and the quest motif. Gros Louis adds to the list the excessive joy and then grief of Orpheus, the May morning on which Eurydice is stung, that Orpheus is a king, and Orpheus' vow of service to Venus.<sup>58</sup>

A strictly allegorical interpretation, however, cannot appreciate Henryson's blending of the courtly and allegorical traditions. Nor can it account for the shift in emphasis from the moralitas, typical of the allegorical

tradition, to the narrative. Gros Louis suggests that Henryson tells such a vivid, engrossing tale that the moralitas pales in comparison. Its strength wanes by its complexity and by its separation from the tale. Henryson even seems to forget it as he attributes the most brutal lust to Aristeus or Virtue and sees Eurydice, Appetite, sympathetically and tenderly.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Henryson humanizes Orpheus and Eurydice to make them engaging characters instead of abstractions. For example, he emphasizes Orpheus' joy and grief. In hell Orpheus reacts with pity to Ixion, Tantalus, and Tityus; and he is afraid before the murky darkness. Henryson develops Eurydice far beyond her role in previous allegorical tellings: Orpheus describes her vividly and she expresses understanding of her fate. Henryson expresses his attitudes toward the myth, maintains Gros Louis, through the paradox of Orpheus' final statement on love: no one is at fault; man suffers because he is human. The moralitas, he says, becomes "the old allegory speaking more softly from a dying tradition."<sup>60</sup> Henryson's version comes at the end of the era during which the allegorical interpretation of the myth dominated men's thinking. He points toward the time when "moralization of mythology . . . becomes a kind of Renaissance parlor game."<sup>61</sup> While Friedman agrees that Henryson's narrative overshadows his moralitas, and even that Henryson lost sight of the moralitas in writing the story, he does not inter-

pret Henryson's intent as anything less than sternly moralistic. He suggests that it is only by accident that he managed to tell such an engaging tale:

From the form in which Henryson presents the story it is clear that he wished to use the romance Orpheus as a vehicle for moral lessons; it is to his credit that he did this so well as to produce one of the most charming and memorable portraits of Orpheus to come out of the romance tradition.<sup>62</sup>

#### The Poem as Narrative and Ironic Moralitas

The extreme positions of interpreting "Orpheus and Eurydice" as non-allegorical and as completely allegorical are not the only alternatives. Gros Louis and Friedman offer the possibility of the poem's being the blend of the allegorical and romance traditions of the Middle Ages. A fourth alternative is suggested by Harold E. Toliver. Although Toliver does not deal specifically with "Orpheus and Eurydice," his discussion of the relationship between Henryson's fables and their moralitates, and "Testament of Cresseid" and its moral, has implications for other of his poems. Toliver suggests that the morals of Henryson's stories do not calcify their meanings, but rather "reveal another dimension in the tale, a dimension which dissolves both sympathy and moral judgment in an ironic solution."<sup>63</sup> Henryson's humanity and morality merge, resulting in a complex, ironic attitude. The metaphors he uses in the fables to describe the connection between the narrative

and the moral--the shell and nut or the earth and flower-- suggest that they have an organic relationship. Neither extreme of human weakness nor strong morality alone suffices, but the ethical position of the moralitas grows out of and depends upon the narrative's humanity. Since the moralitas adds a new dimension to the narrative instead of giving an explanation of it, it is quite appropriate that it will not account for several of the narrative's details. The inconsistencies and omissions that Gros Louis and Friedman point up need not reduce the significance of the moralitas in any way. The psychological development of Orpheus and Eurydice does not detract attention from the moralitas. Rather, because it forces the reader to identify more closely and sympathize more deeply with them, it makes the ironic judgment of the moralitas stronger. The allegorical equations add complexity to the personalities and actions of the narrative by suggesting new meanings for them to carry. And a sophisticated reaction is required from the reader: that of both sympathy and judgment at once. The combination is more aesthetically successful than either one alone might be.

What divides the critics?

Recall the spectrum of how thoroughly an allegorical interpretation applies to Henryson's "Orpheus and Eurydice." Wittig, at one extreme, suggests that it does not apply at all. Toliver accepts the allegory as one aspect



of Henryson's poems, but meaningless without the humanity and sympathy of the narrative from which the morality grows and is nurtured. Gros Louis and Friedman impart more independence to the moralitas, believing that it is one of two equally important traditions behind the poem which are never quite resolved. Gros Louis places less emphasis on the allegory than Friedman since he thinks that Henryson, when the tradition was dying, did not see it as a completely adequate definition of the human condition. Friedman suggests that Henryson did find the moral perspective wholly satisfying, and that the narrative engages the reader and lives only by accident. At the other end of the spectrum from Wittig are Kinghorn and MacQueen. Kinghorn fails to see the full complexity of the allegory, but MacQueen draws out and develops the implications of the moralitas for the tale. Nevertheless, both of them see the significance of the poem solely in an allegorical interpretation of it. Of these critical positions only Wittig's may be discarded, as has been shown. The attempt to reconcile the remaining positions depends first on the clarification of relatively objective questions, and second on coming to terms with an ever present critical problem to students of medieval literature, that of the choice of an appropriate time-perspective.

Two objective questions underlie the difference of opinion on the degree to which the allegorical tradition applies to Henryson's poem. First, to what extent had the

allegorical interpretation of creation itself and of all of literature weakened by the fifteenth century? Second, what was the meaning of the romance tradition that Friedman and Gros Louis so greatly emphasize? An examination of these questions will clarify the differences among the poem's critics and may lead to a degree of reconciliation.

The former question has two aspects. First, how much potency did an allegorical outlook have in the minds of Henryson's readers, and second, how narrowly did it define his own view of the world? Gros Louis states that it had lost its strength in both instances, substantiating his position by looking forward to the Renaissance where he finds that the allegorical interpretation of mythology had become a parlor game. Morton Bloomfield has six objections to accepting the allegorical reading of medieval literature: first, an allegorical approach allows for no difference between a literary and theological work. Second, a new emphasis on the world of the senses de-emphasized the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Third, the multi-level methods of Scriptural interpretation were never mechanically applied. Fourth, if all literature is interpreted as multi-level, the difference between what is written by men and what is written by God disappears. Fifth, multi-level interpretations leave no way to identify a correct interpretation. Sixth, reading medieval works allegorically imposes a non-historical system on what was actually disordered.<sup>64</sup>

Seznec cites a distinction often made between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. While the Middle Ages

looked at the classics for moral sustenance and studied them only in their "Christian aspects," the Renaissance, free from such scruples, is thought to have looked on classical literature as a source of pleasure, aesthetic as well as sensuous.<sup>65</sup>

He demonstrates, however, through examining the writings of humanists and neoplatonists that the assumption is not acceptable; that "the great allegorical current of the Middle Ages, far from shrinking, flows on in an ever widening channel."<sup>66</sup> As has been noted, Robertson strongly supports Seznec's position in his assertion that allegorical interpretation never lost its prestige and was practiced in the Renaissance even by such an eminent figure as Erasmus.<sup>67</sup>

How committed Henryson himself was to allegory cannot be determined except, perhaps, through the discovery of more biographical information. His poetry is ambiguous, containing both narratives and morals which stand in uncertain relation to each other. If lectures he may have given his students, journals he may have kept, or observations others may have made about him were uncovered, his position might be clarified. But the number of fifteenth-century Scottish Robert Henrysons and the scant poetic references we have to his life make such a discovery unlikely.<sup>68</sup>

The second question, the meaning of the courtly love, romance tradition looms as a major critical issue today. Was Orpheus the romance hero a separate portrait, distinct from Orpheus the allegorical figure? Did the Christian allegorical tradition and the secular romance tradition conflict with each other, each a serious, viable, alternative world-view? Friedman and Gros Louis seem to give both traditions equal consideration. MacQueen does not, completely subordinating the romance to the allegorical. A thorough examination of the numerous positions on the question is impossible here. But a brief explanation of traditional and contemporary opinions demonstrates the diversity of opinion and more clearly pinpoints the issues dividing Henryson's critics.

C. S. Lewis expresses the traditional view of courtly love in his classic study, The Allegory of Love.<sup>69</sup> He describes it as an institution:

. . . love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love. The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady's lightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim. There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassel owes to his lord. . . . The whole attitude has been rightly described as 'a feudalisation of love'.<sup>70</sup>

He sees it as a set of ideals, a code of ethics in opposition to those advocated by the Church. Indeed, the

very prudery of the Church concerning passionate love, even when conjugal, and the view of marriage as "purely utilitarian"<sup>71</sup> led to a bifurcate world-view. The medieval man lived with two sets of values, contradictory and mutually exclusive. Christianity's ideals existed in the realm of eternity; romantic values dominated the secular, humane realm.<sup>72</sup> While medieval man would inevitably, upon reflection, accept the values of the eternal world as the real ones, he took the courtly ideals seriously: ". . . the very same conduct which Ovid ironically recommends could be recommended seriously by the courtly tradition."<sup>73</sup>

The narratives of Chrétien de Troies portrayed romantic love, but the writings of Andreas Capellanus theoretically explicated and codified it. Lewis interprets Andreas' work as a straightforward instruction book for the use of would-be lovers. After two books of rules for approaching and seducing the lady, guides to the cultivation of the proper state of mind, and prescriptions of the responsibilities and duties of a lover, Andreas shocks the reader with the statement, "No man through any good deeds can please God so long as he serves in the service of love."<sup>74</sup> And in the remainder of the third book, he retracts all he has said in the first two. Lewis sees no contradiction in the work; only a reminder that while the actions and attitudes that have been advocated in the first part may represent secular or worldly good, they are

not appropriate to eternity. There, Christian values hold sway.

An appreciation of the range of opinion on the interpretation of the courtly love tradition requires only discussion of the position of one other scholar. Since D. W. Robertson has led the attack on the critical views that prevailed until the latter half of the twentieth century, an examination of his position will clearly demonstrate the diversity of opinion and the need for more research before a reconciliation of interpretations of "Orpheus and Eurydice" can be effected. Robertson<sup>75</sup> attempts to demonstrate the absurdity of Lewis' position that the people of the Middle Ages took "courtly" ideals seriously. The severity of the laws concerning adultery would have made it inconvenient and dangerous for the couple.<sup>76</sup> And the code of behavior is ridiculous. After reviewing the strictures traditionally thought to have bound the lover, he concludes, "but I doubt that many medieval noblemen could be persuaded to go so far as to become 'courtly lovers,' even for the sake of a superior social tone, and that great ideal frequently attributed to them, and to modern real estate developments, 'gracious living.'"<sup>77</sup> But if it is absurd to think that medieval man practiced or held it virtuous to practice the deification of another's wife, swooning in her absence, trembling in her presence, acting on her every desire regardless of what ethical compromises it demanded, how

are the literary works--The Romance of the Rose, the romances of Chrétien de Troies, The Book of the Duchess, and the writings of Andreas Capellanus, for example--to be interpreted? Although the practices of courtly love do sound absurd as Robertson describes them, that absurdity alone does not prove that medieval man did not take them seriously. But coupled with his demonstration of the ironic intent of De Amore, it becomes a convincing argument.<sup>78</sup>

Through an examination of the preface, the discussion of love in the first part of Book One, and the statements at the end of Book Three, Robertson tries to demonstrate that Andreas was humorously and ironically describing a kind of love that was actually idolatry or cupidity. Instead of advocating courtly ideals, he was satirizing them. Robertson sees Book Three, not as a definition of the proper scope of this type of love, but as an "application of the double lesson"<sup>79</sup> that Andreas, in the preface, tells his student he is about to give him. The same love is described throughout the work, but Book Three makes evident its eventual consequences. By appealing to such common medieval authorities as Augustine, Bernard Silvestris, Boethius, Ailred of Rievaulx, and Peter of Blois he suggests that two concepts of love prevailed in the Middle Ages, charity and cupidity. Elsewhere Robertson describes these types of love as the two poles of the medieval value system.<sup>80</sup>

The descriptions of cupidity correspond to the love that Andreas depicts. Andreas' seeming praise of it suggests the medieval literary device, irony,

the unadorned and gentle use of words  
to convey disdain and ridicule . . .  
In the absence of the speaker, manifest  
evil and impure belief indict the sub-  
ject . . . for it is nothing but vitu-  
peration to commend the evil deeds of  
someone through their opposite or to  
relate them wittily.<sup>81</sup>

Since Robertson has shown the affinity between Andreas' love and cupidity, "the evil and impure belief" would seem to "indict the subject," and so the treatment is ironic.

Andreas' writings represent the theoretical underpinnings for the romantic conventions that appear throughout the literature of the Middle Ages. When De Amore is seen to be ironic, humorous, and condemning of the love it describes, the conventions in other works must be interpreted as an allegorical representation of cupidity.<sup>82</sup> And so the romance conventions in "Orpheus and Eurydice," Robertson presumably would say, support the allegorical interpretation that condemns Orpheus' love as cupidity rather than charity since Orpheus confuses love with appetite. Given Robertson's interpretation of the courtly love, romance tradition as an allegorical representation of cupidity, the disagreements dividing MacQueen and Kinghorn from Friedman and Gros Louis break down: the



completely allegorical interpretation subsumes the view of the poem as a culmination of the romance and allegorical traditions.

Defining the problem of the choice of an appropriate time perspective is equally as important as identifying these more objective issues in the attempt to see what divides Henryson's critics. Is the critic seeking to understand a medieval work in terms of what it meant to its contemporary audience or in terms of what it can mean today? What relationship is there between the medieval and twentieth-century interpretations? What validity does each have? The critics who have been cited all claim to be investigating Henryson's intent and his fifteenth-century audience's attitudes. Accepting this perspective, it seems clear that the evidence points to the validity of a completely allegorical interpretation. It provides a unified reading of the poem, uniting narrative and moralitas, integrating the seeming digressions on genealogy and music, and justifying the telling of a vivid, engaging story. On the basis of Robertson's view of the courtly love tradition, the allegorical interpretation, further, is able fully to appreciate, as Friedman and Gros Louis do, Henryson's interweaving of the allegorical and courtly love traditions: the romance aspects of the poem are themselves allegorically interpreted as the manifestation of cupidity.

But if the poem is interpreted strictly as allegory,

what appeal can it have to modern readers? It is unfortunate that Toliver tries to demonstrate that Henryson shared his position that the narrative and moralitas stand in ironic relation to each other. Evidence to the contrary makes it unlikely that a medieval author would take allegory so lightly. But his argument does suggest an aspect of the appeal of the poem today. The struggle between reason and appetite does not currently concern many people; indeed any consideration of traditional ethics and morality does not have the appeal that it once did. "Sympathy and moral judgment" can be solved in "an ironic solution"<sup>83</sup> today because we are distanced from them both. Moral considerations do not determine our world view, and so they may freely add a dimension to it without calcifying it. Certainly it is of primary importance to understand what Henryson intended and how the audience of the time reacted, insofar as our scholarship will allow. However, it is valid and necessary to ask what in this poem engages contemporary audiences. None of Henryson's critics has been able definitively to establish the answers to the former questions. MacQueen is the most convincing. None has attempted to answer the latter. Toliver, inadvertently, has come the closest.

## NOTES

1

John Block Friedman, Orpheus in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970). My discussion of the phases derives from this book.

2

Friedman, p. 38.

3

Robert Henryson, "Orpheus and Eurydice," The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, ed. H. Harvey Wood, 2nd revised edition (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), pp. 127-148. All further references to the poem are to this edition and will be cited by line number in the text.

4

Kurt Wittig, The Scottish Tradition in Literature (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p. 44.

5

John MacQueen, Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 24-44.

6

Friedman, pp. 194-210.

7

Kenneth Gros Louis, "Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages," Speculum, 41 (1966), 643-55.

8

Harold E. Toliver, "Robert Henryson: From Moralitas to Irony," English Studies, 46 (1965), 300-9.

9

Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 234-7.

10

Virgil, Virgil's Eclogues and Georgics, trans. T. F. Royds (London: J. M. Dent and Company, n. d.), pp. 168-81.

11

Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, ed. and trans. Richard Green (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), pp. 73-4.

12

Friedman, pp. 204-5.

13

John Speirs, The Scots Literary Tradition: An Essay in Criticism (London: Chatto and Windus, 1940), p. 32.

14

Wood includes a reprinting of Trivet's version for comparison, pp. 263-5, the original.

15

The Chepman and Myllar, Asloan, and Bannatyne manuscripts are reproduced by Gregory E. Smith, ed., Poems of Robert Henryson, (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), III, 25-87.

16

MacQueen, p. 27.

17

MacQueen, pp. 31-32.

18

MacQueen, p. 33.

19

Richard Hamilton Green, "Classical Fable and English Poetry in the Fourteenth Century," Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 112.

20

James I. Wimsatt, Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), p. 17.

21

Robert Ackerman, Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature (1966; rpt. New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 137-8.

22

Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, 36 (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1953), pp. 319-21.

23

Charles Sears Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic: Interpreted from Representative Works (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1928), p. 239.

24

Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art, trans. Barbara F. Sessions (1940; trans. and rpt. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 4.

25

Seznec, p. 84.

26

Seznec, p. 85.

27

Charles Donahue, "Summation," Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 62-5.

28

D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 291, 316. Wimsatt, pp. 24-6. My application of Donahue's terms to the categories that Robertson and Wimsatt delineate.

29

Atkins, J. W. H., English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase (Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 22.

30

Donahue, p. 67; Seznec, p. 88.

31

Robertson, p. 290.

32

D. W. Robertson, ed. and trans., On Christian Doctrine by Saint Augustine (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), pp. x-xi.

33

Augustine, Doctrine, pp. 38, 132-3.

34

Robertson, Preface, pp. 304-14.

35

Robertson, Preface, p. 292.

- 36  
Robertson, Preface, p. 315.
- 37  
Robertson, Preface, p. 317.
- 38  
Robertson, Preface, p. 316.
- 39  
Robertson, Preface, p. 337. Paraphrased from Augustine's Soliloquia.
- 40  
Robertson, Preface, p. 347.
- 41  
Seznec, p. 88.
- 42  
Seznec, p. 89.
- 43  
Seznec, pp. 90-3.
- 44  
Robertson, Preface, pp. 355-6.
- 45  
Dante Alighieri, The Convivio of Dante, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed (1903; rpt. London: J. W. Dent and Sons, 1940), pp. 63-7.
- 46  
Robertson, Preface, p. 352.
- 47  
Green, p. 117.
- 48  
Charles Osgood, ed., Boccaccio on Poetry by Boccaccio (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930), pp. xviii-xvix.
- 49  
Robertson, Preface, p. 286.
- 50  
The discussion of the allegorical tradition behind the Orpheus myth derives from Friedman, pp. 86-145.
- 51  
A. M. Kinghorn, "The Minor Poems of Robert

Henryson," Studies in Scottish Literature, 3 (1965), 30-40.

52

MacQueen, p. 37.

53

MacQueen, p. 38.

54

MacQueen, p. 39.

55

Friedman, p. 208.

56

Friedman, pp. 159-60.

57

Friedman also makes the point in regard to David, pp. 148-55; in regard to Christ, pp. 38-85.

58

MacQueen, as has been stated, sees these romance conventions as an allegorical representation of the worldliness and spiritual failure of Orpheus and Eurydice.

59

MacQueen interprets Virtue's rapacious behavior as an intended contrast to courtly behavior and "a stylistic yoking of apparent incompatibles very characteristic of medieval allegory . . . ," p. 34.

60

Gros Louis, p. 653.

61

Gros Louis, p. 655.

62

Friedman, p. 196.

63

Toliver, p. 300.

64

Morton Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," Modern Philology, 41 (1958), 73-81.

65

Seznec, p. 58.

66

Seznec, p. 59.

67

Bloomfield, p. 8ln., claims that Erasmus attacks the method of Scriptural exegesis in Praise of Folly.

68

Marshall W. Stearns, Robert Henryson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 8-13; Denton Fox, Testament of Cresseid (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1968), p. 16.

69

C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (1936; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 1-43.

70

Lewis, p. 21.

71

Lewis, p. 33.

72

Lewis, p. 42.

73

Lewis, p. 7.

74

As quoted by Lewis, p. 41.

75

D. W. Robertson, "The Concept of Courtly Love," The Meaning of Courtly Love, ed. F. X. Newman (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1968), pp. 1-18.

76

John Benton--"Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," The Meaning of Courtly Love, pp. 19-42--gives more historical information on the legal and social attitudes toward adultery and on the status of women in the Middle Ages. He comes, relatively, to the same conclusion as Robertson: ". . . the works [of medieval love literature] I have mentioned seem to me consistent with Christian or feudal ideals . . ." (p. 35).

77

Robertson, "Concept," p. 2.



78

D. W. Robertson, "The Subject of the De Amore of Andreas Capellanus," Modern Philology, 50 (1953), 145-161. A more extensive analysis of De Amore may be found in A Preface to Chaucer, pp. 391-448.

79

Robertson, "Subject," p. 146.

80

D. W. Robertson, "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Gardens," Speculum, 26 (1951), p. 24.

81

Benton, pp. 28-29.

82

In "Gardens" Robertson demonstrates the affinity between the love described and cupidity in Romance of the Rose and De Amore, among others, through an analysis of garden imagery. In "Concept" he discusses Book of the Duchess and Troilus and Criseyde as illustrative of cupidity. In Preface he deals with the stories of Chrétien de Troies (pp. 448-453) and the works of Chaucer (pp. 461-503).

83

Toliver, p. 300. See note 57.

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