

Marriage and Otherworlds: the Classical Underworld and Medieval English Faerie

English authors of the Middle Ages clearly saw a connection between the classical Underworld, the realm of the dead, and “Faerie” (with its variety of spellings) or “Elfland,” the realm of fairies. Chaucer has the most explicit example of this connection when he writes in *The Merchant’s Tale*:

Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,
And many a lady in his compaignye,
Folwyng his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,
Which that he ravysshed out of Ethna
Whil that she gadered floures in the mede—
In Claudyan ye may the stories rede,
How in his grisely [grim] carte he hire fette [stole] (1015-1021).

Pluto as “kyng of Fayerye” comes as a shock to the modern reader—Pluto should be the name of the king of the Underworld, the land of the dead. The first thought is that Chaucer means something else, but as the passage goes on it is very clear: this is the Pluto who, as we know from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, “ravysshed,” that is, abducted, his “wyf, the queene Proserpyna” while she “gadered floures in the mede”—and he even gives an antique source, Claudian, a late fourth-century Latin poet (Chaucer would not have known Greek or had access to any Greek texts).

This continuum of classical and medieval and the unapologetic morphing of classical stories into medieval ones is particularly apparent in *Sir Orfeo*, where the classical myth of Orpheus becomes not about a man seeking his dead wife from the Underworld but a man seeking

his fairy-snatched wife from Faerie. The unknown poet of *Sir Orfeo* does exactly what Chaucer does in equating the Underworld and Faerie. But can the myth of Orpheus be the same myth if Eurydice does not die and if Orpheus does not go to the land of the dead to save her? How is being abducted by fairies in any way the same as dying? The answer lies in the depiction of the Otherworlds—Faerie and the Underworld—in both classical and medieval English texts and folklore. In Vergil's *Georgics* (4.453-527) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10.1ff.) we get a similar version of the Orpheus and Eurydice story, in which Eurydice is bitten by a snake, dies, and goes to the Underworld. In Ovid and Vergil, the Underworld is described as being underground, dark (the dead "lack light", *luce carentum*, in Vergil 4.472 and the path from Erebus is "obscure, thick with opaque darkness," *obscurus, caligine densus opaca*, in Ovid 10.54) at the end of a downward-sloping path (*adclivis [...] trames*, Ovid 10.53) that, when Orpheus is returning, leads up to the upper breezes (*superas [...] ad auras*, Vergil 4.486). In the fairy tale "Childe Rowland," Rowland must go into a green hill and "through a long passage" (400) to where the light "was a sort of twilight or gloaming" (400) in a rough-walled "grotto" (401). Elfland is depicted as a sort of dimly-lit, underground place, much like classical Orcus. The (non-famous, human) inhabitants of both places are similar: in *Sir Orfeo* (387-404) the hero finds many similarly (seeming) dead and bound (in madness and enchantment) humans who parallel in specific detail the actually dead figures in the Underworld whom Orpheus finds in Vergil's account (4.475-480). Furthermore, in the king of Elfland's green hill in the story of Rowland, Rowland's two brothers, who went before him to try to save their sister Burd Ellen, "lay in a trance in the corner of the hall" and then awake "as from a profound sleep, during which their souls quit their bodies" (403). Humans in both the Underworld and Faerie often either are dead or seem dead.

The final connection between the Underworld and Faerie is abduction and marriage. In

“Childe Rowland” and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, a girl is abducted from her family and taken to the otherworld to be married to the king of that realm. This theme plays out in a subtler way in *Sir Orfeo* as well, and Apuleius’ myth of Cupid and Psyche also draws together abduction by and marriage to a nonhuman entity, separation from family, and a kind of death to the mortal self.

Select Bibliography

Ashliman, D. L. *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language, Based on the Aarne-Thompson Classification System*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Jacobs, Joseph, ed. *English Fairy Tales*. 1890. Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2007.

Jamieson, R. “Rosmer Haf-Mand, or the Mer-Man Rosmer.” *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*. Edinburgh: James Ballantyne and Co., 1814. 397-410.

Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. 1961. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Spearing, A. C. “*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender.” *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*. Eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert. Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2000.