Tension between what is known and what is unknown is a common conflict in epic literature. The concept of the “unknown” is complicated because it is just that – unknown. It is something that humanity does not, or cannot, understand, such as the inevitability of death, life after death, the complex nature of love and other emotions, and the possibility of beings beyond the human world. In the tale of *Sir Orfeo*, Thrace is a kingdom that lives in harmony. There is a certain implication at the beginning of the story that the city is a place of happiness and contentment as Orfeo is portrayed as a great lord, courageous and generous. Thrace is a strong and noble city. Life there seems to leave nothing to desire. That is, until something of the Otherworld comes to disturb their way of life and Sir Orfeo, the harper, is the only one who can restore the harmony.

I will argue in this paper the way that Orfeo is representative of the redeeming quality of art in his music. In this way, the Fairy King represents anything “other,” things that are difficult for the capacity of the human mind to comprehend, in the case of *Sir Orfeo*, most easily of death and another realm beyond the living. The Fairy King, something completely “other” in regards to the people of Orfeo’s kingdom, disturbs life in Thrace in a way that no one there understands. No one knows how to recover from the paranormal abduction of the queen, not even Orfeo himself. In great despair, Orfeo feels he has no other option, but to go in exile to the forest, where he first
encounters the means by which he will conquer the Fairy World and redeem the harmony for his kingdom.

It is clear in the epic that Sir Orfeo displays supreme musical intelligence and that there is no greater bard in the entire kingdom, if not the entire world. His harp is what makes him an artist and it is what gives him a means for victory in a number of situations throughout the poem and ultimately allows him to redeem the harmony of his kingdom, making Orfeo a representation for the redeeming quality of art when harmony of life, such as that in Thrace, is disrupted by something “other.”

The harp is undoubtedly a major part of the work. Most scholars acknowledge the harp in some way, but few recognize the redemption of harmony in the human world through Orfeo’s use and mastery of the instrument. Keeble claims the harp signifies Orfeo’s true identity as a minstrel (Keeble 202). In this way, Orfeo does not lie to the Fairy King when he claims that he is just a minstrel, wandering, as minstrels do, in search for an audience, but rather acknowledges his true self beyond his most basic level of identity as being a king. Orfeo’s identity as a minstrel is what saves him and his wife and brings peace to his kingdom in the end.

Ellen Caldwell, however, takes a different stance on the happy ending of *Sir Orfeo*. She “links the loss of Heurodis to the loss of Orfeo’s kingdom” and claims the restoration of Orfeo’s kingdom is dependent upon the recovery of the queen (Caldwell 291). Oren Faulk attributes Orfeo’s reclamation of his kingdom to his victory in the Fairy World when he says “Orfeo’s victory over the supernatural enemy enables him to aspire to rule his land again, and also arms him for the coming confrontation with his old friends and foes in Traciens” (Faulk 255). The recovery of the queen and the victory over the supernatural enemy indeed arm Orfeo in his homecoming quest. Thracians hear of his adventures and they have faith in him, but the art of
Orfeo’s harp is the cause for winning back his queen and therefore departing the Fairy World a triumphant man. The harp is Orfeo’s ultimate weapon.

The Orfeo poet introduces the king as a musician right away. Orfeo’s superlative and unmatched musical talent with the harp is clear immediately, but the first real experience of Orfeo’s relationship to the instrument occurs when he commits himself to exile in the wilderness after the abduction of the queen. “Al his kingdom he forsoke; / Bot a sclavin on him he toke. / He no hadde kirtel no hode, / Schert, ne no nother gode, / Bot his harp he tok algate / And dede hom barfot out atte gate; / No man most with him go” (Ed. Lakaya 2). At this point in the story, Orfeo abandons his city, puts on simple clothing, not including shoes, and leaves everyone behind to go in grievance and isolation to the wilderness. The only thing he brings with him is his harp, but a harp serves no purpose in hunting, in staying warm, in starting a fire, or any other safety skill that a man would need in order to survive in the wild. The fact that he brings only his harp shows the significance of the music in relation to Orfeo’s identity. He lost everything he loved – his wife, his kingdom when he leaves it – and he relies on his harp in the wilderness to retain a sense of his former identity in Thrace. The poem reads “His harp, whereon was al his gle . . .,” showing that the harp was Orfeo’s only source of pleasure in the wilderness and that the melody he creates is so beautiful that even the animals come to find joy in his music (Ed. Lakaya 6). In this way, he is also conquering something considered “other” as the beasts in the wilderness are tamed by his harping. The close association between his identity and the harp emphasizes Orfeo’s artistic capacity. It is through this art that he will ultimately regain his kingdom.

The harp then plays a major role in Orfeo’s victory in the Fairy World. Orfeo, after all, would never have been able to gain access to the Otherworld without his harp as he claims his occupation as minstrel and displays his desire to play for the Fairy King in order to be granted
entry by the porter at the gate. When Orfeo finds the throne, the Fairy King inquires where this
foreign minstrel is from and how he got there. “What man artow, / That art hider y-comen now?
/ Ich, no non that is with me, no sent never after the. / Sethen that ich here regni gan, / Y no fond
never so folehardi man / That hider to ous durst wende / Bot that ic him wald ofsense”’ (Ed.
Lakaya 9). The king reveals that no man has ever entered the Otherworld without having been
summoned, that no man ever dared before. Orfeo’s love for Heurodis brought him there, but it is
important to note that it was his harp that gained him access by allowing him to come as a
minstrel, playing the part of a wanderer in search of lords for which to play, never knowing
whether he will be welcomed.

Not only does the harp get Orfeo into the Fairy kingdom at all, the harp wins Heurodis.
Earlier in the poem, the initial threat occurs when the Fairy King first appears to Heurodis as she
slept under the ympe-tree and foretold his intention to take her with him to the world of the
Fairy. Orfeo reacted militaristically to the imminent abduction of his wife, calling all his men to
arms and gathering them to create an armored barrier around her. His men made an oath to die
before they allowed the queen to be taken. “His preparations for the return of the Fairy King are,
in human terms, entirely reasonable and laudible, and apparently more than sufficient to meet
any threat,” but he clearly underestimates his enemy (Keeble 196). All Orfeo’s military efforts
end up in vain as she suddenly disappears leaving no man to witness how it happened. The Fairy
King exposes Orfeo’s incompetence as a man and in his military, especially due to his waiting
until the next day to seize Heurodis in order to make a public show of his will despite human
efforts. The Fairy King is ignorant, however, to the capacity of Orfeo’s art even in comparison to
the unfathomable power of the Fairy.
The first time Sir Orfeo tries to save his wife from the Fairy King in the garden, he fails, but his second attempt to save her in the Fairy castle is successful. The difference between the two situations is the harp. In the orchard, he gathered his best military force in a scene that seemed to be the picture of a solid defense, but the queen disappeared anyway, without so much as a struggle. Orfeo is alone in the second encounter, displaying physical weakness and age from his time in the forest, with none of his men and nothing with which to arm himself except for his harp. Despite the hopeless appearance of this second encounter, Orfeo saves his queen from the Otherworld. The harp was the only way into the Fairy kingdom and it is the only way out if he wants to leave hand-in-hand with Heurodis. As Orfeo stings his harp, he renders his Fairy audience speechless as they all gather around him to listen with obvious delight in his music. After he plays, the Fairy King announces his delight and instructs Orfeo to name his fee, giving Orfeo an opportunity to claim a boon. When Orfeo demands the woman who sleeps beneath the ympe-tree, the King has no choice but to honor the contract of his honest word and Orfeo and Heurodis are free to escape the Otherworld, a feat of which no other man can speak. The value of truth and the beauty of art are binding in the Fairy World, where even the best human military effort is useless.

A happy ending seems in order at this point in the poem, but Sir Orfeo still has obstacles to overcome with his harp. He must return to his kingdom and reclaim the harmony that was once a part of his life. The harp plays a major role here as well. Orfeo’s homecoming is in disguise, as he keeps the part of a poor minstrel and lodges with a beggar and his family. Determined, Orfeo slings his harp over his shoulder and goes into the city where he is welcomed as a minstrel by his own steward, who also does not recognize him. After listening to the musicians play a melody together at the castle, Orfeo plays his harp alone for his home audience.
and they all agreed it was the best sound they had ever heard. Only after the music does the steward recognize the harp. Orfeo takes this opportunity to test the loyalty of his steward and finds him faithful in his grief when he discovers the fictitious fate of his lord, Sir Orfeo. After testing his audience, Orfeo exposes the truth with a final soliloquy. Faulk states “The contents expose Orfeo as the true king even while form and phrasing reveal to be a true bard. The information Orfeo supplies the courtiers constrains them to comprehend his identity at last” (Faulk 259). Upon Orfeo’s homecoming, the harp is the catalyst for his welcoming by the steward, for his testing of the loyalty of his courtiers, and for the exposition of his identity as Sir Orfeo. Harmony is restored as he is recrowned in his kingdom. Life in Thrace seems to have returned to the way it was before the disruption by the Fairy King, representative of the “other.”

The structure of the tale of Sir Orfeo also strongly speaks to the significance of the harp and the redeeming quality of art. The fact that the poem itself begins as well as ends with the music of lays and bards is not unimportant in showing the relationship between Orfeo and the redeeming quality of the artist. The poem begins “We redeth oft and findeth y-write, / And this clerkes wele it wite. / Layes that ben in harping / Ben y-founde a ferli thing . . . In Breteyne this layes were wrought / First y-founde and forth y-brought, / Of aventours that fel bi days, / Wherof Bretouns maked her layes, / When kings might ovr y-here / Of ani mervailes that ther were, / Thai token an harp in gle and game / And maked a lay and gaf it name. / Now of this aventours that weren y-falle / Y can tell sum, ac nought alle. / Ac herkneth, lordings than ben trewe, / Ichil you telle of “Sir Orfewe”” (Laskaya 1). The poem introduces the idea of the bard as storyteller and that the recording of history’s important events and people depends on the harpers’ lays. The ultimate brief section of the poem focuses on the harpers as well. “Harpours in Bretaine after than / Herd hou this mervaile bigan, / And made herof a lay of gode likeing, / And nempned it
after the king” (Laskaya 12). The significance of the harp is emphasized throughout the poem, but it is important to note that the poem itself would not exist without the harper and his lays. In this way, it could almost be said that the stories of all the other humans who are held in the sort of purgatorial state in the Fairy World could have been sung if only the news had been caught in the hands of a harper.

He may not have intended to become the hero in redeeming the harmony of his world when he set off in exile for the wilderness, but Orfeo himself describes the occupation of minstrels as wanderers, never knowing where they will next end up. It may seem like he leaves in complete poverty when he abandons his kingdom in heartache, having lost or left everything he held dear, but he was not in poverty at all as long as he has his harp. Keeble suggests that the poem’s audience may assume “not only that in his harp he found pleasure and happiness, but that therein lay his sole comfort and stay, and by his harp, by his fidelity and integrity, he will come to final victory” (199). Orfeo did not lie to the Fairy King when he identified himself as a minstrel and he was under no false disguise as a poor minstrel upon his homecoming. Orfeo is the minstrel, the artist; therefore, he is the only one who could have restored harmony by defeating the Fairy World that disturbed his quality of life, saving his wife, and coming home to reclaim the crown through his redeeming art. His artistic efforts restored harmony and brought Orfeo final victory in Thrace and in the Otherworld.
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