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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62m09947>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 29(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

**“THE MINSTREL’S SONG OF SILENCE”:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINE AUTHORITY  
AND THE FEMINIZED OTHER  
IN THE ROMANCE *SIR ORFEO***

CHRISTINA M. CARLSON

The girl tripped, falling, stumbled into Death.  
Her bridegroom, Orpheus, poet of the hour and pride of Rhadope,  
sang loud his loss to everyone on earth.  
—Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*

Why did you turn back, that hell should be reinhabited  
of myself thus, swept into nothingness?  
H.D., “Eurydice”

Much of the scholarship written about the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* focuses on Orfeo’s identity as a poet and on the power inherent in his poetry, especially in its performative aspect. Robert Longworth asserts that “the minstrel’s art is at once subject to the forces of change and capable of compelling change,”<sup>1</sup> and also a source of order and stability: “Orfeo’s harp has throughout the poem the power to bring into harmony nature, society, and other temporal powers.”<sup>2</sup> E.C. Ronquist argues that Orfeo’s poetry has the ability to make a moral impact, both within the poem itself and amongst its audience; he writes, “in the full strength of Orfeo’s art, he is able to make ethical requirements so the kingdom to which he returns will be more humane and stable,”<sup>3</sup> and also, “the audiences all thus join the subjects of Orfeo, his power of admonition apparently still in effect. The poet-minstrel projected by this reading text seems capable of arousing action.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, Roy Liuzza sees Orfeo’s song as a regenerative power

which causes change, brings pleasure, and gives life; it unites the men of  
the kingdom, draws the beasts of the wilderness together into Edenic  
harmony, overcomes the inhabitants of Fairy, and returns Heurodis to

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<sup>1</sup>Robert M. Longworth, “Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel’s Art,” *Studies in Philology* 79 (1982), 6.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup>E. C. Ronquist, “The Powers of Poetry in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985), 111.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

the noisy realm of completions, reunions, and restorations that is represented by the climactic revelation in the steward’s hall.<sup>5</sup>

What is distressing about these otherwise positive readings of the significance of Orfeo’s poetry is that they tend to downplay the very context within which Orfeo is compelled to sing his song—the search for and rescue of Herodis. If the poem, as these scholars seem to think, is essentially about the powers of Orfeo’s poetry, then it is also completely reliant on the abduction and victimization of Herodis, which provide the impetus for the exercise of that power. In light of this point, the poem itself, as well as Orfeo’s identity within it, is predicated on the fact of Herodis’s passivity and, most especially, her silence; not only do her capture and captivity in the world of Fairy provide a situation in which Orfeo can exert his powers of poetry, but his identity as king and minstrel is defined exclusively in terms of her silence. While Herodis’s abduction initially challenges Orfeo’s status, ultimately it is the vehicle by which his authority as poet and ruler is reconfirmed and glorified. The persistent irony behind the poem is that, while Herodis’s silenced, victimized status makes Orfeo’s poetry necessary, it also makes it possible.

R.H. Nicholson writes that one of the significant differences between the classical myth and the medieval romance is “the transformation of the legendary Orpheus’ role as musician priest into that of harper king in the lai of Orfeo.”<sup>6</sup> In this shift, the political powers of kingship become intimately connected with the power of the poet; Nicholson figures the two powers as equal when he writes of the romance that “the poem is centered on Orfeo...and finally celebrates his power as heroic harper *and* good ruler” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> Seth Lerer sees Orfeo’s authority as king as stemming from his abilities as a poet; he emphasizes “Orfeo’s skill with words as well as with music, for the king’s ability to deal with fairy lords and human stewards ultimately relies on his ingenuity in conversation and storytelling.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the romance itself supports such a connection. From the very outset, Orfeo’s authority is constructed through his ability to be *heard*. His public identity is defined in terms of performance:

In the world was never man born  
That ever Orfeo sat biforn,  
And he might of his harping here,  
He shulde thinke that he were

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<sup>5</sup>Roy Michael Liuzza, “*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 279–280.

<sup>6</sup>R.H. Nicholson, “*Sir Orfeo*: A ‘Kynges Noote,’” *Review of English Studies* 36 (1985), 162.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>8</sup>Seth Lerer, “Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Speculum* 60 (1985), 94.

In one of the joys of Paradis. (lines 17–21)<sup>9</sup>

His superiority over other men is a result of his musical skill: “he lernid so ther nothing was / A better harper in no plas” (lines 15–16).

While Orfeo is described through aural references, by contrast, his wife Herodis is presented entirely in visual terms:

The king hadde a Quen of priis  
That was y-cleped Dame Herodis  
The fairest levedy for the nones  
That might gon on body and bones. (lines 27–30)

These lines focus our attention not only on Herodis’s beauty, but on the fact that she is *embodied*. She is presented as little more than an object of “priis”—a word Sands glosses as “excellence,” but which can also mean “price” or “value”—to be “hadde” and “cleped.” According to Lerer, Orfeo and Herodis represent the perfect royal medieval couple: “Orfeo’s lineage, combined with Heurodis’s grace and beauty, tells the reader that this is an idealized court patterned along the lines of romance convention.”<sup>10</sup> It is not primarily Orfeo’s pedigree that distinguishes him as a good king, however, but his vocal and musical skills. Likewise, it is not only Herodis’s loveliness that makes her an ideal queen, but also her silence. Silence and beauty are inextricably linked in the person of Herodis, and her status as a good queen stems both from her physical presence as a beautiful body and from the absence of her voice, which serves to emphasize and define her husband’s verbal ability and, by extension, his royal authority.

If Orfeo’s kingship is dependent upon his being a speaking subject, and his identity as a speaking subject is defined by Herodis’s silence, then her failure to be silent would pose a potential threat to the kingdom. In light of this dynamic, Herodis’s response to the visit from the king of Fairy, starting at line 53, is a disruptive moment, one that introduces the possibility of such a threat. Before the audience is made aware of the cause of the disruption, it is noticeable that Herodis’s response is an inversion of her usual behavior:

Ac as sone as she gan awake,  
She crid and lothly bere gan make;  
She froted hir honden and hir feet  
And crached hir visgae—it bled wete.  
Hir riche robe hie all to-rett

<sup>9</sup>All citations from *Sir Orfeo* are from *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (Exeter, 1993).

<sup>10</sup>Lerer, 94.

And was reveysed out of hir wit. (lines 53–58)

This passage marks a shift from silence to sound, but it also involves a corresponding shift in appearance. Herodis destroys her own beauty when she cries out, implying that, for her, articulation, even in the form of a strangled cry, and attractiveness are mutually exclusive. While the intrusion of Fairy poses an immediate threat to Herodis, it also represents a threat to Orfeo’s status as king; he stands to lose his “accessory” queen, and also his authority as speaker king, if he can no longer be defined in terms of her silence. Patrizia Grimaldi writes of the *Orfeo* poet that “the main concern of the author is not Orfeo’s great love for Heurodis...the basic unit of the fairy tale is not the character but the character’s function in the plot.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, in lines 73–74, “when Orfeo herd that tidng, / Never him nas wers for no thing,” his response reveals not only a concern for his wife, but also a larger, structural, concern about his ability to function as harper king. It is revealing that the first comment he makes to her is not an inquiry after her well-being, but an observation about the change in her status from voiceless to voiced:

“O lef lif, what is te,  
That ever yete hast ben so stille  
And now gredest wonder shille.” (lines 78–80)

For a brief moment in the poem, Orfeo defuses the danger posed by Herodis’s outburst through his own eloquence. Nicholson writes convincingly that “Heurodys’ return to herself is directly attributed to Orfeo’s singular efforts...the lament which summons her from her madness is also the first instance of Orfeo’s singular eloquence.”<sup>12</sup> Through his words, Orfeo manages to calm, soothe, and most importantly, silence Herodis. And, as Nicholson points out, Orfeo’s words do more than just quiet Herodis—they also re-establish her beauty:

the primary effect of the description is to recollect the conventionally idealized forms of romantic medieval beauty with which Heurodys has been associated...the recollection is purposeful in reasserting norms which are rational, however romantic. She who was then so “stille,” whose perfect beauty is now destroyed, is virtually refigured by Orfeo’s eloquence till she lies “stile” once more.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Patrizia Grimaldi, “Sir Orfeo as Celtic Folk-Hero, Christian Pilgrim, and Medieval King,” in *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 148.

<sup>12</sup>Nicholson, 167.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 167–168.

Finally, Orfeo not only manages to quiet Herodis with his words, but through a neat rhetorical sleight of hand, he also appropriates her attempt at articulation and replaces it with one of his own choosing:

“Lete ben all this rewefull cry  
And tell me what thee is and hou  
And what thing may thee help now!” (lines 90–92)

Through his precarious position as speaker, Orfeo restores Herodis’s beauty and silence.

What Nicholson fails to mention is that Orfeo’s re-establishment of the status quo is a temporary one. For all Orfeo’s semblance of control, Herodis still speaks. Her assumption of the role of speaking subject is at odds with her identity as a good queen; she cannot be both at the same time. In the forty lines of text that comprise Herodis’s only coherent speech, it is not only the fact of her speaking, but also what she actually says, that introduces both a literal and an ideological threat to the security of Orfeo’s court and kingdom. In this section, Herodis describes her encounter with the king of Fairy: how he came to her under the ympe tree, how he showed her his kingdom, how he promised to return for her, and how he threatened to harm her if she did not comply with his wishes.

At the literal level, Herodis threatens the kingdom when she tells Orfeo she has to leave:

“Allas, my lord, Sir Orfeo!  
.....  
Bot ever ich have y-loved thee  
As my lif, and so thou me.  
Ac now we mot delen atwo.  
Do thy best, for I mot go!” (lines 96, 99–102)

Her departure would signal a breakdown of both the idealized royal union Lerer describes and, by extension, the king’s authority over his subjects. As A.S.G. Edwards explains, “the loss of the king’s wife leads directly to the loss of the kingdom...the failure of marriage at a literal level leads to a larger, metaphoric failure of the marriage between ruler and people.”<sup>14</sup> Herodis’s departure, however, also threatens Orfeo’s kingship in that he would no longer be able to define himself as speaking subject in her absence; he would lose his aurally-constructed identity and, with it, his authority.

Orfeo’s response to this threat is, essentially, denial. He attempts to deny the threat to his power through a show of military force; he musters

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<sup>14</sup>A.S.G. Edwards, “Marriage, Harping and Kingship: The Unity of *Sir Orfeo*,” *American Benedictine Review* 32 (1981), 283–285.

an army of “ten hundreded knightes” (line 159) to fend off the retinue of the fairy king. But his failure to listen to Herodis, his failure to accept her story with its inevitable outcome of abduction, reveals that he also denies her identity as a speaking subject. This double denial is Orfeo’s final attempt to maintain the status quo, of both his power as king and her silence as queen. Of course, it does not work:

Ac yete amiddes hem full right  
The Quen was oway y-twight  
With fairy forth y-nome. (lines 167–169)

Herodis’s status as a speaker is confirmed through the truth of her words, and her failure to serve as silent “other” to Orfeo marks the unraveling of his power and his identity; his army is helpless to act, his wife is spirited away to the land of Fairy, and the ideal royal marriage is disrupted. In short, all the foundations of Orfeo’s power are destroyed at the moment Herodis is removed to the land of Fairy. As a result, he literally gives up his kingdom, placing it in the hands of his steward, and takes to the woods to live as a hermit or wild man. As if to confirm the total loss of his status as subject, he vows that he will no longer have women as the object of his gaze: “never eft I nill no woman see.” (line 187) The reversal of his fortunes is complete and absolute.

As Longworth, Ronquist, Liuzza, and Lerer all have noted, the intrusion of the fairy world, which provides the impetus for the rest of the romance, serves as a mirror to Orfeo’s kingdom. Within the context of a gendered analysis of the dynamic of sound and silence, however, this mirroring functions in two specific and previously unexamined ways. First, Herodis’s position within the realm of Fairy reflects, confirms, and re-establishes her status as a silent, embodied object; second, escape from the fairy world, which functions as a silent, aestheticized, feminized “other” of Orfeo’s kingdom, helps him to re-establish his own kingship and his position as a speaking subject.

There can be little doubt that the land of Fairy is meant to be read as a double, a mirror image, of Orfeo’s own kingdom. As Liuzza points out, the two realms are described in almost identical language: “Heurodis describes her first glimpse of the kingdom of fairy as ‘castles and tours,/ Rivers, forests, frith with flours’ (159-60), and later Orfeo’s kingdom is described in the same words (245-6).”<sup>15</sup> Ronquist notes that “the other kingdom has the same courtly pursuits as Orfeo’s—hunting, music, assemblies of knights and ladies.”<sup>16</sup> Most interestingly, the king of Fairy, as lord over this realm, is a double for Orfeo himself. Lerer comments that

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<sup>15</sup>Liuzza, 279.

<sup>16</sup>Ronquist, 102.

both of them lay claim to Herodis using almost the same words: “fairyland promises violence and pain if Heurodis will not ‘with ous go, / and live with ous ever-mo’ (167-8). Orfeo, however, has promised ‘Whider thou gost ichel with the, / and whider y go thou shalt with me’ (129-30).”<sup>17</sup> In essence, the fairy kingdom reflects back to Orfeo what he has lost, what he should be; it becomes the “other” by which he is defined. In this way, it functions both as a symbol of and a replacement for Herodis, as a “speculum of the other woman.” According to Luce Irigaray, woman’s reflection of man, while mirroring back sameness, also involves a lack.<sup>18</sup> Like Herodis, what the fairy kingdom lacks is agency and voice. Ronquist identifies this condition when he describes the land of Fairy as “aesthetic, imitative, aimless,”<sup>19</sup> as does Liuzza when he writes that “the visual artifice of Fairy is linked to the power of suspension, absence, atemporality, and incompleteness.”<sup>20</sup> Lerer, too, pinpoints this essential difference between the two kingdoms when he describes

fairyland as a kingdom of artifice: a display of human craft which manipulates surfaces for the awe or delectation of the beholder. The poem contrasts this artificial world with what I will call Orfeo’s artistry: a musical skill which does not simply dazzle the senses but which can move the spirit.<sup>21</sup>

What all three fail to identify is the gender implications inherent in this dichotomy. The contrast between Orfeo’s kingdom and Fairyland is outlined in virtually the same terms as the descriptions of Orfeo and Herodis at the beginning of the poem. Like Herodis, the fairy kingdom is described only in visual terms; it is carefully constructed, an *objet d’art*, meant to be looked at and admired. It contrasts with Orfeo’s art, his harping, which is not only heard but also carries with it, in Lerer’s terms, a spiritual authority of which the superficiality of Herodis and the fairy kingdom are incapable. This latter passive, silent state of suspended animation is exemplified by Orfeo’s first encounter with the king of fairy and his retinue in the woods:

The King o fairy with his rout  
Com to hunt him all about  
With dim cry and bloweing  
And houndes also with him berking.  
Ac no best they no nome. (lines 259–263)

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<sup>17</sup>Lerer, 97.

<sup>18</sup>Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY, 1985).

<sup>19</sup>Ronquist, 101.

<sup>20</sup>Liuzza, 279.

<sup>21</sup>Lerer, 93.



The fairies are unable to act, to make an impact on the physical world. In short, the kingdom of Fairy is set up as a feminized world, a world of silence, beauty, and passivity, in contrast to the “real” world inhabited by kings and speaking subjects. Like Herodis in the real world, the fairy kingdom defines what Orfeo is, or should be, through what it is *not*; escape from it becomes the vehicle for Orfeo to re-establish and reassert his position as harper king and speaking subject.

About the structure of the romance, Edwards writes that “the various sections of the narrative chronicle a process of disruption, confusion, and ultimate recovery.”<sup>22</sup> In a gendered reading, this disruption occurs when Herodis reverses her idealized status through both an act of articulation and its corresponding disfigurement. Confusion results from Herodis’s absence, when Orfeo can no longer maintain his own identity; he gives up his kingdom and is confronted with the disorienting, spectral fairy world as a reflection of all he has lost. Recovery ultimately comes through Orfeo’s re-establishment of himself as a speaking subject and, by extension, through the repositioning of Herodis as silent queen. In order for this to occur, Orfeo must engage the fairy world and shatter its illusion through his language.

His opportunity comes at a point that marks a real shift in the narrative. The moment in question is when Orfeo, wandering through the forest, sees “sixty levedis on hors ride / Gentil and jolif as brid on ris; / Nought o man amonges hem ther nis.” (lines 280–282). Lewis Owen notes that this moment is significant because it involves Orfeo “violating his vow, made ten years before, never more to see a woman.”<sup>23</sup> Owen is correct in stating that this moment leads to a shift in Orfeo’s behavior, from passive to active. But it does more than that—with the breaking of the vow, Orfeo assumes the power of the gaze; he is the sole male viewer, and woman becomes an object to be looked upon.

The pivotal point of the poem, thematically, structurally, and literally is line 290: “That seigh Orfeo and lough.” Not only do these five words confirm Orfeo’s position at the absolute center of the narrative, they also re-establish him as both viewing and speaking subject—he sees, and he laughs. From this moment on, Orfeo is able to engage the fairy kingdom and to work to reclaim his royal, poetic identity. Interestingly, it is also from this midpoint in the text that the structure of the poem begins to reflect its theme. The progression of the narrative in the second half of the poem is essentially a mirror image of the first half; events unravel toward a resolution in the exact reverse order of the way they were built up.

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<sup>22</sup>Edwards, 283.

<sup>23</sup>Lewis J. Owen, “The Recognition Scene in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971), 251.

It is no coincidence that the moment at which all this occurs is a moment of contact between real and fairy worlds. Orfeo sees the women when they are out hawking. But unlike previous occasions, this time the hunt is successful:

The foules of the water arisith  
 The faucouns hem wele deviseth;  
 Ich faucoun his prey slough. (lines 287–289)

In a reversal of the moment when the king of Fairy successfully intruded into Orfeo's kingdom for his "prey," Herodis, the falcon's kill prefigures not only the successful re-emergence of the real (Herodis) from the fairy world, but also Orfeo's resumption of the role usurped by the fairy king; when he says "Parfay, ther is fair game," (line 291) it is deliberately unclear if Orfeo is simply commenting on the spectacle of the hunt, or if he is referring to the fairy kingdom itself.

An answer is suggested when, a few lines later, Orfeo spies Herodis for the first time since she was abducted by the fairy king. The moment serves as a reflection of that previous encounter. Herodis sees the king, in this case Orfeo; she cries, and her ladies rally to aid and return her to what they think is the safety of the fairy kingdom:

The teres fell out here eighe  
 The other levedies this y-sighe  
 And maked hir oway to ride  
 She most with him no lenger abide. (lines 303–306)

But just as the king of Fairy was able to penetrate Orfeo's kingdom to abduct Herodis, this passage suggests that Orfeo will be able to do the same in order to get her back. Orfeo's words recall both his own earlier sentiments, as well as those of the fairy king:

Whider-so this levees ride  
 The selve way ichill streche  
 Of lif no deth I me no reche. (lines 316–318)

Armed with his harp, Orfeo enters the fairy kingdom.

Once he is inside, the fairy realm's ability to mirror the truth of Orfeo's kingdom is fully realized. The exterior of the castle, all burnished metal and highly reflective, polished surfaces, contrasts sharply with the horrors it contains within:

Then he gan bihold about all  
 and seighe liggend within the wall  
 of folk that were thider y-brought

and thought dede and nare nought  
 sum stode withouten hade  
 and sum non armes nade  
 and sum thurch the body hadde wounde  
 and sum lay wode, y-bounde  
 and sum armed on hors sete  
 and sum estrangled as they ete  
 and sum were in water adreint  
 and sum with fire all forshreint  
 wives ther lay on child-bedde  
 sum ded and sum awedde  
 and wonder fele ther lay besides  
 right as they slepe undertides. (lines 363–378)

Just as the construction of the castle, with its “utmast wall...clere and shine as cristal,” (lines 333–334) is supported by the undead “liggeand within the wall,” (line 364) so the idealized court, as described by Lerer, is made possible only by the silence and objectification of its queen. The fact that scholars tend to gloss over the tableau of the undead in favor of a discussion of the artifice of the fairy kingdom is not surprising, in light of the fact that they also gloss over issues of gender; to acknowledge the silent bodies would be to acknowledge the source of Orfeo’s power. The last “undead” in the tableau is Herodis herself:

Ther he seigh his owen wif  
 Dame Herodis, his lef lif  
 slepe under an ympe tree  
 By her clothes he knew that it was he. (lines 381–384)

It is only within the kingdom of the Fairy, only within the realm of the purely visual, that Herodis is revealed for what she really is: completely passive, totally silent, and thoroughly embodied. Her inclusion in the catalogue of the undead confirms that she is little more than a body, and the fact that Orfeo recognizes her only by her clothes reveals that her identity is constructed through the external and the visual. While scholars have debated the significance of the second ympe-tree in fairyland,<sup>24</sup> its function seems fairly simple: it is a mirror image of Herodis as she was last seen in Orfeo’s kingdom, and it returns the narrative to the moment she was abducted.

It is only after Herodis is revealed for the silent, embodied creature that she is, only after the plot returns to the moment of her abduction, that Orfeo can go about the business of reestablishing his own identity as the harper king. He positions himself for this shift when he confronts his own

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<sup>24</sup>For a detailed discussion of the various theories, see Alice Lasater, “Under the Ympe-Tre, or: Where the Action Is in *Sir Orfeo*,” *The Southern Quarterly* 12 (1974): 353–363.

mirror image, the king of Fairy. Ensconced within the trappings of royal splendor, seated in state with his silent, beautiful queen, the fairy king represents the medieval ideal of masculine authority to which Orfeo longs to return:

Than seighe he ther a seemly sight  
 A tabernacle blisseful and bright  
 Therin her maister King sete  
 And her Guen fair and swete  
 Her crounes, her clothes shine so bright  
 That unnethe bihold he him might. (lines 387–392)

With Herodis's identity as silent other already confirmed, all that is left for Orfeo to do is to reclaim his authority through his harping. In the guise of a minstrel, Orfeo plays his harp and elicits from the inhabitants of Fairy the same response that had established his authority in his own kingdom:

And blisseful notes he ther gan  
 That all that in the palais were  
 Come to him forto here  
 And liggeth adoun to his fete  
 Hem thenketh his melody so swete. (lines 414–418)

Orfeo's authority is readily defined against the silence of the fairy kingdom, and his rediscovered powers of poetry prompt the fairy king to exclaim:

Menstel, me liketh wele thy glee  
 Now ask of me what it be  
 Largelich ichell thee pay. (lines 425–427)

Scholars have made much of the verbal exchange in which Orfeo asks the king for Herodis and the king refuses, then ultimately submits to Orfeo's appeal to gentillesse. They have seen it as an example of Orfeo's rhetorical skills and as a re-establishment of courtly virtues; Lerer writes, "what ensures Orfeo's success are the conventions of civilized life and his own ingenuity at making them work. These conventions include music as a social force, courtliness as a mode of behavior, and promise-keeping as a personal habit."<sup>25</sup> Certainly, this moment contains all these elements. But scholars have failed to note the underlying gender implications; at its most basic level, it represents a verbal exchange between two authoritative male speaking subjects, in which Herodis is reduced essentially to a commodity to be bartered for. Her complete lack of agency in the determination of

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<sup>25</sup>Lerer, 105.

her fate once and for all establishes her as the passive, silent, and beautiful object needed to define masculine authority within the context of the idealized royal marriage. Not only does it re-establish the courtly ideal, but it also re-establishes the dichotomy of speaking and silence upon which that ideal is founded.

It is deeply and disturbingly ironic that the climactic moment of Herodis’s rescue from Fairyland also marks her ensuing absence from the narrative. This is perhaps the greatest proof of Grimaldi’s theory that Orfeo’s search has little to do with his love for his wife and everything to do with the reassertion of his authority. Upon being rescued, she is summarily dumped at the house of a beggar, while Orfeo sets off to reclaim his kingship. In fact, the only capacity in which she is mentioned in the last one hundred lines of the poem is as a prop or an accessory to the reconstruction of Orfeo’s story. First, when Orfeo tells his hypothetical story to the steward, she is the prize that Orfeo “hadde y-won...owy / Out of the lond of fairy.” (lines 537–538). Then, once the truth of his story is established and Orfeo is reconfirmed as king through the singing of his song, Herodis is brought out of hiding and displayed as the prize incarnate:

And sethen with gret processioun  
They brought the Queen into the toun  
With all maner menstracy. (lines 563–565)

Once again, the *Orfeo* poet is a master of ambiguity, and it is unclear whether “with all maner of menstracy” refers just to the music of the procession or if Herodis’s presence is due to all Orfeo’s “maner of menstracy”—his harping to please the king of Fairy, his rhetorical skills in bargaining for her release, his retelling of his own story to reclaim his kingdom.

Much of the *Orfeo* scholarship is concerned with the powers of his poetry to inspire change and incite action, to renew life and reveal truths. What it seems to ignore is that this poetry also has the power to obscure the conditions that make it possible. Orfeo’s poetic endeavor, his identity as speaker, comes at the Herodis’s expense. She pays the price of silence. By not exploring or even acknowledging Herodis’s silent but essential role in the construction of Orfeo’s poetry *and* his identity as poet, the scholars comply with his verbal project, to use the power of words to keep Herodis ever silent.

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