

Is Heurodis Eurydike: An Analysis of Three Manuscripts

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the making of the Middle English Romance *Sir Orfeo*, by investigating discrepancies in the spelling of the heroine's name. The heroine's name is commonly known as Heurodis, whose spelling appears in a more dominant manuscript of the three extant manuscripts that contain *Sir Orfeo*: MS Advocate 19.2.1. While there is no doubt *Sir Orfeo* owes its existence to the far distant Greek mythology of Orpheus, there are many differences between the two works. Therefore, it makes sense to consider the possibility that another work existed in-between Orpheus and *Sir Orfeo* that might have influenced the plot of the Middle English version. In this paper three variant forms of the heroine's name are analyzed, and a theory is presented as to why there are three variant forms of the heroine's name and how the name Heurodis came into existence.

1. Previous research on the origin of *Sir Orfeo*

There is no argument the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* has its primary origin in the Greek mythology of Orpheus with an adaptation. However, the two versions have some substantial differences to allow for speculation that *Sir Orfeo* may have had some sources other than the Greek mythology. One such story line in *Sir Orfeo* that deviates from the Greek story of Orpheus is its happy ending. In *Sir Orfeo*, the heroine Heurodis is reunited with Orfeo and lives a happy life. In the Greek mythology Orpheus, a happy ending does not exist. Instead, the heroine Eurydike is taken back to the underworld as Orpheus looks to see if Eurydike is behind him.¹⁾

Despite the differences between the two versions of the story, the main characters, a husband and a wife, are the same in both stories. What is intriguing about these two stories is while there is consistent use of the king's name, Orfeo or other similar variant forms, there is a lack of consistency in the use of the queen's name. In order to approach the question of in what sources *Sir Orfeo* has its origin, this paper

1) There is no reference to the name of the king of the fairy land. Given the importance of his role in the story, it is intriguing his name is not mentioned in the story.

focuses on distinct differences in the spelling of the heroine's name. The name of the queen in *Sir Orfeo* is not Eurydike as in the Greek mythology of Orpheus, but has three variant forms.²⁾ In A, the spelling of the queen is Heurodis, while in H it is Erodys and in B Meroudys. These three names are used consistently in each manuscript, except for in H. Based on the analyses of all three manuscripts, A in facsimile edition, H in digitized form, and B in its original form, the variant forms are not the result of scribal errors in copying a manuscript, but instead are intentionally used as a uniform name in each manuscript: Heurodis in A, Erodys in H, and Meroudys in B.

2. Analysis of texts: three variant names of Heurodis

There are three extant manuscripts of *Sir Orfeo*, all of which display distinctive spellings for the name of the heroine. In A, Heurodis is the name consistently used to refer to the heroine. This name is often regarded as the prototypical name of the heroine because of its relations to other manuscripts. A is considered to be closer to the unattested manuscript that precedes these manuscripts. H and B are considered to have descended from A. This section examines where the name Heurodis occurs in the three texts.

2.1. Heurodis in MS Advocate 19.2.1

MS Advocate 19.2.1 shows the use of the variant form Heurodis. The study of the manuscript suggests A is the closest to the unattested 'Sir Orfeo', from which all three of the manuscripts were copied from. This more direct connection of A to the copied manuscript is probably why the spelling Heurodis is considered the prototypical name for the queen in *Sir Orfeo*. There are three occurrences of the queen's name in the text. It is consistently spelled Heurodis.

The king hadde a quen of priis
That was y-cleped Dame Heurodis
The fairest leuedi, for the nones,
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 51-53)

This ich quen, Dame Heurodis,

2) *Sir Orfeo* is contained in three extant manuscripts, MS Advocate 19.2.1, MS Harley 3810 and MS Ashmole 61 (Hereafter referred to as A, H, and B respectively). A is considered to have been composed in early 14th century while H and B are thought to have been composed in the 15th century).

Tok to maidens of priis
& went in an vndrentide,
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 63-65)

To a leuedi he was y-come,
Biheld, & hath wele vnder-nome,
& seth bi al thing that it is
His owen quen, Dam Heurodis.
(Bliss, 1966, p. 29, l. 319-22)

Referring to the spelling Heurodis in A, Bliss states the name Heurodis comes from Latin or Greek Eurydice, though he does not provide a detailed explanation as to how the name Eurydice transformed into Heurodis.³⁾ Heurodis probably has its origin in the Greek name Eurydike, but the process of transformation of the name cannot be explained just by referring to Latin or Greek origins. A possible process of transformation will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Donovan, in contrast, compares Heurodis to Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas in ancient Rome. Donovan's argument is based on the phonetic similarity of Heurodis and Herodias as well as the fact both heroines are wives of an important figure head.⁴⁾ Though we cannot entirely rule out the possibility presented by Donovan, it is too big of a leap to assume the author of H replaced the original name Eurydike, adopted Herodias and changed the spelling to Heurodis.

Between Bliss and Donovan, Bliss's argument that Heurodis is connected to Eurydike seems more plausible than Donovan's as there is not enough literary evidence to connect Heurodis to Herodias in the making of *Sir Orfeo*.

2.2. Erodys in MS Harley 3810

In MS Harley 3810, there are three occurrences of Erodys, with one minor deviation, Erodysse. Though there is one difference in the spelling, consistency is mostly displayed.

3) "*Heurodis* is clearly derived from Latin or Greek *Eurydice*; since the diphthong is always spelt *ew* in this text, the *u* probably represents the voiced spirant [v] of Byzantine or medieval Greek." (Bliss, 1966, p. 52).

4) M. J. Donovan, "Herodias in the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*", *MÆ* xxvii, 1958, p. 162-5

That is clepyd Dam Erodys,
The feyrest woman for the nonys
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 50-51)

That ilke queen, Dam Erodys,
Toke with hur .ii maydenes of pris,
& walked in the vnder-tyde
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 61-63)

He knew hur by the semelant, y-wys,
His owe lady, Dam Erodyse,
(Bliss, 1966, p. 28, l. 307-308)

The variant form Erodyse can be regarded as a minor deviation from Erodys. During the Middle English time where *Sir Orfeo* was composed, the influence of French and/or Latin was strong, therefore it was naturally the case the original spelling from the source language was retained, while in other cases, the word was adapted to the English convention

Bliss argues H was written from memory by a minstrel, therefore it had many omissions, transpositions, and corruption compared to A.⁵⁾ If H was made based on the memory of a minstrel, it is not surprising the name of the heroine has changed from Heurodis to Erodys.

The spelling Erodys can be explained by the linguistic phenomenon of hypercorrection. The spelling in H could have been a variant of Heurodis created by a scribe that had knowledge of the French language. If H transmitted orally from A and was composed in an environment where Norman influence existed in England, it is possible the initial sound of Heurodis was silent and thus created the reconstructed spelling of Erodys in H. Phonologically, both Heurodis and Erodys would have been pronounced similarly if pronounced by French speakers.

2.3. Meourdis in MS Ashmole 61

In MS Ashmole 61 there are three occurrences of Meroudys. The spelling Meroudys is consistently used. The following are examples:

5) Bliss, 1954, p. 18.

That was callyd Dame Meroudys;
A feyrer lady than sche was one
Was neuer made off flessch ne bone;
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 44-46)

Than þe quen, Dame Meroudys,
Toke with hyr ladys off grete price
And went in a vndron-tyde
To pley hyr in an horcherd syde.
(Bliss, 1966, p. 7, l. 53-56)

Hym thouȝt þat it was in all wyse
Hys awane quen, Dame Meroudys.
(Bliss, 1966, p. 29, l. 323-324)

Bliss argues the spelling Meroudys in B is due to how the text was transmitted orally. All the instances of Meroudys are preceded by the word *dame*. Bliss's argument is the combination of Dame followed by Eurydice induced the addition of the sound /m/ to the initial position of the heroine's name when recited by minstrels.

To support the point presented by Bliss, all occurrences of Meoudys in B are preceded by *Dame*. As the final -e in Middle English, in most cases, have the shwa sound /ə/, it is likely the French sound of the heroine's name /ərodis/ assimilated with the preceding /m/. It was not just /m/ that allowed for the spelling of Meroudys, but the final /ə/ in *dame* also helped with the assimilation of the sounds. As the assimilated sounds are both vowels, the final /ə/ of *dame* and the initial /e/ of Erodys, provided an easy linguistic environment for the merger of these two sounds. This phonetic environment that surrounds Erodys is likely to have contributed to the existence of this variant form.

Shuffleton proposes another argument.⁶⁾ He argues the reason why Heurodis is spelled as Moroudys could have been because of the scribe Rate, who was responsible for the copied manuscript. He postulates Rate misread when copying from A and H and wrote Iueroudys. Although Shuffleton proposes such a theory, he is also cautious enough to point out that such a theory is not entirely persuasive given Rate's common writing characteristics. Shuffleton writes, 'Rate seems to have misread the name of the heroine, spelled "Heurodis" in

6) Shuffleton, 2008, p. 585

Ak and H. There is a faint possibility that he wrote “Iueroudys,” since the three connected minim strokes of “m” can occasionally be read as “iu”, however Rate usually used a long descending stroke to write an initial “I,” thus “Meroudys” seems more likely.⁷⁾

After analyzing the original text, it was concluded that all of the occurrences of the name in the manuscript were intelligible enough to see the spelling in the manuscript is Meroudys. Based on the paleographical analysis of B manuscript, Bliss’s argument for the odd spelling Meroudys is most convincing.

3. Possible Sources of *Sir Orfeo*

With regards to the production of Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, there is a huge time gap and physical distance between the Greek mythology Orpheus and the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*. There is speculation that *Sir Orfeo* was produced under a strong influence by Breton lais prevalent in Brittany. Substantial similarities of motifs have been observed in *Sir Orfeo* and Breton lais, however although is no extant work that directly connects *Sir Orfeo* and Breton lais. Kittredge argues the source of Breton lais to be in *The Wooing of Etain*, an Irish legend, thereby suggesting Middle English *Sir Orfeo* has a Celtic influence.⁸⁾ Although Bliss argues there is not much commonality between *Sir Orfeo* and *The Wooing of Etain*, common features do exist between these two works⁹⁾. The incorporation of the land of fairies in *Sir Orfeo* is oftentimes used as an argument for Celtic influence.

4. Phonological analysis

We now turn our attention to the phonological aspects surrounding the heroine’s name. Eurydike and Heurodis arguably have more phonetic resemblance than Eurydike and Erodys or Meroudys. *Sir Orfeo*’s possible connection to Marie de France and Breton lais supports its source as a French text. In the process, the Greek spelling Eurydike could have transformed into Eurydice, however as the existence of such a source has not been be attested, it remains only a possibility and not a definitive answer. If the Brittany route poses a likelihood, an argument could be formulated that the spelling Heurodis was the result of a phonetical presentation of the name through its oral transmission.

The mechanism as to how such a phonetic change could have taken place must be considered. Documents exist to support the story of Orpheus reaching the Roman Empire as well as France. In France, there have

7) Shuffleton, 2008, p. 585

8) Kittredge, 1964, p. 102-111

9) “The only points of resemblance between *The Wooing of Etain* and *Sir Orfeo* are the preliminary visit of the fairy prince, and the ranks of armed men stationed to protect the queen; neither of these features is very remarkable, and their presence might well be due to the coincidence” (Bliss, 1966, p. xxxiv).

been an opera piece that is based on the story of Orpheus. In the process of being transferred to the Roman society, the Greek name Eurydike could have been spelled Eurydice based on the Latin writing convention. The final /ke/ in Eurydike, when orally transmitted, could have been interpreted by speakers of Vulgar Latin to have the spelling Eurydice, whose final sound is /tʃ/. The shared sound for Greek Eurydike and Classical Latin Eurydice had different alphabetical representations in each language.

Once the spelling of Eurydice was established in Vulgar Latin, Eurydice was likely to have been transferred into French as Eurydice. This time the Latin spelling remained, but the sound changed to */euridis/ with the final /tʃ/ changing into /s/. The sound /s/ was the common sound for the final -ce in earlier French.¹⁰⁾

Thereafter, the spelling Eurydice */ɔirodis/ was established in French and brought to England. People in England recognized the name of the heroine as having the sound */ɔirodis/ as represented phonetically. At this stage there was no gap between the sound and the hearers' recognition. However, when the sound was processed in the mind of the hearer, with the assumption that it was a French name, people reshaped the spelling by adding an initial /h/. What was orally transmitted into England as */ərodis/ was now orthographically reconstructed as Heurodis using the French silent 'h' at the beginning of the heroine's name. The non-attested Eurydice in an English manuscript became Heurodis. Readers or scribes of the story, in contrast, when they saw the spelling Heurodis, registered it as Heurodis with the phonetic presentation of /hju:ro:dis/, which was a natural linguistic adaptation for English speakers.

5. The connection between Old Norse and Anglo-Norman

Another hypothesis, which is considered weaker, with regards to the name change of the heroine in *Sir Orfeo* is the influence from Old Norse. Brittany, where Breton lais were produced, had strong influence from Nordic countries as the area was under attack by Vikings in the 10th century. There is also documental evidence to show Nordic countries received literary influence from France. Such influences suggest there were interplays between these two literary cultures. There is evidence Hákon Hákonarson, King of Norway in the 13th century, commissioned translation of lais of Marie de France.¹¹⁾

Nordic influence on the composition of *Sir Orfeo*, through the channel of Breton lais, is a possibility that should be further explored. Evidence to support such a theory can be found in the Volsunga saga composed in the 13th century. There is a striking phonetic resemblance between the heroine Hjördis and Heurodis. In addition, the characters are both figures of importance, Hjördis is a goddess and Heurodis is a queen.

10) Asterisks are attached to phonetic symbols that are unattested and hypothetically presented in this paper.

11) Rikhardsdottir, 2013, p. 26

There are also Old and Middle English texts that show influence of Old Norse to support such a theory, for example, Middle English *Havelok* is a well-known English literary work that show obvious influence of Old Norse. If *Havelok* was composed during the Middle English period and exhibits traces of Old Norse influence, it is reasonable to assume other Middle literary works were also influenced.

There is not enough evidence to substantiate a firm link between Nordic mythology and Middle English Romance. However, the possibility of Nordic influence on the formation of the name Heurodis is something that is worthwhile investigating in the future.

6. Conclusion

This paper provided a possible explanation as to how the original Greek heroine name Eurydike, from the Greek mythology of Orpheus was transformed into the Middle English Romance heroine Heurodis from *Sir Orfeo*. It is challenging to explain how two names with such obvious distinctions can refer to the same character. To tackle this obstacle, three approaches were taken: 1. reference to genealogy of the three Orfeo manuscripts, 2. phonetic features of the two names, 3. source study and transmission of the text. A detailed analysis of the name forms of the heroine and the surrounding environments of the texts presented the possible hidden link between Eurydike and Heurodis, thus postulating the idea Heurodis, in fact, derives from the Greek Eurydike rather than coined by the author/scribe of Middle English *Sir Orfeo* in MS Advocate. 19.1.2.

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Is Heurodis Eurydike: An Analysis of Three Manuscripts

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