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A REAPPRAISAL OF ROBERT HENRYSON'S ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
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## ABSTRACT

Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice must be reappraised because critical thought has not grasped the complexity and accompanying message contained in the poem. Much of this thought concentrates on the adequacy of the Moralitas. Chapter One, therefore, examines critical attitudes towards the Moralitas, and the relations of the Moralitas with the body of the poem. The chapter finds that the Moralitas is superficially adequate as a moral lesson for Orpheus and Eurydice, but is at a deeper level insufficient. The conclusion of the chapter suggests that this insufficiency may be due to the presence of a narrative persona in the poem.

Chapter Two examines the poem in the light of a possible narrator, finding substantial textual evidence for such a concept. The narrator's voice alternates with a different, authorial tone until the Moralitas is reached, and the narratorial tone predominates.

Music is emphasised to an unprecedented degree in Orpheus and Eurydice, and the narrator is most obvious in l 240-242 where he emphatically denies any musical expertise. Chapter Three, therefore, acknowledges the importance of music in the poem and for the Orpheus myth itself by making a brief examination of the growth of musical and cosmological theory in the Middle Ages. The chapter ends by assessing the accumulation of musical detail in the most central versions of the Orpheus story prior to Sir Orfeo.

Chapter Four examines Sir Orfeo in detail because it provides a significant contrast with Henryson's poem. For the first time Orpheus' music is able to rescue his wife permanently from her plight, and music in Sir Orfeo is found to be inextricably intertwined with the concepts of universal and temporal order.

Chapter Five ties these strands of thought into a coherent whole. The role of music in Orpheus and Eurydice

places much more emphasis on the divinity and excellence of Orpheus' musical ability and on the singing of the spheres (an indication of cosmic order) than does Sir Orfeo, thus heightening the irony and tragedy when Orpheus' music is unable to prevent him looking back and losing his wife. We must conclude that Henryson is using this incompatibility between the emphasis on divine music which orders the universe and its ultimate impotence to point the way to a deeper issue.

Chapter Five relates this musical conflict to the insufficient Moralitas and its overbearing narrator, and finds that many traditional 'Medieval' aspects of the story are undermined by Henryson as author. Henryson is using Orpheus and Eurydice as a vehicle, not to deny, but to wistfully question his inherited Medieval world view.

Orpheus and Eurydice, then, reveals Henryson's disquiet with the Medieval cosmological model through the narrative persona (and the insufficient Moralitas) and the role of music in the Orpheus story.

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## PREFACE

If all the world and love were young,  
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,  
These pretty pleasures might me move  
To live with thee and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold  
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,  
And Philomel becometh dumb;  
The rest complains of cares to come...

...But could youth last and love still breed,  
Had joys no date nor age no need,  
Then these delights my mind might move  
To live with thee and be thy love.

(Sir Walter Raleigh, The Nymph's  
Reply to the Shepherd)

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