

ALESSANDRA PETRINA

“ARISTEUS PASTOR ADAMANS”: THE HUMAN SETTING IN  
HENRYSON'S *ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE* AND ITS KINSHIP WITH  
POLIZIANO'S *FABULA DI ORPHEO*

The possibility that Angelo Poliziano's *Fabula di Orpheo* influenced Robert Henryson in his composition of *Orpheus and Eurydice* has been the object of frequent debate in twentieth-century criticism on the Scottish poet.<sup>1</sup> Demonstrating Poliziano's importance for Henryson's poem, or the role of the Italian humanist in Henryson's cultural background, appears a hopeless task, since the very little that is known of Henryson's life does not allow anything more than hypotheses about his much talked-of visits to the Italian courts, his reading of the Florentine humanists, or even his knowledge of the Italian language. At the same time, however, a comparative reading of the two poems clearly shows points of similarity, since in both cases the reader can notice a resolute parting from the classical models, and the introduction of motifs belonging to courtly literature conventions.

Though both dependent on the tradition related to the myth of Orpheus, Poliziano and Henryson, in different ways, have gone far beyond it, exploring new paths that have brought them to striking convergences. An analysis of *Orpheus and Eurydice* and of the *Fabula di Orpheo* makes it possible to highlight, through their authors' use of different devices and motifs, a humanist way to the treatment of the myth. The “kinship” of my title acquires a new, not totally expected connotation: a cousinship, a relation as of two codices belonging to the same stemma but independent from each other. The aim of my research in this paper is the identification of this shared distinctiveness, the analysis of the distance the two poets have gone, and at the same time the analogies one could find even if it was not necessary to suppose any direct contact. The result could be the delineation of (in historical terms) a late medieval, or, in literary terms, a humanist way to the myth of

Orpheus, found by poets living in different milieus but sharing some common cultural background.

Much depends on what we intend by humanism, and on whether a definition of humanism in Italy and in Scotland may lead us to discover more analogies or differences between the cultural contexts in which the two poets under discussion grew. While Italian humanism has been the subject of much critical debate, Scottish humanism still awaits a definition; in fact, even as far as English humanism is concerned we are still beholden to Robert Weiss' study on the subject – a fundamental work, still unsurpassed for range of observation.<sup>2</sup> Weiss' book, however, is now over sixty years old, which means that many of its assumptions have been invalidated by more recent studies. If, in the case of English humanism, a thorough critical updating is necessary, for Scottish humanism the discussion has been limited so far to the literary aspects of the phenomenon, and the relation between literary production and ideology has been very little investigated. We may accept P. O. Kristeller's definition of humanism as "the general tendency of the age to attach the greatest importance to classical studies",<sup>3</sup> a definition which can be applied to both Poliziano and Henryson (though we do not know much about the latter's cultural activity, apart from the poems he has left us), and use this attention towards classical antiquity, and the use of classical texts as literary models, as a practical starting point for our discussion of the two Orpheus texts. Any more detailed definition, which would take into consideration the humanists' activity as teachers or as rhetoricians, is rendered less practical by the very little information we possess on the Scottish poet.

The essential preliminary step in the comparison between *Orpheus* and *Orfeo* is to frame the two works from a historical and literary point of view. Establishing a date of composition for the two poems could enable the critic to envisage in chronological terms the possibility of their being related. Unfortunately very little can be said on this point, even if something is known of the circumstances accompanying the birth of the *Fabula*. It appears that Poliziano's *Fabula di Orpheo* was written between 1478 and 1483. Though any attempt to narrow this period has been subjected

to much controversy,<sup>4</sup> it is probable that the play was actually composed in 1480, in two days, upon Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga's request.<sup>5</sup> It is more difficult to establish the date of composition of Henryson's *Orpheus*, since we have no indication which might be of any help; it must also be added that, unlike the *Fabula*, this text was linked to no particular festive occasion, so critics have been less bothered with chronological queries. All that is known is that Henryson probably wrote his poems between 1460 and 1488, and possibly later: so the possibility of his having read or seen or heard of Poliziano's work is not to be excluded.<sup>6</sup>

The second, and certainly more relevant, preliminary question is the definition of the literary background, and in this case I would like to confine my exposition to the essential Latin sources — Virgil, Ovid, Boethius. The story of Orpheus finds its origin in Greek myth and literature, but here the question is one of which texts were more readily accessible to both poets, and would be considered *auctoritates* in the fifteenth century. The earliest Latin source is Virgil, who in his *Georgicae* (IV, 453-527) introduces for the first time the relation between Eurydice's death and Aristeus' insane love, linking the latter to the Orphic myth. Unlike what happens in the Greek tradition, Virgil devotes an extremely long space to Aristeus, son of Cyrene and Apollo, and true protagonist of the story<sup>7</sup>. Orpheus' story, and in particular the detail of Eurydice's death, are in fact told by Proteus in a flashback, as an explanation of the wrath of the gods against Aristeus:

illa quidem, dum te fugeret per flumina praeceps,  
immanem ante pedes hydram moritura puella  
servantem ripas alta non vidit in herba.  
(ll. 457-9)

The link between Aristeus and Orpheus is simply functional to the wider context of Book IV, and no parallel is established between the two characters or the two stories. As a consequence, neither Eurydice nor Aristeus' love for her is given any autonomous space. Even the settings differ widely: while Aristeus, the persecuted bee-keeper, lives in a world of trees and animals, Orpheus, after the brief interlude “along the river” (“per flumina”) in which Eurydice finds her death, undertakes his quest or quells his despair in a most un-Georgical landscape, among “Taenarias etiam

fauces, alta ostia Ditis” (l. 467), or in a scenery of rocks and ice (ll. 517-8). Virgil's influence on the humanist poets seems to have been restricted to the introduction of the Aristeus motif, and possibly to some touches concerning Orpheus' grief.

The more frequently quoted Ovid, on the other hand, probably has a less relevant influence in this particular instance. Ovid, who devotes to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice a passage of his *Metamorphoses* (X, 1-77), has read Virgil, and presupposes the same of his readers; some passages of the story are consequently omitted or understated. Aristeus is not mentioned, the serpent remaining the sole cause of Eurydice's death. The story is given in extremely terse, concise terms: Orpheus' journey is matter-of-fact; his prayer, that so moves every infernal creature, comes straight to the point. Eurydice, on the other hand, is given some moving lines, both in the first half of the story:

nam nupta per herbas  
dum nova naiadum turba comitata vagatur,  
occidit in talum serpentis dente recepto,  
(ll. 8-10)

and when Orpheus sees her among the dead:

Umbras erat illas recentes  
inter, et incessit passu de vulnere tardo.  
(ll. 48-9)

However, it is difficult to see any demonstrable link with the two fifteenth-century poems under discussion.

The case of Boethius is decidedly more complex. The passage devoted to Orpheus in his *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (III, metr.xii), makes no mention of Aristeus: the stress is solely on Orpheus' sadness and on his attempted rescue of Eurydice, who is barely mentioned, having no autonomous personality. As is well known, the expression “Aristeus pastor adamans” comes not from Boethius but from the English Dominican Nicholas Trivet's early fourteenth-century gloss to the Boethian text.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while Boethius' influence on Henryson's poem appears to be of an indirect nature, and practically negligible in the case of Poliziano, Trivet's gloss is of great importance for the Scottish poet, as can be seen, for instance, if the episode of Aristeus' pursuit and Eurydice's death (ll. 92-126) is taken into

consideration. Henryson's section on this episode is enlarged from Trivet's "hic uxorem habuit Euridicem, quam cum Aristeus pastor adamans eam uiolare uoluisset, fugiens per prata calcato serpente interiit et ad inferos descendit", and the adjective "adamans", indicating the violent ecstasy of the first onset of love, is taken by Henryson as the key to Aristeus' character. In his gloss Trivet goes further than the exposition of the story: he gives an allegorical interpretation of the characters and their actions, and, after reading Orpheus as *pars intellectiua* and Eurydice as *pars affectiua* (a reading that has many points of contact with the tradition of the *Ovide moralisé*), inevitably stumbles on the problem of Aristeus. Virgil, who was only interested in a narratively sustainable explanation of the curse persecuting Aristeus, transformed this hitherto blameless bee-keeper into a potential rapist and an indirect murderer. Trivet solves the problem by interpreting Aristeus as *uirtus*; his desire for Eurydice is therefore virtue's natural inclination to influence the *pars affectiua*. Eurydice is made to be the cause of her own grief, since the field across which she runs to escape from Aristeus represents *amena presentis uite*, and the serpent is the *inferior sensualitas* to which Eurydice stoops. However, the allegorical interpretation jars somewhat at a narrative level, and Aristeus' double nature — violently negative at a literal level, virtuous (with some straining) in the allegory — remains a literary problem that will have to be faced by the humanist poets.<sup>9</sup>

The interminable bibliography on Orpheus and the connotations acquired in his contacts with various cultures are clear indications of the impossibility of circumscribing the subject and highlighting in detailed terms either Poliziano's or Henryson's contributions to the renovation and continuity of this tradition, especially if we attempt to focus on the protagonist, a semi-divine figure, half-way between magician and musician, who has gradually become a myth for Western culture. The medieval treatments of the story frequently show a tendency to transpose it into courtly terms — a process certainly reflected in the protagonist, whose attempt to rescue Eurydice from Hades is easily ranged, along with Alcestis' sacrifice, among the supreme examples of devotion.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, this same journey, and

Orpheus' extraordinary musical abilities, are liable to undergo allegorical interpretation or can be easily read in Christian terms. The two poems under examination seem to show that the newly awakened interest for classical tradition that marked humanism both in Italy and Scotland directed the poets towards a different, partly original reading of the myth. The mediaeval inheritance is still present, particularly as concerns the second half of the story; it is even more evident in Henryson, who feels duty bound to conclude his narration with that overlong *moralitas* at which many critics still mourn. At the same time the reader witnesses the introduction of a new mode, half-way between courtly and Arcadic, which forms the concern of the present section.

The tragical story of Orpheus and Eurydice can be divided in two parts, sharply distinguished by setting, events and typology of characters. The first part takes place in a pleasant valley somewhere in Thrace, the second in various sections of the kingdom of the dead. The first, touching on Orpheus and Eurydice's love and on the latter's sudden death, held little or no interest for classical and early medieval tradition, which dedicated only the scantiest attention to it. It is inevitable that the most successful innovations on the part of both fifteenth-century poets should be concentrated here, and particularly on the two characters of Eurydice and Aristeus, who, though playing such a crucial role in the terrestrial part of the story, had been pointedly ignored in previous versions of the legend. Even in their more or less standard roles, they cause more curiosity than the predictable Pluto and Proserpina, since their arrival in the Orphean tradition is certainly later; but, more importantly, they are relevant because their human status allows the poets to consider them in contemporary terms, to negotiate them within a humanist setting, creating different links between the characters and the myth or classical tradition constituting their background.

The humanist poet is thus presented with a changed situation: Orpheus has been transformed by mediaeval tradition into an *amans fin*, and this transformation, together with the new light thrown on Aristeus, leads almost inevitably to a

highlighted parallelism between these two impetuous lovers, one licit and one illicit (not that this detail would unduly bother a humanist poet). They are both driven by passion into fatal mistakes, and are both, to all intents and purposes, the killers of the woman they love.<sup>11</sup> Eurydice, on her part, plays a perfect role for a courtly setting: she belongs to the ranges of the innumerable, passive Emilys and ladies fair who, without actually doing anything apart from walking in a garden or a meadow green, raise a havoc of unimaginable proportions.

In both poems, Eurydice and Aristeus are soon (and, from an aesthetical point of view, unfortunately) swept away by the course of events to give place to Orpheus' otherworldly experience, and at this point the two poets, each in his own way, return to the safer context of erudite quotation: Henryson gives us a tortuous and occasionally dreary journey through the spheres, with an unprecedented exhibition of musical knowledge; Poliziano makes Orpheo deliver a learned eulogy of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, directly proceeding to quote Virgil, Ovid and other classical sources in the original, while the unearthly journey, considerably shorter than Henryson's, constitutes a good occasion to display scenic delights. Incidentally, here we have a measure of the two poets: where Poliziano resolves a possibly uncongenial section with elegant, functional swiftness, Henryson considers it vital to demonstrate first of all that he has studied his lesson. For a good instance of this point, compare the passages in the two texts describing Orpheus' meeting with the infernal creatures and the most renowned souls in pain, from the Furies to Tantalus: in a very orderly manner, Henryson devotes one or even two stanzas to each, making exact references to the task or torment of the character in question. Hitherto he had been mainly interested in the love-story aspect of the myth, occasionally offering his personal interpretation of the characters; now, following more closely the Boethian tradition, he turns to an encyclopedia of netherworldly horrors, for a sum total of 54 lines. Poliziano gives the following six lines to Pluto:

I' veggo fixa d'Ixion la rota,  
 Sysifo assiso sopra la sua petra  
 e le Belide star con l'urna vota,  
 né più l'acqua di Tantalò s'arrettra;

e veggo Cerber con tre bocche intento  
 e lle Furie aquietate al pio lamento.<sup>12</sup>  
 (ll. 183-8)

It is evident from this that a full knowledge of Greek mythological lore is already presupposed of the spectator. Poliziano's touch is possibly lighter, though here, as in Henryson, the depiction of hell is a mere repetition of classical *topoi*.

It is in the description of the events preceding Eurydice's death and Orpheus' divine adventure that a new tone is set for the poems, a tone that seems to draw the poems into the humanist intellectual context. Here both poets have the best opportunities for exercising their poetic powers, for an exploration of genres and modes that depended only on their own curiosity and imagination. This is especially true in the case of Henryson. The presence of myth or of a strong literary tradition to whom he feels beholden seems to stump him only occasionally; more often, Henryson's true brilliance shows in his free handling of the poetic tradition at his disposal: the possibility of working in a completely new direction of his own making<sup>13</sup> allows him momentary escapes from erudition that result in memorable scenes. Two such episodes are to be found in *Orpheus and Eurydice*: one is the justly praised lament of Orpheus (ll. 134-81), the other is the appearance of Eurydice shortly before her death:

I say this be Erudices the quene,  
 Quhilk walkit furth in till a Maii mornyng,  
 Bot with a madin, in a medowe grene,  
 To tak the dewe and se the flouris spring;  
 Quhar in a schawe, ner by this lady ying,  
 A bustuos herd, callit Arystyus,  
 Kepand his bestis, lay wnder a bus.  
 And quhen he saw this lady solitar,  
 Barfute with schankis quhytar than the snawe,  
 Prikkit with lust, he thocht withoutin mar  
 Hir till oppres — and till hir can he drawe.  
 (ll. 92-102)

In its brevity, the passage is unforgettable. Eurydice had hitherto been reduced to a dramatic pretext; now, once again, as had been the case with *Sir Orfeo*, she appears to have found her role as a “lady ying”, who, overlooking her mighty queenly status, is walking with only the company of a maiden, avoiding Ovid's embarrassing *turba naiadum*, and enjoying the simple pleasures of taking the dew and admiring the

flowers. The very routine vagueness, almost the abandon of the description, together with the focus on a few surprisingly realistic details, sets this scene very much apart from what has preceded it, and creates a new Eurydice for the reader; she may have some points of contact with the dainty Herodis of the anonymous *Sir Orfeo*, but some of the elements in her portrait (she is a rich and *mychti* queen, not simply a fair lady) make this character more complete and original.<sup>14</sup>

It would be misleading, however, to think that Henryson has abandoned one literary convention, deriving from the classical inheritance, only to fall into tamely following the courtly love one and doing no more. The bucolic setting chosen by the Scottish poet, corresponding to a certain extent to the one chosen by Poliziano, differs from the latter in its pervasive sense of impending doom. Poliziano, who underlines the novelty of Aristeus' courtship through the use of metre and with the introduction of some comic relief figures such as the two *pastori schiavoni* Mopso and Thyrsis,<sup>15</sup> creates a pleasant, almost homely, Arcadia: we hear the accents of Northern Italian dialects while the shepherds, searching for a lost calf, come tumbling down the mountain slope. The metre, variegated and occasionally experimental (particularly when a comic effect is intended, as in ll. 88-95, or in the Bacchic episode), contributes to this atmosphere. The bucolic surrounding is not without its more gently melancholic notes, and these are provided by Aristeus, clearly an upper-class shepherd, who speaks extremely choice Italian and is given the sweetly haunting song “Udite, selve, mie dolce parole” (ll. 54-87).

Henryson's Arcady is likewise pleasant, though decidedly less merry than Poliziano's. There is no comic relief here, but a first glimpse of the tragedy to come, already anticipated in ll. 890-1, when the married couple's bliss has been described:

Lyke till a flour that plesandly will spring,  
Quhilk fadis sone, and endis with murnyng.

These lines, coming just before the May morning scene, rob it of some of its sweetness, introducing the *et in Arcadia ego* motif; the scene itself opposes a female figure's delicate portrait with that of a “bustuous herd [...] prikkit with lust”. Unlike Poliziano's Aristeus, almost a country squire consumed by longing, Henryson's

shepherd strikes a jarring note, introducing an excess of earthiness in the episode. This is fittingly accompanied by the subtly grim landscape of treacherous bushes, and also by the sudden change befalling Eurydice once Aristeus catches sight of her — the “lady ying” is apparently reduced by Aristeus' ogling into a “lady solitar”, “barfute with schankis quhytar that the snawe” (l. 100).<sup>16</sup> Lines 100-1 seem to be the *volta* of the passage, suddenly abandoning any pretence of Arcadian prettiness and establishing a rough and urgent tone of primal desire and flight for survival. The later treatment of the kingdom of the dead and the final *moralitas* serve to adjust this impression rather than cancel it.

In this strangely modified version of Arcadia not only Eurydice's role but also her status is changed from what was established in literary tradition. The most important departure concerns her social position, and the detail with which it is described.<sup>17</sup> The perfection of the courtly love lady appears enforced by an allusion to her worldly goods (“haboundand in riches”, l. 75), a wry reference to a matter-of-fact attraction in the context of pastoral idealisation of the myth. The poet goes further: in her netherworldly apparition Eurydice is much changed, and, in keeping with Scottish folklore on the subject, has not only lost much of her beauty, but has withered and become lean and deathlike, as if any vitality or bloom had forsaken her:

[...] Erudices he knewe,  
 Lene and dedelike, pitouse and pale of hewe,  
 Rycht warsch and wan and walowit as the wede.  
 (ll. 348-50)

The rhetorical strategy of infusing very graphic images tinged with local references seems recurrent with Henryson, as is evident in the case of *The Testament of Cresseid*.<sup>18</sup> In the poem under examination, he applies this technique not only to Eurydice, but to Aristeus. The latter's case is more complex. The crux is the ambiguity of his role, substantially deriving from his uncertain mythological status, and especially due to Virgil, who first introduced the traditionally chaste bee-keeper into this scene of violent love and tragedy. Poliziano and Henryson, with opposite intentions, add a further element of ambiguity by making evident reference to his social status. The Italian poet, as we have seen, depicts a genteel shepherd, of

cultivated speech, and evidently the owner of the livestock the two *pastori schiavoni* are tending.<sup>19</sup> His mad pursuit, though the ultimate cause of the tragedy, is introduced by “Udite, selve, mie dolce parole”, which is not only one of the highest points of the *fabula*, but a decisive step towards including Aristeus in the pastoral convention. Besides, the *aria* presents a curious insistence on images of escape which shift the focus from the lady running away from her lover like a lamb from the wolf (ll. 68-9) to the topos of running time (ll. 72-3) and to Aristeus' own life consuming itself in this love (ll. 84-5). Poliziano's rhetorical strategy is clear: he deals with the ambiguity of Aristeus' role (an ambiguity underlined by the etymology of his name) by shifting the perspective towards the image of a consuming and self-consuming love, that is to say, by restoring the quasi-rapist within the folds of Arcady, and letting him be absolved by the lines he speaks. On the other hand, the poet does not seem worried by the allegorical or philosophical implications of the Orpheus myth, which might appear strange if we associate, as we should, Poliziano with the Neoplatonic Florentine circle of Marsilio Ficino.<sup>20</sup> It is possible, of course, that Poliziano understated the mythological background and the allegorical overtones because they were well-known anyway, at least by the type of audience the *Fabula* was intended for, and were, theatrically speaking, of little use to him.

Henryson, on the other hand, appears particularly troubled by Aristeus' dichotomy, especially as it was discussed, directly or indirectly, both in Trivet's commentary and in Boccaccio's *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, which might have been another relevant source for him.<sup>21</sup> In the *moralitas* (ll. 435-8) he faithfully follows Trivet, identifying Aristeus with “noucht bot gude vertewe”, yet there is no analogy with what is proposed in the fable. Aristeus' “lust” (l. 101) is very far from the virtue he is supposed to represent; while the reader is restored to the fulfilment of his/her natural expectations in the narrative context, s/he is also made aware that these expectations diverge from interpretative convention. In his 1966 article, Kenneth R. Gros-Louis reads Henryson's poem as the converging point of two literary traditions of the Orpheus myth, seeing in the *moralitas* a careful adherence to the

Ovidian or Boethian commentators, while the fable is influenced by the popular Orpheus, nearer to the anonymous *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that this reading may help explain the contradictions inherent in the character of Aristeus.

Yet Henryson does not limit this demolition of Aristeus' good name to highlighting his nefarious responsibility in the matter of Eurydice's death,<sup>23</sup> but proceeds to undermining the shepherd's status. The second stanza of the poem opens with the lines "It is contrair to the lawis of nature/A gentill man to be degenerate" (ll. 8-9). This stanza is a curious one, and finds no real justification in the story that is about to be narrated. It highlights, however, Henryson's preoccupation with nobility and its inherent *gentillesse*. In order to make Aristeus a more credible character, Henryson denies him the noble status that Boccaccio had granted him (a status implicitly confirmed by Poliziano), maintaining instead a well-defined social distance between him and the royal couple, Orpheus and Eurydice.<sup>24</sup> Poliziano had studiously ignored allegorical, erudite conventions only to turn to the more common pastoral convention of the love-sick shepherd; Henryson, with more daring if perhaps less elegance, creates a character who is further from the princely Orpheus and nearer to the Robene of *Robene and Makyne*, as the adjective used for him, "bustuos", demonstrates.<sup>25</sup> In the hands of the Scottish poet, Aristeus finds new justification to his action and a more interesting personality.

R.D.S. Jack's attempt to make Henryson's *Orpheus* derive from Poliziano's *Fabula* can be read as an attempt to give a literary pedigree to the former, and it certainly reflects the more general problem concerning Robert Henryson, an obviously erudite poet about whose erudition we know practically nothing outside the brief hints he drops in his poems. On the other hand, it is difficult to determine the literary value the fifteenth century would have attributed to the *Fabula di Orpheo*. Poliziano seems to have cared but little for this work, composed in a couple of days and, in his opinion, excessively stooping to the audience's needs.<sup>26</sup> It is true that the *Fabula*, the first theatrical work of the Italian Renaissance, enjoyed great fame and was frequently adapted and staged; it is also true that Poliziano, by deliberately

ignoring the Neoplatonic vision of Orpheus with which he was so well acquainted,<sup>27</sup> preferred a more popular and variegated version of the myth, thus offering with his work a pointed critique of the philosophical debate of his day.

Poliziano's literary operation is more complex than it appears at first sight. His literary and philosophical learning, years of training in the classics, a sure if hitherto undiscovered flair for theatrical writing, combined with a situation in which the occasional nature of the work and the limited time at his disposal forced him to do without a series of cultural and textual filters; if, therefore, the *Fabula* suffers from a certain lack of narrative unity and philosophical depth, it is also a text in which we can read, more clearly than elsewhere, the convergence of various literary modes, a veiled autobiographism, and Poliziano's attention to the theatrical and social *mores* of his day.<sup>28</sup> This same variety is mirrored in his use of various linguistic levels, whose collocation represents a precise rhetorical strategy. Henryson's mixture of genres in his *Orpheus and Eurydice* presents many analogies with what has just been described with regard to Poliziano. Poliziano appears more conscious and sure of his abilities, his resources and his audience, and is less careful of the impression he has to create. In Henryson the effort to impress is often noticeable, to the detriment of the readability of the poem. Yet the convergence of literary modes, the conflation of genres, seems the key-note for the reading of both works. In Henryson the most visible consequence of this contamination is the distance between fable and *moralitas*: though there are frequent instances of this distance in late medieval poems, in this case it may lead to outright contradiction, as is exemplified by the treatment of Aristeus, the *bustuos herd* becoming the symbol of *gude vertewe*.<sup>29</sup> *Orpheus and Eurydice* is indeed a new, strange and elaborate poem, attempting to draw together irreconcilable traditions, showing strong links with the Middle Ages but at the same time highlighting a new way to the treatment of the myth.<sup>30</sup>

Although the "contamination" of genres may lead to some unhappy solutions, such as the contradiction described above between the delineation of a character and its symbolic meaning, it also opens interesting possibilities in the representation of

episodes such as Eurydice's death, which represents, particularly in the setting chosen by Henryson, the brusque disruption of a narrative *topos*. The courtly presentation of the princely marriage (ll. 74-95) presupposes courtly characters, and the reader is in a sense misled by the apparition of Eurydice in the meadow (ll. 92-5), obviously very much at ease in her setting. A beautiful morning in May, a garden, a lady walking: all this presupposes a young man coming along (or squinting from above through prison bars), seeing the lady, hopelessly falling in love and spending the rest of his life in the attempt to win her without even speaking to her. Instead, with the arrival of Aristeus the scene, already looking as if it belonged to romance in the Middle English meaning of the term, once again marks the poem's distance from courtly love tradition. This change, or choice, concerns the mood of the characters as well as of the poem: a good instance of this point is the apparition of the maiden who has come to announce to Orpheus his loss (ll. 113-9), in a scene that reminds us of the atmosphere of folk-tales, or *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>31</sup> The courtly love style of stanza 14 has been read as an equivalent of Trivet's *amena presentis uite*, and this has led to postulating the use of this style on Henryson's part as a signal of a contradiction in the poet's intentions.<sup>32</sup> This hypothesis opens a new perspective on Henryson's use of genres as narrative signals: in order to deal with a difficult, contradictory story, he creates a literary pastiche, demonstrating once again, as with the *Fables*, to be a critically-aware poet who can even joke on his deliberate manipulation, when, after treating the reader with a long dissertation on the various musical modes, he writes:

Off sik musik to wryte I do bot dote,  
 Thar-for at this mater a stra I lay,  
 For in my lyf I coud newir syng a note.  
 (ll. 240-2)

It would therefore seem, stylistic or aesthetic considerations apart, that Robert Henryson achieves much more than Poliziano with his treatment of the Orphic myth. It must be remembered that Poliziano was (hurriedly) composing an occasional work, and deliberately eschewing any attempt at philosophical treatment or at allegorical interpretation. Neither poet, if the truth be told, writes a masterpiece. But if the reader can, to a certain extent, know what Poliziano wanted to achieve from the very

circumstances of the composition, in the case of Henryson we see a more complex operation: the Scottish poet attempts a re-evaluation of the sources of the myth which entails, particularly in the case of Aristeus, a comparison, even a mediation, between the classical tradition descending from Virgil and the medieval moralising interpretation proposed by Nicholas Trivet.<sup>33</sup>

ALESSANDRA PETRINA

*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Anglo-Germaniche*

*Università di Padova*

*via Beato Pellegrino, 26*

*35100 Padova*

*Italy*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> R. D. S. Jack (*The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* [Edinburgh, 1972], pp. 8-14) was among the first to note a series of similarities, particularly in the pagan setting and in the use of some minor figures, and to state the possibility of the Italian poet influencing Henryson. Jack went so far as to imagine Henryson actually meeting Poliziano in Mantua and attending the performance of the *Fabula* before the Gonzaga court. The critic is the first to admit that his fascinating hypothesis is mostly based on speculation alone: so far there is no factual proof either that the *Fabula* was actually performed in Mantua, or that Henryson could read Poliziano, in the original or in translation, though there may be a link between Henryson and the Neoplatonist circle in fifteenth-century Florence. On this point, see J. MacQueen, "Neoplatonism and Orphism in Fifteenth-Century Scotland: The Evidence of Henryson's 'New Orpheus'", *Scottish Studies* 20 (1976), 69-89 (p. 87). Other critics (D. Gray, *Robert Henryson* [Leiden, 1979], pp. 219-20; R. J. Lyall, "Did Poliziano Influence Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*?", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 15, 1979, 209-21) take up the question of Poliziano's influence and firmly refute it.

<sup>2</sup> R. Weiss, *Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1941).

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<sup>3</sup> P. O. Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance”, *Byzantion* 17 (1944-5), 346-75, reprinted in: *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, ed. M. Mooney (New York, 1979), 85-105, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Bigi, “Umanità e letterarietà nell'Orfeo del Poliziano”, *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 159 (1982), 183-215 (p. 187).

<sup>5</sup> See I. Maïer, *Ange Politien* (Geneva, 1966), p. 387. Both Maïer and V. Branca (“Poliziano a Venezia e l'origine veneziana della *Fabula di Orfeo*”, in: *Giorgione e l'Umanesimo veneziano*, ed. R. Pallucchini [Florence, 1981], pp. 109-27) establish more precisely the date as 12/13-14/15 June 1480. But see also G. Scavizzi, “The Myth of Orpheus in Renaissance Art, 1400-1600”, in *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. J. Warden (Toronto, 1982), pp. 111-62 (p. 117) (though he is rather unreliable on dating), and A. Tisconi Benvenuti, *L'Orfeo del Poliziano* (Padua, 1986), pp. 58-70.

<sup>6</sup> We also know that Henryson's *Orpheus* was printed in Scotland by Chapman and Myllar in 1508. See *Selected Poems of Henryson and Dunbar*, ed. P. Bawcutt & F. Riddy (Edinburgh, 1992), p. xi. M. P. MacDiarmid discusses the poem in his *Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 19-20, arguing for a date of composition between 1465 and 1472.

<sup>7</sup> It is generally thought that Virgil invented the theme of Aristeus' pursuit of Eurydice: see P. Dronke, “The Return of Eurydice”, *Classica et Mediaevalia* 23 (1962), 198-215 (p. 201). Dronke also suggests that Virgil invented the motif of Orpheus losing Eurydice through his own weakness in looking back at her (*ibidem*). But see also M. Detienne, “Orphée au miel”, in *Quaderni Urbinati di cultura classica* 12 (1971), 7-23.

<sup>8</sup> Trivet's text, datable around 1300, is reprinted, as concerns the section on Orpheus, in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. D. Fox (Oxford, 1981), pp. 384-91. Henryson explicitly acknowledges Trivet's influence at the beginning of his *moralitas* (ll. 421-4). On this point, see also J. MacQueen, “Poetry — James I to Henryson”, *The History of the Scottish Literature*, ed. R. D. S. Jack & C. Craig (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 55-72 (p. 65).

<sup>9</sup> This is not meant as a complete assessment of classical sources on the myth of Orpheus; however, it is useful to remind the reader that Henryson and Poliziano would have probably read also Fulgentius' *Mythologiae*, 3.10, as well as Boccaccio's *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, V.12-13. As for

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Henryson, Chaucer's influence may also be discerned in the identification of the classical underworld with fairyland (see his *Merchant's Tale*, IV.2039 and 2227), though the Scottish poet might also have read Chaucer's translation of Boethius; many details concerning Orpheus' journey through the spheres are taken from Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, though Henryson appears to have been the first to link this account with the figure of Orpheus.

<sup>10</sup> See D. Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), p. 212: "Medieval poets were especially fond of Orpheus the lover. They saw him, in courtly garb, as an 'amans fin', as a lover of exemplary faithfulness, a 'loyal amoureux'. Boethius' proverbial lines, 'quis legem det amantibus', which echo through medieval literature, are adapted to courtly elegance". A similar concept is expressed by P. Vicari in her "Sparagmos: Orpheus Among the Christians", in *Orpheus*, ed. Warden, pp. 63-83 (p. 64): "Although the men of the Middle Ages never forgot the magical musician with his entourage of beasts and trees, that aspect was put in abeyance in pictorial art and narrative literature and had to bide its time until the Renaissance, and the Medieval Orpheus was primarily the lover of Eurydice who descended into Hades to win her back."

<sup>11</sup> In his "Umanità e letterarietà nell'Orfeo del Poliziano" (pp. 192-3), E. Bigi considers Aristeus' "sfrenato ardore", a foreboding of Orpheus' excessive love, afterwards mirrored once again in the episode of the Bacchae.

<sup>12</sup> "I see Ixion's wheel now stilled, Sisyphus sitting on his stone, and the Danaides with their empty urn, nor does Tantalus' water now withdraw; and I see Cerberus with his three mouths intent, and the Furies becalmed at Orpheus' pious lament" (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> The best example of this approach is *The Testament of Cresseid*, in which new material is included, offering an original conclusion to the traditional story.

<sup>14</sup> The unusual quality of this description can be appreciated if we compare it with a near example, i.e., the description of the lady walking in the garden in *The Kingis Quair*. There, in spite of the youth of the lady and the freshness of the scene, the poet appears weighed down by symbolism and feels it necessary to load his lady, generally identified with King James I's future wife Joan Beaufort, with costly jewels and other allegorical paraphernalia (for a full discussion on this point, see A. Petrina, "*Donne Gentili*: A Comparison between Dante's Beatrice and the Lady of the *Kingis Quair*", shortly to

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be published in the Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature, ed. Mapstone). For *The Kingis Quair* as a possible source for Henryson, see J. B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase *pastori schiavoni*, used by Poliziano in the text of the *Fabula*, should indicate shepherds of Slavic origin. The poet uses it simply to underline Mopso's and Tyrsi's humble origins; their speech, coloured and rendered occasionally obscure by dialectal words and accents, is more Northern Italian than Slavic.

<sup>16</sup> Not everything in this "humanising" process is proof of Henryson's innovation: Orpheus' lament, with its refrain "Quhar art thou gane, my luf Erudices?", is indebted to Virgil (IV, 523-27), who has Orpheus' severed head still murmuring "Eurydice".

<sup>17</sup> C. Elliott's comment is very appropriate: "She is given certain secular and sensual touches; she is *haboundand in riches* (l. 75), and feels no shame (which suggests emotion raised above reason) in offering to Orpheus *wordis sweit and blenkis amorus* (l. 81)" (*Robert Henryson. Poems*, ed. C. Elliott [Oxford, 1963], p. xviii). The narrative choice in this passage may remind the reader of the description of the Lady in *The Kingis Quair* (st. 50); there is, of course, no proof that Henryson actually read the *Quair*, though Bawcutt and Riddy, in their *Selected Poems of Henryson and Dunbar*, p. x, consider it a likely possibility.

<sup>18</sup> Appropriately, K. Wittig writes: "When, in *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Henryson gives a survey, a report, he is trite and pale; but when he can intently visualise, *vivify*, a scene, down to the details of his own environment, there he is grand: as in Eurydice's flight (ll. 103ff.), the memories of the Complaint (ll. 134ff.), the scenes of the search (ll. 247-309)" (*The Scottish Tradition in Literature* [Edinburgh & London, 1958], p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> For this choice Poliziano might have followed Boccaccio's suggestion: in the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium* (5, xiii) Aristeus is simply a *pastor*, but of noble descent, being the son of Apollo (which makes him, ironically, Orpheus' brother) and of Cyrene.

<sup>20</sup> According to V. Branca ("Momarie veneziane e *Fabula di Orfeo*", in *Umanesimo e Rinascimento. Studi offerti a P.O. Kristeller* [Florence, 1980], pp. 57-73), Poliziano's work can be profitably compared to the *momarie*, popular shows for the Venetian Carnival; hence the use of the

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word *fabula* in the title, and *fiesta* in the stage direction. N. Pirrotta (*Li due Orfei: da Poliziano a Monteverdi* [Turin, 1975], pp. 5-45) sees, with some hesitation, a relation between the *Fabula* and the *strambotti* tradition (the *strambotti* being short poems, of folk origin, generally accompanied by music, very popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy). These influences could account for the swiftness of the narration and the insistence on comic details, even when they do not seem very well timed, as in the final scene.

<sup>21</sup> The suggestion, made by J. MacQueen (“Neoplatonism and Orphism”, pp. 69-89), is firmly refuted by R. J. Lyall in his “Henryson and Boccaccio: A Problem in the Study of Sources”, *Anglia* 99 (1981), 38-59.

<sup>22</sup> “Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages”, *Speculum* 41 (1966), 643-55. On the possible relationship between *Sir Orfeo* and Henryson's poem, see also J. B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, pp. 196-8; C. Mills, “Romance Convention and Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*”, in *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature: Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. A. J. Aitken, M. P. McDiarmid & D. S. Thomson (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 52-60.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, P. Bawcutt and F. Riddy (op. cit., p. 219) speak of “playful irony”.

<sup>24</sup> In his edition of Henryson's poems C. Elliott writes: “Aristaeus is *pastor* in Virgil; but Henryson gives him the vague function of beast-keeper (l. 98). Here too a change of narrative detail seems to work thematically. A domestic, 'pastoral' role is replaced by one much vaguer. Allegorically, beasts are the sensual passions, and here such types of carnality are governed, 'kept' by Aristaeus. The narrative innovation serves the *sentence*” (p. xviii). This is an interesting hypothesis, though possibly imposing on the text a meaning that was not intended by the poet.

<sup>25</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* does not register Henryson's use of the word, but explains it as “rude, crude, unmannerly, lacking in polish”. An analogous adjective occurs at line 12, *rusticate*, and in this case neither *MED* nor *OED* register it.

<sup>26</sup> See I. Maier, *Ange Politien*, pp. 390-2. Maier also quotes a letter Poliziano wrote to Carlo Canale, in which he expresses a decidedly negative judgement on his work.

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<sup>27</sup> See his reference to Ficino's lyre, “longe felicior quam Thracensis Orphei [...] veram ni fallor Eurydicem hoc est amplissimi iudicii Platoniam sapientiam revocavit ab inferis” (*In coronide* [Basel 1553], l. 310).

<sup>28</sup> On the autobiographical overtones, see V. Branca, “Poliziano a Venezia”, p. 123; on more general questions of rhetorical and stylistical variety, see E. Bigi, “Umanità e letterarietà nell'*Orfeo* del Poliziano”, p. 194, and L. Russo, “L'*Orfeo* del Poliziano”, *Belfagor* 8 (1953), 269-81 (p. 273).

<sup>29</sup> “The basic form of Henryson's poem may be compared to the emblem, in which the picture is also followed by a *moralitas* in verse.” This beautiful but not altogether convincing simile is in R. J. Manning, “A Note on Symbolic Identification in Henryson's 'Orpheus and Eurydice'”, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 8 (1971), 265-71 (p. 266).

<sup>30</sup> This aspect of the poem has been extensively analyzed by K. R. R. Gros-Louis (op. cit.); the critic devotes an attentive study to the relationship between fable and *moralitas*.

<sup>31</sup> Concerning this scene J. MacQueen, in his “Neoplatonism and Orphism”, writes: “The servant girl too describes Eurydice's death in terms of capture by the fairies [...] Only the servant girl, however, uses this term, and it seems probable that Henryson intended his primary audience to distinguish her reaction as belonging to a level intellectually and philosophically lower than that which I hope to show is implicit in the remainder of the poem” (p. 70). Such a reading supports my hypothesis on Henryson's acute genre awareness. See also P. Vicari, “Sparagmos”, p. 76: “Henryson's fifteenth-century *Orpheus and Eurydice* stands between the Celtic and medieval Latin versions of the story. The author was obviously a man of classical learning, well acquainted also with Neoplatonism and the allegorical interpretations of ancient fable”.

<sup>32</sup> “A moral judgement on the part of the persons described” (J. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson. A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* [Oxford, 1967], p. 33). See also R. L. Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979): “The setting into which Eurydice walks is a typical courtly love setting, but Henryson is using it as the scene of a dangerous and uncontrolled action of passion. This is also a possible vestige of the romance tradition” (p. 154).

<sup>33</sup> I wish to thank Giovanni Petrina for his help with the Latin texts.