Direction by indirection: A study of begging devices in Widsith and Sir Orfeo.

Eileen M. Bilsak

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DIRECTION BY INDICTION:
A STUDY OF BEGGING DEVICES
IN WIDSITH AND SIR ORPEO

by
Eileen M. Bilsak

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In Honor of My Parents,
Michael T. and Marie Titus Bilsak

With All My Gratitude and Love
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ABSTRACT

The Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith* and the medieval lay-romance *Sir Orfeo* are examined in terms of their use of begging devices. In *Widsith* the poet manages to create a successful begging poem through indirection by speaking for himself through the guise of a fictitious scop, by exaggerating his qualifications as a minstrel through *Widsith*’s impressive catalogues, and by suggesting generous reward through *Widsith*’s claims of having received, in the past, valuable gifts. The most persuasive device of all, however, is the poet’s consistent emphasis on the duty of the king to bestow gifts, and on the power of the scop to record his generosity for all time in song. The medieval lay *Sir Orfeo*, on the other hand, carries on in much the same tradition in its attempt to secure reward from the audience. The begging devices in this poem, however, serve only a secondary purpose: The ruse of association, exaggeration of need, reluctance to name a specific gift, reminders of the noble responsibility of gift-giving, and appeals to the audience’s desire for fame merely work within the structure of the poem, whereas the same devices in *Widsith* are overt and explicit, and control the structure.
INTRODUCTION

Direction by Indirection:

A Study of Begging Devices

in Widsith and Sir Orfeo

1. THE ANGLO-SAXON SCOP

Because we live in a world where even the details of history are preserved and immediately accessible through media archives and computer banks, we sometimes find it unnerving to confront the relative lack of information existing about earlier ages. This is certainly the case when we approach the oral poetic traditions of Anglo-Saxon England: most of what we know about these poets and their poetic activities must be gleaned painstakingly from the few extant poems themselves or else cautiously pieced together and applied to the poetry after exhausting studies of the oral poetic traditions of actual modern tribal societies. More specifically, Beowulf, Widsith, and Deor yield most of the little evidence available to scholars about the Anglo-Saxon oral poets, and Milman Parry's 1934-35 investigation of the oral formulaic narrative tradition of the Yugoslavian guslars (followed by Alfred Lord's study of the same tradition after Parry's death in 1935), allows us to make generalizations about the oral narrative poetry of a contemporary local culture that can be applied to, and therefore shed light on, the oral narrative poetry of the dead Anglo-Saxon
Still, notwithstanding these research methods available to us, "there remain many questions we would like to ask an Anglo-Saxon poet if only we could interview one, questions that would reveal to us aspects of his art and the function of his poetry in society."  

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1 Jeff Opland, Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry: A Study of the Traditions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 1. See also Milman Parry, "A Comparative Study of Diction as one of the Elements of Style in Early Greek Epic Poetry," in The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 421-431. This is Milman Parry's ten-page Master of Arts thesis (University of California at Berkeley, 21 December 1923) in which he revolutionized the established view of Homeric scholarship towards the composing process of Homeric verse. Here he proposes that the poet's use of recurrent epithets was based on metrical convenience rather than contextual appropriateness, and that these epithets are drawn from a traditional pattern rather than from individual poetic creation (p. xxvii). His scholarly work on Homeric diction has, according to Adam Parry, "significantly changed the way we read the lines of the Iliad and the Odyssey. But this is not the aspect of his work which has most caught the imagination. What has made him best known, and has most aroused interest in his writing, is his sense that all poetry is divided into two great and distinct realms, the literary and the oral, that each of these realms has its own laws of operation and its own values, so that each is almost a way of looking at the world; and finally that, of these two realms, the oral is in some way the more natural and the more satisfactory. (p. xxxiv)"

2 Opland, p. 5. In his work cited above, Jeff Opland provides an excellent review of research concerning the status of scholarship on the oral poetic tradition. Generally, he finds the early work on formulaic theory by Milman Parry and Albert Lord convincing to a degree and useful to an extent, but on the whole restricted in their views. He objects to Magoun's application of the Yugoslav tradition to Old English poetry on the grounds that he was "too bound by the figure of the Yugoslav guslar as an exclusive model of an oral poet: thus, the Anglo-Saxon poet had to
Jeff Opland, in his recent study, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, provides some well-reasoned answers to those questions we might reasonably ask. The song of the Anglo-Saxon poet before the second century, Opland explains, performed a serious function in society, providing the pagan king with eulogistic celebration which both supported and encouraged the king's ruling power. By the seventh and eighth century, however, after the introduction of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon society, the king no longer depended on the poet's eulogy to confirm his power but rather looked to the Pope for confirmation of his ruling power as transmitted from God. Thus, the tribal poet in seventh and eight century England was by necessity

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2 continued be just like the guslar. (p. 9) Similarly, he objects to Alan Jabbour's conclusion that the Anglo-Saxon tradition was primarily memorial rather than improvisational, explaining that both Magoun and Jabbour overlook the possibility that Anglo-Saxon poets may have been both improvisers and memorizers. Instead, Opland attempts to present a more complex view of oral poetic tradition that admits both improvisation and memorization by evaluating Old English poetry "within the context of what can be learned from all extant Old English and Anglo-Latin sources, from a comparative study of Germanic and Indo-European literature, and from a comparative study of analogous traditions surviving today. (p. 18)"

Here he presents the Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa as more analogous to Anglo-Saxon society than Yugoslavians because both are tribal societies that demand loyalty to the chiefs they follow; however, Opland concedes that "it might be argued that the southeastern Bantu analogue is less relevant than the Southslavic, since at least the Serbocratian and the Anglo-Saxon are Indo-European cultures. (p. 11)"

3 Opland, p. 29.

4 Opland, pp. 88-89.
forced to ply his trade outside royal circles and so had to refit his poetry for purposes of entertainment rather than eulogy. By this time the traditional poet probably fell in with travelling troupes, and found a place for himself among the "mimi, scurrae, histriones, and citharistae, the inoculatores and the saltatores, descendants of the Roman theatrical performers, (who) may have set the stage for the blurring of the distinction between tribal poet and entertaining singer to which the later Old English glosses beat testimony."\(^5\)

Before the distinctions blurred completely, however, the differences between the tribal poet, some of whom survived until the eighth and ninth centuries, and the wandering minstrel hinged on their function and performance:

...the poet eulogised contemporary personages whereas the harper entertained audiences professionally; the poet performed solo without accompaniment whereas the harper sang to the accompaniment (whether occasional or continuous) of his instrument. The harper may have purveyed songs dealing with contemporary personages, but his songs would probably have been explicitly narrative and could be appreciated by all his diverse audiences; the poet would tend to produce elliptical, allusive eulogies susceptible of immediate interpretation by an audience that was familiar with the events and personalities referred to. Thus the poet and his audience shared a community of experience, which was not necessarily true of the relation between the professional itinerant entertainer and his audience.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Opland, p. 95.

\(^6\) Opland, pp. 190-191.
Indeed, according to Opland, the scop was much more than an entertainer: he was a creator, a composer of eulogistic songs. The minstrel who borrowed songs or merely sang those he learned from other performers, then, was the gleoman. 7

Whether the Anglo-Saxon poet was well-received in his travels, however, is open to question. Critic Norman E. Eliason argues that the view of the Anglo-Saxon entertainer as set forth in L.F. Anderson's standard work, The Anglo-Saxon Scop (Toronto, 1903), is outdated and inaccurate. Anderson states that the scop "was esteemed by his contemporaries, not simply as the poet but also as the sage, the teacher, the historian of his time. His power of moulding public opinion secured for him marked consideration from the great and powerful." 8 Although this view is perhaps accurate when applied to the second-century eulogistic scops attached to one court, it is not true of the scops of later centuries when the distinctions between the scop and the gleoman were not so clear. Eliason argues instead that the scops may, indeed, have wandered from court to court, but that they were not necessarily honored or rewarded generously. 9 Here there seems to be a significant lessening of the distinction between scop and gleoman: both depended on their continued popularity as composers and entertainers for a livelihood, because few professional poets at this time were

7 Opland, p. 191.
9 Eliason, p. 191
Thus, it has been conjectured by scholars that the scop and gleoman probably came to be known by interchangeable terms, and they probably freely borrowed composing and performing skills from each other to make their product more marketable.

Because the scops came to be in such a dependent position to their audiences, having to rely on their favor to make a living, it is only natural to believe that the scops could and would use their composing talents to hint for generous rewards. Their begging, however, had to be done discreetly:

Begging was apparently rare in Anglo-Saxon times, the helpless being cared for then by the church, and the able-bodied earning their keep by their own labor or by loyal service to their lord. But even in a society thus structured to provide cradle-to-grave care for all, there were surely some whose need was overlooked or who chose to shirk or preferred not to live on alms. What begging there was must have been sub rosa. Thus, rather than offend their audience by blatant requests for funding, the scops had to direct their listeners to their pocket-books through indirection; the scops had to address themselves to the delicate task of lacing their entertainment with suggestions of generosity that would be neither obvious nor ignored. Widsith, in this writer's view, and in the views of W.H. French and Norman Eliason, p. 192.

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10 Eliason, p. 192.
11 Eliason, p. 192.
E. Eliason, is a stunning example of one such Anglo-Saxon begging poem.\textsuperscript{12}

ii. THE MEDIEVAL MINSTREL

The minstrels of medieval England were in an economic position similar to that of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. The medieval minstrels, however, were descendants of the troubadour tradition that came into England after the Crusades through the influence of William IX, Count of Poitou and Duke of Aquitaine (grandfather of Queen Eleanor, wife of Henry II), and they ultimately came to be the poor relations to their courtly troubadour cousins just as the gleoman played a poor second to the scop.\textsuperscript{13} The troubadours were cultivated and refined gentlemen, having passed through all the degrees of knighthood and having arrived at an elevated station of dignity. They were the composers of love songs, but they relied on the jongleurs who accompanied them to sing and play their compositions.\textsuperscript{14} Although financially well-provided for, the jongleurs eventually broke free from the limited courtly audience and style of the troubadour.

\textsuperscript{12}W.H. French, "Widsith and the Scop," \textit{PMLA}, 60 (1945), 623.


\textsuperscript{14}Rowbotham, pp. 97-98.
dours, perhaps because they yearned for more independence, perhaps because they were too many to meet the relatively small demand, perhaps because they responded to the restlessness that arose from the Crusades. Whatever the case, the jongleurs hit the roads looking for employment and came to be known then by the term we generally use for them today, the "wandering minstrels." 15

Without the protection and financial support of the troubadours, however, the minstrels were forced either to drum up a livelihood for themselves or perish:

[The minstrels] cast themselves upon the world, and the world, as they held, was responsible for their maintenance. Sometimes the world did not see the matter quite in the same light, and the gay and festive days of the wandering minstrels were interspersed with many gloomy ones, when the trilling of lutes and the warbling of innumer-able songs brought not a stiver to their coffers. 16

Even though modern scholarship has got rid of the floridity and sentimentality of such comments, it has done little to change what must be an accurate assessment of the state of affairs. Thus, the minstrel, like the gleeman was in an economic position such that begging was a necessity for survival.

Some minstrels, of course, had better fields to glean than others. According to Albert C. Baugh,

15 Rowbotham, pp. 165-168.

16 Rowbotham, pp. 171-172.
Minstrels were everywhere and of many kinds. They ranged from those attached to the household of the king or a noble, and who enjoyed a reasonable degree of security, to those who stamped the roads and were little better than vagabonds. Some were probably of limited range, having perhaps the ability to play an instrument and sing a few songs. But many must have had a repertoire suitable for a variety of occasions and a variety of audiences, whether in a village square or public house, on the one hand, or, on the other, a baronial hall or monastery.17

It is certain, nevertheless, that the minstrel, like the gleoman, had to acquire materials for his economic survival and at some point probably tried his hand at composing. As a result, the distinction between composer and performer blurs once again so that the modern reader is hard put to tell exactly how or by whom a poem in the oral tradition came to be composed.

Although most minstrels probably did not create their own materials, some were probably sufficiently talented to alter their materials to suit their dual purposes of entertainment and begging. Others, however, had to beg or buy their songs from professional poets who, according to Baugh, would very often flavor their work with appropriate begging devices for the minstrel who sang them:

With books as expensive as they were anything like a reading public did not exist. Since poets and versifiers were aware of this, they

wrote with oral presentation in mind, adopting a style, so far as they were capable of it, natural to live presentation. They could hardly have failed to put themselves in the place of the minstrel or to imagine themselves as addressing a body of listeners. Since the minstrels were to be a poet's publishers, he might as well include a suggestion of reward for the performer at the same time he provided suitable pauses for rest and refreshment.18

Thus, whether by the minstrel's own hand or by the hand of a professional composer, begging devices were woven into the fabric of the minstrel's song to encourage generosity in the audience. Such is the case of the medieval lay, Sir Orfeo, which in this writer's view applies many of the same begging devices used by the Anglo-Saxon poet of Widsith.

18 Baugh, pp. 9-10. In this same article, Baugh furnishes evidence to support this view. Among other examples, Baugh cites the closing lines of Havelok in which the performer asks for a silent prayer for the author, clearly suggesting written rather than oral composition of the poem:

Say a pater-noster stille
For him pat haueth þe rym maked,
And þerfore sele nihtes waked.

(Baugh, p. 7)
CHAPTER I

A Closer Look At Widsith

As an Anglo-Saxon Begging Poem

Scholars have been perplexed over the years by virtually every aspect of the Anglo-Saxon poem Widsith. Although the critics generally agree that the poem is made up of several ancient fragments, they generally disagree as to the date, order, and interrelationships of those fragments. One issue in particular, however, has captured and held critical attention: what is the purpose of the poem? Naturally, a variety of scholars have offered a variety of interpretations in their attempt to answer this question, but for the most part their arguments have been unsatisfactory. Indeed, their failure to explain the poem stems from their failure to take into account the high incidence of references in the poem to generosity.

W.E. French and Norman E. Eliason, however, are the two major critics who have recognized these references as the mortar between the parts of the poem, and both have explained the poem in terms of these references to generosity serving as effective appeals to the audience for liberality in its gifts to the wandering scop who recites the story of Widsith. French and Eliason are, in this writer's view, right on the mark in their theory that Widsith is a begging poem; nevertheless, this chapter will attempt to strength-
their position on this subject by taking a closer look at some of the problems in the poem and thereby shedding yet more light on 1) the "strange duality of character" surrounding the scop, Widsith, in the prologue (11:1-9) and the scop in the main body of the poem (11:10-134); 2) the seemingly non-organic catalogues in the poem; 3) the largely ignored references to gift-giving, and 4) the curious universal nature of the epilogue (11:134-143).

Critical approaches to some of these problems have been, to say the least, varied. According to R.W. Chambers, "the first English students of the poem regarded it as autobiographical, as the actual record of his wanderings written by a scop."

Although the opening and closing portions of the poem about Widsith's last journey include interesting details of the scop's life, and "make plausible enough autobiography," still "no one man could have seen all the individuals mentioned in the long Catalogues of Kings, or thulas, which take up some forty lines of the total of 143 in the text of the poem." Chambers, and later Charles W. Kennedy, accept the poem instead as

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a phantasy of some man, keenly interested in the old stories, who depicts an ideal wandering singer, and makes him move hither and thither among the tribes and the heroes whose stories he loves.21

Still other critics approach the poem differently. H.M. Chadwick and N.K. Chadwick view the poem as a vehicle for instruction,22 and Kemp Malone finds it to be a "vehicle of history."23 Similarly, George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie assert that the poem is a "conglomeration" whose original "stratification" is obscured, but that "the modifications which were later made in the poem were occasioned by a decline in interest in Widsith's own career, and a desire to increase the value of the poem as a compendium of geography and history."24 As mentioned above, however, W.H. French and Norman E. Eliason celebrate Widsith as an Anglo-Saxon begging poem.

Cutting across years of critical research and theories concerning the poem, French points to the largely ignored but oft-

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21 Chambers, p. 6.


repeated references to generosity in *Widsith* as indicators of the poet's purpose in writing the piece: to secure a patron. Indeed, French proposes

> that the writer was a scop; that his learning was merely professional; that his object in displaying it was not to teach or to construct a rhapsody on heroic themes; that far from being in retirement, he was striving to remain in active service; and that his ultimate aim in composing the poem or in reciting it subsequently was to interest a patron in supporting him.\(^2^5\)

French continues to say that in an effort not to appear "crass" in his quest for a generous patron, the poet had to present his qualifications indirectly rather than to simply blurt out his merits and his desire for gifts, so he invented a fictional scop, *Widsith*, through whose adventures he could demonstrate his competence and at the same time "point out the benefits he could bestow on a patron."\(^2^6\) Thus, in his endeavor to obtain financial security, the poet very ingeniously cites long catalogues of rulers and tribes as a "table of contents of his repertory," a display of his professional credentials. Unfortunately, according to French, "the tremendous learning of the poem...has caused the appeal for patronage to become lost to view."\(^2^7\)

Like French, Norman Eliason argues that *Widsith* is not the artless product of an inept poet. He claims that the scop

\(^{2^5}\) French, p. 623.  
\(^{2^6}\) French, p. 623.  
\(^{2^7}\) French, p. 624.
possesses "a strange duality of character...seeming to be a life-like human being and at the same time an utterly incredible one." Widsith, in short, is the poet's "alter ego," enabling him to make claims obliquely for himself through the fictional scop. Eliason, however, departs from French's view at points. He does not see the catalogues as any display of "tremendous learning" because they are simply old name-catalogues handed down from pre-literate days, and as such they are certainly no indication of the poet's repertory since it would be "a repertory too vast to be credible." Eliason also argues that the rewards mentioned in the poem are "too numerous and generous to be taken seriously;" therefore, it is likely that the poet is using a ruse to ask for rewards far beyond what he can ever hope to get: "this is the well-known begging dodge of asking for the moon in the hope of getting a cheeseparing." No critics before the present writer, however, have noticed the possible extent of the poet's subtlety in begging in the prologue. The poem begins with a nine-line prologue in which the poet introduces Widsith in the third person. Here the poet merely

29 Eliason, p. 188.
30 Eliason, p. 188.
reports that Widsith "spoke," "traversed the greatest number of tribes," and "received desirable treasure." But at the same time, these verbs, maegolade, geondferde, and Leðah, virtually summarize the content of the entire poem. Thus, the crafty poet of Widsith apparently gets to his point quickly in the first three lines and devotes the rest of the poem to developing that point: he who travels and speaks receives treasure. In addition, it might have been by happy chance that the poet chose to include here the formulaic phrase, "wordhord onleac": just as Widsith unlocks his treasure of words to distribute freely to his audience, so the suggestion subtly seems to follow that the audience will similarly unlock its treasure-hoard and distribute the same freely to him. It is possible that the poet has taken pains here to describe a cause-effect relationship between speaking and receiving treasure that is neither obvious nor obscure. Here it is possible that he has expertly planted the seeds in the minds of his listeners, and then goes about cultivating those seeds throughout the body of the poem in fond hopes of a good harvest.

The poet's subtlety in the prologue does not end here, however. Although it is true that the poet introduces Widsith in the prologue and takes care to provide realistic details of this scop's lineage and professional success (11.4-9) which help make Widsith appear to be a lifelike character, yet in the light of Widsith's far-reaching travels to courts spanning centuries that
are recounted in the body of the poem, his character also assumes a fantastic quality. Why, we are bound to ask, would the poet attempt to produce such a strange "duality of character"?

Norman Eliason argues that this dual image was purposefully created by the poet, "intended to serve as the poet's alter ego, for it is only thus that the scop's duality of character makes any sense."\(^{31}\) In other words, the poet created a fictional scop who was identifiable with the poet and at the same time utterly unconnected with the poet, so that this scop could make claims on his own behalf while at the same time indirectly making claims on the poet's behalf:

> The fictitious scop is thus a clever beggar's ruse, and...Widsith...is a begging poem...in which the poet is obliquely rather than bluntly appealing for something and thus both concealing and revealing his purpose.\(^ {32}\)

Although Eliason borrows this view from French, he does not give it the dimension French does, and neither one gives this approach the emphasis it deserves, for it is important to the poem. Rather than the fictitious scop, Widsith, representing only the poet (as Eliason would have it), French asserts that he should "personify the whole craft of minstrelsy."\(^ {33}\) If Widsith represents not only the poet but also all poets through the ages,

\(^{31}\) Eliason, p. 187.

\(^{32}\) Eliason, p. 188.

\(^{33}\) French, p. 623.
then the appeal for generosity in the poem is that much stronger: the appeal is not simply on behalf of a single scop, but rather on behalf of the whole craft of minstrelsy. The effectiveness of this ploy is stunning, then, because the would-be patron can look beyond the scop who stands before him in live performance and see the society of scops in other courts in other lands in other times; he can then see himself not only as an incidental patron to a solitary singer, but also as an important benefactor to the long tradition of the minstrel art itself.

Thus, the poet has skillfully achieved this "duality of character" to produce an oblique approach to begging, but perhaps the approach is even more oblique than anyone ever guessed: critics recognize that the poet is indirectly identified with Widsith, but they pass over the indirect identification of Widsith with all minstrels that French himself mentions only off-handedly. In this writer's view, then, in light of this new association, the heft of the poet's appeal is all the more weighty, yet still beautifully subtle. The poet is able to suggest not only that he has travelled to many courts, but also that collectively his minstrel brothers have traversed the world. By implication, then, the association of the poet and Widsith with the brotherhood of minstrels identifies the patron who might help Widsith with the brotherhood of kings who helped these minstrels survive through similar generosity. The suggestion is clear: if the patron wishes
to be numbered among the great, he should reward the scop as generously as the other patrons who have been called upon in the past.

Oddly enough, the very device that helps the poet generate and maintain this subtlety of suggestion throughout the poem has distressed many critics: what purpose do the catalogues, or thulas, serve in the poem? George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie are, perhaps, representative of those critics who do not see the catalogues as an integral part of the poem:

The narrative of the minstrel's own adventures...is broken up by several passages in catalogue form: first, the catalogue of kings (the "weold" catalogue), 11.18-34, and second, several catalogues of geographical names (the "ic waes mid" catalogues), 11.57-65a, 68-69, 75-87. These several catalogues do not form an integral part of the minstrel's story; rather they seem to have been inserted at random, without very close attention to their appropriateness or to the smoothness of the transitions.34

On the contrary, in this writer's view, these catalogues serve several important functions. They may, indeed, be "old name-lists from pre-literate days," as Eliason suggests, and Eliason is also probably right that the names listed in the catalogues are too extensive to be considered seriously as a "table of contents" of the poet's repertory. The poet, however, used these old name-lists deftly to advance his purpose: the recitation of these catalogues was calculated to appeal to the listener's respect for

34Krapp and Dobbie, p. xliii.
tradition, his interest in the scop as an entertainer, and his desire for fame; clearly these appeals were calculated to help loosen the patron's purse-strings.

As discussed earlier, the scop Widsith could not possibly have traversed the world visiting courts that span three centuries. Thus, it is probable that the poet here is conjuring up associations of the kings and tribes of the past in distant lands; therefore, by extension (and this point is neglected by scholars), wherever there has been a great king and great peoples, there has been a (great) scop (the greatness of the scop being implied). Again, by identifying Widsith with all minstrels, the patron is identified with all kings. It is not by accident that the catalogue of kings (11.18-34) immediately follows a seemingly innocuous comment by the scop that

sceal beod(n)a  gehwylc þeawum lifgan,
eaerl æfter oþrum  ædle raedan,
sepe his peodenstol  gehoon wile! (11:11-13)

(Every chieftain must live virtuously one lord after another, ruling his land, he whose throne is to flourish.)

36 Chambers, p. 190. All citations of the text of Widsith are from Chambers. Translation of line 13 is from Malone, pp. 36-37. Malone does not accept Chambers' emendation beod(n)a for the beoda of the MS text; therefore the line means 'each of men must live virtuously': "The men Widsith had in mind were presumably the fea monna of line 10, the rulers of the countries he had visited. By using beoda (rather than some other synonym of monna) the scop brought out the fact that each man was a member of some beod and must follow the customs of his beod. In administering justice and guiding the life of his people a Germanic king was expected to follow the common law, a body of folk practices handed down from
If the patron, then desires success, he must live virtuously, and the suggestion is not far off that living virtuously means giving generously as other kings had before him, since gift-giving was considered a virtue and a responsibility among Anglo-Saxon nobility.

According to Ernst Leisi in *Gold und Manneswert im Beowulf,* gift-giving was an integral part of a king's reputation and honor:

...a special condition must exist regarding...

wealth in general. One can gather this from the Old English words which express the idea of "rich." The words meaning "wealth" in Old English poetic speech are plentiful, but equally for our purposes, ambiguous: ēadig must be translated often as "rich," but sometimes as "happy, fortunate"; the same applies to sællic; wlonc means "rich," but in other contexts, "pride"; rīce means "rich," "mighty";

36 continued
generation to generation and hallowed by immemorial custom. The ways of prince and subject alike were governed by tradition. Thus, Malone's reading does not alter this writer's interpretation; rather, it heightens the possibility that this poem was composed by a scop for begging purposes because the poem, then, could be used to appeal to the responsibilities of his audience.

Although Malone would argue that this reference to reciprocal social responsibility was simply one of the "realistic touches" applied to the poem by a cleric author (p. 112), his view of the poem's authorship is unlikely because it would seem that such sustained attention to, and emphasis on, gift-giving as occurs in this poem goes far beyond what one would reasonably expect if it were intended only to create a more lifelike character. Indeed, in an article earlier than Malone's edition of the poem, French argues against the poem's cleric authorship: "Professor Malone has well remarked that in dealing with the undocumented past, one must accept probabilities because certainties are not available. Now the probability that a scop, in a poem of one-hundred and forty-three lines, would mention rewards a dozen times is very strong; the probability that a cleric, whose interest in the profits would be nil, would nevertheless allude to them frequently is very slender. He would have no motive for his act. (French, p. 625.)"
blaēd, "wealth" and "fame"; ār, "possessions," "charity" and "honor"; spēd, "wealth," "success," "virtue"; dugud, "wealth," "fame," and "virtue." We ascertain that there is no single word which represents wealth as a mere economic reality. It is impossible to speak of someone in Old English, "He is rich, but a bad and unhappy man," because encompassed in the idea of "rich" is virtue, or happiness, or both. This can only signify that that wealth means...a happiness, and that a close connection exists between wealth and virtue. The "rich" is also the "virtuous" and vice versa.36

Our understanding of the importance of gift-giving to the Anglo-Saxons, therefore, is a crucial factor here, because if the performer of Widsith were trying to extract gifts from his audience, it is only to be expected that he would remind his listeners of their duty to distribute gifts as a demonstration as well as a renewal of their reputations for greatness and honor.

Thus, when the poet of Widsith comments that "Every chieftain must live virtuously," he is saying that every king must give generously; and when the poet says, "one lord after another," he is simply prefacing the catalogue of kings that will follow, implying that the present king or nobleman will want to add his name to that illustrious list; and finally, when the poet says, "he whose throne is to flourish," he is referring to the prosperity of the kingdom that results from its ruler's generosity. Again, Leisi illuminates the close relationship between gift-giving and sovereign survival:

(The King) is the goldwine gumena, the "gold friend of men"; the sinergifa, "treasurer giver"; the bêaga brytta, "ring giver," or simply se rîca, "the rich one." His throne is the gifstöl, "the giving chair." Sinc brytnian, "to distribute treasures," has the meaning of "ruling." All these expressions point to the fact that giving was a function of kingship. Many situations attest to the fact that the king stood or fell by the power to give. Hroðgar's grandfather, even as a youth, had an "open hand" and for this reason earned a large, enthusiastic following. On the other hand, King Heremôd, whom Hroðgar cites as a warning, "gave no rings." For this reason he was a loner and, moreover, a "grim-hearted miser who came to a bad end while another who unhesitatingly gave gifts, seized the throne."

We can assume, then, that the poet's audience would fully realize the implications of lines 11-13 of Widsith's speech, although Widsith never directly applies that statement to his audience. Instead, he subtly uses the inclusive term, "gelwylc," and so this clever poet alludes to the specific responsibilities of his present audience by pointing out the responsibilities of kings in general.

The poet's facility with his material does not stop here, however. He also employs the catalogues to advertise his competence and boast about his past successes so that the patron will retain him. Again, the second catalogue (11.57-65a) is significantly preceded by a comment from the scop that

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37 Leisi, pp. 262-263.
Forpon ic maeg singan and secgan spell,
maenan fore mengo in meoduhealle,
hu me cynegode cystum dohten. (11:54-56)

(And so I may both sing and say my story;
declare before the company in the mead-hall
how men of great race were nobly liberal to
me.) 38

The poet indicates in this preface to the catalogue that he has
been received in the courts of "men of great race" and that they
were "liberal" in their gifts. Of this passage, Kemp Malone says
that "Here Widsith makes it clear that what he wants to bring out
is his success as a professional entertainer." 39

This point requires, in this writer's view, more emphasis.
The implication of these lines is that the poet has been in great
courts and has been successful there; therefore, the patron of the
court that he now visits (probably far less impressive than any
mentioned in the catalogue) has been given the privilege of re-
ceiving him in the same manner. The catalogue serves, then, as a
sort of exaggerated resume, through which the poet presents
himself as a highly competent and well-paid scop who has success-
fully entertained the best of courts. If the patron is interested
in him as an entertainer at all, he is likely to want to hire a
minstrel with such handsome (though inflated) credentials--
the patron is likely to want to experience the same kind of talent-
ed entertainment in his court that pleased such a wide variety of
other courts.

38 Chambers, p. 207.
39 Malone, p. 42. 25
Finally, the catalogues also help the poet appeal to his patron's desire for fame. According to Barbara Raw,

The main purpose served by poetry was entertainment, and in this the whole company could join, but it also had some more specialized functions which gave the poet a distinctive role. The kings and heroes described in Old English literature had an insatiable desire for fame, and one reason for patronizing a minstrel was to ensure that one's fame was recorded. Thus, by singing of the greatness and generosity of past and present kings and tribes listed in the catalogues, the scop implies that any generosity received of the present patron will be similarly repaid with recognition and immortality in song. Through his emphasis, then, on greatness and generosity, the poet very cleverly creates a situation in which it is clear that greatness is equated with generosity (i.e., those great kings were generous), and that generosity perpetuates greatness (i.e., these generous kings will forever be great in the scop's song).

Certainly the patron would be sensitive to the possibility of his fame and generosity being recited in a scop's song through generations in the mead-halls throughout the land. The attraction of this possibility would undoubtedly be great and figure largely in the patron's decision to retain or reject the scop. At the very least, the patron would want to avoid the suggestion that he was neither generous nor great, and he would very likely feel

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obliged to respond with some gift though the reward were not liberal. Indeed, the catalogues are far from inappropriate in this poem: they serve the poet well in his attempt to convince his patron that a long and respectable minstrel tradition is behind him; that he, himself, is a competent scop; and that great generosity could possibly be repaid with great fame.

Although the purpose of the catalogues may seem arguable to some, the purpose of the many references to gift-giving sprinkled throughout the poem is clear: Widsith is reinforcing his points that generosity is a nobleman's responsibility and that through the distribution of wealth he can win everlasting fame in song.

As noted earlier, the poet's first mention of gifts occurs within the first three lines of the poem where Widsith is described as having often received many treasures, and in lines 54-56 Widsith claims he will sing of the generosity of the lords he has served. In lines 65-67 he celebrates the liberality of Cudere, then shortly after in lines 71-74 he praises the gift-giving of Aelfwine, and in lines 90-102 he details the impressive gifts given to him by Eormanric and Ealhild. Here in particular (11.103-108), the scop takes care to explain that he has praised Ealhild's gift-giving far and wide in song in order to emphasize the cause-effect relationship between giving and praising. Finally, the epilogue (11.135-143) appeals generally to any nobleman who desires such fame and praise in his lifetime to reward minstrels.
Barbara Raw beautifully describes the poet's subtle and graceful appeal for patronage in these latter passages:

...when [Widsith] praised Ealhild's liberality, thus ensuring that her fame would spread through many lands, all who heard him, men who were good judges of the matter, said that they never heard a better song. There is a delicate hint that faced with such a man, who had travelled so far, had met so many heroes, and had received from those excellent people the greatest of praise, it would be churlish to value the present song any less generously. And then, having established himself by his impersonation as the equal of this most successful of minstrels, the poet gracefully returns to the present with an appropriate and persuasive generalization: all minstrels, like Widsith, go wandering through the world, and wherever they go they meet one who is wise and open-handed, who desires to gain fame before all perishes, light and life together.41

The many references to gift-giving in the poem, therefore, are not pointless particles lodged in a disunified poem; rather, they collectively and gradually build the poet's case for generosity, culminating in the general appeal for reward in the epilogue.

Indeed, the epilogue underscores the idea that the poet here is after financial reward, but more interestingly, it points back to the poet's earlier strategy of casting the particular in the form of the general as an indirect form of persuasion. Just as this particular poet, wanting gifts, cast his personal appeals for reward in the form of the general appeals of an ageless scop, so

41 Raw, p. 44.
too he has cloaked his last bid for generosity in the more general guise of a universal appeal to any lord who was "a connoisseur of songs"\(^{42}\) to reward any minstrel who "tells his need" and performs for him. In this writer's view, it seems clear that the poet is obliquely begging for himself, taking great care to outline both the immediate and future advantages of awarding gifts to minstrels: 1) he will be counted among those who are "connoisseurs of song" (1.139); 2) he will be considered "bounteous with gifts" (1.139); 3) he will "exalt his fame before his Chieftains" (1.140); 4) he will secure praise on earth (11.140-142); and 5) he will win glory under heaven (1.143).

Thus, the careful reader will discover that the poet has purposely presented these advantages in order of ascending importance as a final effort to appeal to his patron's generosity through a desire for fame: if the patron remains unmoved with the idea that he could have personal fame as a patron of the arts, then he might be moved by the idea of having his reputation celebrated in the mead-halls as "bountiful" and "exalted." If these advantages fail to move him, then the poet provides broader and more far-reaching advantages to stimulate his patron's impulse to reward. The poet offers praise for his valorous deeds on earth,

\(^{42}\) Malone, p. 58. Here Malone prefers the translation of gleawne as 'connoisseur of song' rather than 'skilled in song' to emphasize the poet's meaning that the lord being addressed was a patron of poetry and not necessarily a poet himself.
and finally promises everlasting glory under the wide expanse of heaven itself for those lords who are liberal in their gifts to the wandering scop. This epilogue serves as a powerful final appeal to the patron listening to the performer of Widsith, because the poet falls back on the same persuasive tactic he used earlier in the poem: rather than bluntly begging for gifts specifically for himself, the poet gently elevates the patron's attention to the more general virtues of gift-giving as they apply to all noblemen whenever they respond to the needs of any minstrel.

However difficult other aspects of the poem may be, it seems clear that Widsith is definitely not an artless conglomeration of detail; rather, it is a unified and successful piece wherein the detail is skillfully aimed at persuading the patron to untie his purse strings. The far-reaching travels of Widsith may be impossible and the expensive gifts he claims to have received may be unlikely; however, these details present little problem when they are considered in the light of the poem's purpose. The poet has managed to create a successful begging poem through indirection by speaking for himself through the guise of a fictitious scop, by touting his qualifications as a minstrel through Widsith's impressive catalogues, and by suggesting generous reward through Widsith's claims of having received valuable gifts. But perhaps the most persuasive device of all is the poet's subtle but
relentless emphasis on the duty of the king to bestow gifts, and the power of the scop to record his generosity for all time in song. The poet of Widsith might not have received so generous a reward for his work as a piece of land, but he hardly deserves to have been turned away with nothing; perhaps we should give him, at the very least, some "cheeseparing" of greater critical recognition than he has formerly enjoyed.
CHAPTER II

Begging Devices

in Sir Orfeo

As we have seen in Widsith, the Anglo-Saxon poet's meagre livelihood depended on his continued success at court receptions, so more often than not the poet was obliged to encourage his audience's generosity just to ensure his survival. The scop or gleoman, therefore, was charged with the difficult task of indirectly presenting his own cause during the course of his performance so that he could at once entertain and ask for assistance without actually seeming to beg. The need for this indirection was practical, for through experience the performer probably learned that a good story opened purses faster than a hard-luck story:

A scop, a professional entertainer with a reputation for being clever with words and skilled in the telling of tales, might reasonably be counted on for something better than simply a hard-luck yarn or a wheedling plea for a hand-out. His audience—the court, the king, or whoever else he was addressing—would expect to be entertained rather than pestered. And the scop, even though obliged to beg, would presumably have had enough professional pride not to descend to outright begging nor resort to the cajolery of ordinary begging.43

Thus, in the case of poems designed for oral delivery such as Widsith, it is not surprising to find traditional subject matter (i.e., the thules of Widsith), originally used for purposes of recording history or for sheer entertainment, to be put to a new purpose of advancing the poet's requests for reward. In this writer's view, the medieval lay-romance Sir Orfeo, written in the second half of the thirteenth century when minstrels were still to be commonly found at courts singing for their supper, carries on in much the same tradition as its Anglo-Saxon forebearer in its attempt to extract donations from its audience through indirectness.

According to J. Burke Severs, the poem has its classical roots in Ovid's Metamorphosis, Virgil's Georgics, and Boethius' De Consolatione Philosophiae. Later, King Alfred expanded the tale of Orfeo in his "very free" translation of the Consolatione, and to this the later Breton poet blended in a lay elements of Celtic myth from a story, the Filii Mortue, found in Walter Map's De Nugis Curialium, and from the Celtic tale, the Wooing of Etain. The Breton lay, in turn, was translated with little change into French, and from the French it was transformed into the English romance, Sir Orfeo. Severs notes, however, that although the


English and French poets added only a few details to the Breton version, it is not known for certain (although Severs argues for Breton authorship), whether the Breton poet or the English poet added to the tale the final episode in which Orfeo regains his kingdom. 46 Professor Severs argues that this final episode is not "tacked on, superfluous, [or] anticlimactic," but rather that it is "an essential and integral part of the whole." 47

In support of this view, Professor Severs presents a list of parallels between the two climactic episodes of the poem, wherein Heurodis is recovered and wherein Orfeo reclaims his kingdom. Interestingly enough, each of these parallels works to a minstrel's advantage in presenting his case in court for reward because, as we shall see later, they furnish the components of a good begging ruse:

(1) Both climactic episodes are laid in a royal court. (2) In both Orfeo comes to court in the guise of a minstrel. (3) In both his appearance in old and ragged clothing plays a part. (4) In both he is seeking something from the ruler, who has power to grant or withhold what he is seeking. (5) In both he has a right to the thing which he seeks. (6) In both he plays his harp for the ruler and the playing leads to a climactic incident. (7) In both he employs a strategy of misrepresentation, or at least a withholding of the whole truth, and it is through the exercise of his wit that he proceeds. (8) In both the

46 Severs, p. 198.

47 Severs, pp. 199-200.
reader knows the true situation, but the ruler
does not. (9) In both he succeeds in winning
what he is seeking. (10) In the first episode,
at the beginning he possesses both wife and
kingdom; in the second, at the end he once
again possesses them both.48

Thus, the medieval minstrel searching for suitable material for
his repertoire probably saw good possibilities of exploiting the
Celtic and Breton influences of this classical tale for his dual
purposes of entertainment and begging, and so he used the version
of Orfeo that he found as a framework upon which he could build a
poem that would both satisfy his audience's desire for entertain-
ment and stimulate their impulse to generosity.

Although the poet who composed Sir Orfeo may or may not have
been a minstrel himself, (for we do not know exactly how much ac-
tual composing the minstrels did for themselves), he must certainly
have been someone who was at once very clever at his craft and
sensitive to the minstrel's need for self-advertisement.49 In
fact, the poem's success has been duly noted by many scholars who,
in one way or another, join J. Burke Severs in naming it "the
best of the Middle English Breton lays and one of the loveliest
and most charming of all Middle English romances."50 In addition,

48 Severs, pp. 201-202.
49 Baugh, pp. 9-10.
50 Severs, p. 187.
critics have variously celebrated in it its "triumph of marital
devotion," its vivid depiction of the supernatural world,
its stress on human interest, its Christian application (Orpheus
as a Christ figure), and its Boethian focus (a "representation
of man's perilous condition with respect to earthly happiness").
In short, the editor of the poem emphasizes the talent of its author:
"Critics are unanimous in their praise of Sir Orfeo... In fact, the
poem is an outstanding example of narrative skill, and the author's
artistry is such that his technical brilliance may at first sight
be mistaken for untutored simplicity."

It is not unreasonable to argue, then, that such a talented
poet, aware of the minstrel's economic dependence on his audience,
could have wrung from the Orpheus material whatever possible
aesthetic appeal it could have for his medieval audience (i.e.,

51 Charles W. Dunn and Edward T. Byrnes, eds., Middle English
p. 216.

52 George Kane, Middle English Literature (London, 1957), p. 84.

53 A.M. Kinghorn, "Human Interest in the Middle English Sir

54 D.W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton:

273.

56 Bliss, p. xli.
Boethian, Christian, supernatural, and human interests), as well as all of its potential for ensuring its performer financial success. It is this writer's view that the author of *Sir Orfeo* saw in his material not only possibilities for artistic development, but also opportunities for economic advancement which he exploited to the fullest. It is particularly interesting to note, however, that this author uses much the same begging devices as did the scop of *Widsith*, though the *Orfeo* poet is more skilled and applies these devices more subtly.

We have already seen in *Widsith* the devices that the poet used to appeal indirectly for rewards: he speaks indirectly for himself through the ruse of association with another scop; he exaggerates his qualifications as a scop through *Widsith*'s extensive catalogues; and he hints for rewards far beyond what he hopes to get by inflating the value of past gifts. In addition, working throughout the whole poem are the emphases on the nobleman's duty as gift-giver and on the scop's power to provide fame through song in return for the noble's generosity. Indeed, these begging devices must have been effective, for the poet of *Sir Orfeo* centuries later allows these same indirections to work his purpose of begging with discretion.

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57 Eliason, "*Dear*," p. 56. Here Eliason cites the essentials of a begging poem, all of which in this writer's view, can be applied to *Widsith* and *Sir Orfeo*: (1) A subterfuge of some kind enabling the beggar to disclaim that he is begging, (2) an exaggerated claim of his need and merit, and (3) a canny reluctance to specify exactly what he wants or hopes to get.
The ruse of association, we have seen, was used effectively by the poet of *Widsith*, who created an ideal fictional scop through which the poet could indirectly speak for himself. The *Orfeo* poet seems to have been aware of this same device, for he similarly encourages the association of *Orfeo* with minstrelsy, thereby using the traditional classical myth to help him make a case for himself through indirect association with the minstrel king:

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Ac herkneb, lordings (bat beth trewe.)
Ichil 3ou telle (Sir Orfewe.)
Orfeo mest of ani bing
Loued þe gle of harping;
Siker was eueri gode harpour
Of him to hawe miche honour.
Him-self he lerned for-to harp,
& leyd þer-on his wittes scharp:
He lerned so, þer no-bing was
A better harpour in no plas.
In al þe warld was no man bore
þat ones Orfeo sat bifoer
(& he miȝt of his harping here)
Bot he schuld þenche þat he were
In on of þe ioies of Paradis, 58
Swiche melody in his harping is.
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Thus, just as *Widsith* is depicted as an ideal scop with remarkable qualifications, so too *Orfeo* is introduced as an ideal minstrel, whose talents transport its listeners to paradise. It is not by accident, either, that *Orfeo* is introduced as a harper even before he is introduced as a king (1.39). In this way, the poet of *Sir

58 All citations of the poem are from the Auchinleck MS. In the A.J. Bliss edition of *Sir Orfeo*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954.
Orfeo is able to lay the groundwork for his begging without arousing suspicion, because he is simply drawing from the classical Orfeo myth and showing it off to its best advantage in the beginning of the poem. By initially emphasizing Orfeo's association with minstrelsy, therefore, the poet indirectly secures his audience's respect and sympathy for the beggarly Orfeo we find later in the poem, and this respect and sympathy were probably counted on to be transferred to the beggarly minstrel singing the poem in court before them.

If, as Eliason suggests, one of the essentials of a begging poem is that the poet exaggerate his need and merit, then the poet of Sir Orfeo more than obliges. The poet takes great care, in fact, to describe the lowly station of Orfeo after the abduction of Heurodis, and to emphasize the king's superior harping skill. When the heartbroken Orfeo leaves his own court, he takes nothing with him but his harp:

He no hadde kirtel no hode,
Schert, [no] no noper gode,
Bot his harp he tok algate
& dede him barfot out atte 3ate;
No man most wip him go.
O, way! What þer was wepe & wo
When he þat hadde ben king wip crowne
Went so pouerlich out of toun! (11:229-236)

The poet might very well be describing himself here, alone and owning little more than a harp. The harp, it seems, also serves as a transitional device that helps the audience transfer its initial respect for Orfeo to this now impoverished version of the
same man, for it is by the harp that we (and later the steward) recognize Orfeo.

In the lines that follow, the poet carefully details the contrast between the high and low states of Orfeo (11.237-280), thereby indirectly creating a sharper picture of the minstrel's own hand-to-mouth, now-rich-now-poor existence. In fact, Eliason argues that in these the poet repeats the refrain þæs ofercode, þisses swa maeg ("Just as that passed, so may this") as a suggestion of his own plight, the "this" referring to the poet's particular immediate misfortune rather than misfortune in general. It is entirely possible, then, that the poet of Sir Orfeo uses the same device by repeating the work "Now" in the aforementioned lines as an indication of his immediate situation. In any case, the parallel between Orfeo and the minstrel-poet seems clear: if King Orfeo can be reduced to poverty, then it is not so shameful for this lowlier minstrel to have also fallen on hard times and to be in need of reward.

The poet later subtly reinforces the audience's sympathy for the minstrel by describing the heartful pity Hourodis feels for her impoverished lord:

3ern he biheld hir, & sche him eke,
Ac noþer to oþer a word no spoke,
For messnis þat sche on him seiþe,
þat had bon so riche &, so heiþe.
þe teres fel out of her eþe...(11.323-327)

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This ploy of association, it is certain, would have worked on all the ladies of the court and probably would have inspired them to be as generous with their gifts as Widsith's Ealhild to the miserable harper before them.

In the balance of the poem, Orfeo assumes the total identity of the minstrel until his return to prosperity. In this way, the poet is able to speak to the audience in the first person through Orfeo in order to promote himself:

'Parfay!' quoęp he, 'Icham a minstrel, lo!
To solas þi lord wiþ mi gle,
3if his sweete wille be.' (11:382-384)

After the doorman lets him in, the minstrel king presents himself to the fairy king:

'O Lord,' he seyd, '3if it þi wille were,
Mi menstraci þou schust y-here.' (11:419-420)

It seems likely, from this humble petition to the fairy king for an audience and from the following speech on the minstrel's (and, indirectly, his own) low status, that the poet is attempting to break down what seems to have been a genuine resistance to minstrels in the courts, by openly acknowledging their opposition to him but, at the same time, presenting his need for both performance and payment:

'Lord,' quoęp he, 'Trowe ful wel,
Y nam bot a pouer menstrel;
&, Sir, it is þe maner of ous
To seche mani a lordes hous:
þei we nouȝt welcom no be,
3ete we mot proferi forþ; forþ our gle.' (11:429-434)

Thus, the poet is able to speak indirectly to his listeners for

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himself through Orfeo, peddling his craft, pleading his poverty, and preparing the way for the even subtler appeal for patronage to come.

Orfeo, of course, eventually wins back Heurodis through his music and, unlike the classical Orpheus who loses Eurydice a second time and goes melancholy-mad, the medieval Orfeo returns with his wife to the natural world. It seems possible that one of the reasons that this ending was substituted for the older one was that it gives the poet ample opportunity not only to prolong his ruse of association with Orfeo, but also to intensify it. When Orfeo returns to Winchester with Heurodis, he does not immediately reclaim his kingdom as we would expect; rather, "As a minstrel of pouer liif," (1.486), he and his queen lodge with a beggar just outside the town. At this point in the poem, when Orfeo dons both the beggar's clothes and his own famous harp, the association of Orfeo with the needy minstrel performer becomes complete:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{he beggers clopes he borwed anon} \\
& \text{& heng his harp his rigge opon,} \\
& \text{& went him in-to þat cite} \\
& \text{þat men mi3t him bihold & se. (11.499-502)}
\end{align*}
\]

Whereas the harp earlier serves to bridge Orfeo's transition from king to minstrel, here the harp bridges his transition from minstrel to beggar. Indeed, the poet ingeniously "clothes" the respectable king Orfeo with his own assumed identity as a begging minstrel so that he can, with some dignity and discretion, hint
for rewards.

Disguised as a poor minstrel, then, Orfeo arrives at his own court and asks for help. Again, the poet is able to speak inconspicuously for himself in the first person through Orfeo:

'Sir steward!' he seyd, 'Merci! Icham an harpour of heßenisse: Help me now in pis destresse!' (11.512-514)

After having been accepted at court and after having performed, Orfeo's identity is finally questioned by the steward, who recognizes the harp. Rather than revealing his true identity here, however, Orfeo first tests his steward's loyalty by proclaiming King Orfeo's death. Only after the steward laments his death and satisfies the king of his loyalty, does Orfeo at last reveal his identity. In this writer's view, it seems entirely possible that the poet could again be speaking for himself in the first person through Orfeo:

'Lo!

Steward, berkne now pis ping!
3if ich were Orfeo þe king,
& hadde y-suffred ful 3ore
In wildernisse miche sore,
& hadde y-won mi quen o-wy
Out of þe lond  faire,
& hadde y-brouȝt þe leudi hende
Riȝt here to þe tounes ende,
& wiþ a begger her in y-nome,
& were mi-self hider y-come
Pouerlich to þe, þus stille,
For-to asay þi gode wille,
& ich founde þe þus trewe,
þou no schust it neuer rewe.
Sikerlich, for loue or ay,
þou schust be king after mi day;
& 3if þou of mi deþ hadest ben bliþe
þou schust haue voided, al-so swiþe.' (11.556-574)
If the association of the poet with Orfeo had been successful up to this point, then the listening audience would most likely hear in these lines ("3if ich were...") the possibility that the poet singing in their court might be someone other than he is, someone perhaps as important and powerful as Orfeo, who is similarly testing them. It seems just as likely that they would apply to themselves the veiled threat in the lines at the end of this speech ("3if þou of mi...") that if they were unmoved by the minstrel's plight, then they (their reputations) would die, but if they were "trewe" (and we recall that loyalty and gift-giving were once equated), then they (their reputations) would be exalted. Indeed, the poet's disguise as Orfeo, who is disguised as a beggar-minstrel, not only helps him to establish his need for reward, but also helps him to speak directly to his audience, indirectly.

Of course, just as in Widsith, the poet never really names what it is he hopes to receive, but at the same time he alludes to rewards far beyond what he can reasonably expect. In Widsith the scop recounts stories of extremely generous gifts of land and jewels, whereas in Orfeo the poet apparently prefers a "blank check." In the court of the fairy king, Orfeo enchants the ruler with his harping and as a result he is promised anything he wants in return:

'Menstrel, me likeþ we1 þi gle. Now asœ of me what it be, largelich ichil þe pay: Now speke, & tow mi3l asay.' (11.449-452)
Naturally, Orfeo the minstrel asks for that which he wants and needs, Heurodis, and it is granted. The poet of Orfeo could at the same time very easily be hinting here for his own desires and needs to be met as generously.

Of course, as in Widsith, one of the poet's most effective begging devices is his appeal to the nobility's sense of duty as gift-givers. In Sir Orfeo, this appeal is again accomplished through the audience's association with the munificence of both the fairy king and King Orfeo. At the beginning of the poem the poet establishes King Orfeo not only as a harper himself but also as a patron of harpers:

Orfeo mest of ani þing
Loued þe gle of harping;
Siker was eueri gode harpoure
Of him to have miche honour. (11.25-28)

The poet also stresses Orfeo's nobility, thereby lending his profession a history of noble fellowship:

Orfeo was a kinge,
In Jnglond on heïse lording,
A stalworþ man & hardi bo;
Large & curteys he was al-so. (11.39-42)

The suggestion in these lines seems clear: if Orfeo is a great and generous king and a patron of harpers, then the aristocrats at the court wherein this poem was performed would want to avoid the suggestion that they were any less noble or generous; hence, the audience's association with Orfeo works to the poet's advantage in hinting for gifts by reminding them of their noble responsibility of gift-giving. The same principle works in reverse.
in the poet's description of the fairy king and his court: the
underworld court of the fairy king is established as grisly (11.387-404) and the king himself as untrustworthy in his attempt
to withdraw his promise of granting Orfeo's request (11.457-462). The fairy king does, however, ultimately grant Orfeo's
request; therefore, the noblemen listening to the minstrel per-
forming would as earnestly want to avoid being thought less gen-
erous than this unscrupulous underworld king.

At the end of the poem when Orfeo makes his way back to his
own court, he discovers that the protection of minstrels practiced
in his court has been maintained even throughout his absence:

\[\text{be steward seyd: 'Com wip me, come!}
Of \text{pat ichaue pou schalt haue some.}
\text{Euerich gode harpour is welcom me to}
\text{For mi lordes loue, Sir Orfeo.' (11.515-518)}\]

Thus, it is possible that the noblemen listening to the poem
would be encouraged by the examples of the fairy king and Orfeo
as gift-givers to relieve the 'desstresse' of the impoverished
minstrel performing in their own court.

The nobleman in court, however, may often have been moved
to generosity more for practical reasons than for philanthropical
ones: to risk one's reputation by slighting a minstrel was prob-
ably dangerous business because the minstrel had the power to
spread notoriety as well as fame. Perhaps the fairy king event-
tually granted Orfeo's request to avoid the possibility of this
kind of far-sung notoriety. It seems quite likely that the fairy
king's self-serving motive for keeping his word was not lost on
members of the Orfeo poet's audience who would want to avoid the same fate. Certainly the minstrels' courtly Troubadour ancestors were not afraid to use their craft to punish their audiences for stinginess:

The bitterness and rancour of the Provençal sirventes are equalled by few satirists of other nations, surpassed by none; and many a noble — and many a lady too, for that matter — who might be comparatively indifferent to the Troubadour's praise were fain to evade his blame by ministering to his comfort or his vanity.60

Although the minstrels of medieval England were not noblemen themselves like their French forebears, and most were not as adept at composing for themselves, the threat of bad publicity or no publicity at all probably still nagged at the nobleman's purse-strings.

Indeed, the poet of Sir Orfeo, like the poet of Widsith, includes in his poem reminders of the importance and power of minstrelsy. Minstrelsy, as we have seen, is shown to be an integral part of the social life of Orfeo's court before the loss of Neureodis (11.25-38), during Orfeo's absence (11.521-526), and after his return (11.587-590). So, too, was minstrelsy probably an important part of the courts that this poet visited with his songs. In addition, the poet mentions the presence of minstrelsy in the procession of the fairy kingdom (11.301-302),

and he describes the captivating effect of Orfeo's harping on
the wild beasts of the forest (11.272-280). These latter examples
might have suggested to the audience that minstrelsy is not a
craft confined only to this world, but that it in fact has the
power to penetrate even the levels of the otherworld.

The capacity of minstrelsy to record fame through the ages
and report it throughout the earth would, therefore, probably
charge members of the audience with the incentive to reward the
minstrel liberally for his efforts. The poet of Sir Orfeo des-
cribes in the beginning of the poem the various subject matters
of the lay (11.1-12), and then alludes to the minstrel's role
as historian:

In Bretayne þis layes were wrouȝt,
(First y-founde & forþ y-brouȝt,
Of auentours þat fel bi dayes,
wher-ȝif Bretouns maked her layes.)

When kinges miȝt our y-herȝe
Of ani meruailes þat þerwere,
þai token an harp in gƚe & game
& maked a lay & ȝaf it name. (11.13-20)

At the end of the poem, the poet reinforces this idea that the
harper is a receiver of information and transmitter of fame; more
specifically, he leaves his audience with the thought that this
famous patron of minstrels, King Orfeo, will be remembered for-
ever in the lay that bears his name:

Harpours in Bretaine after þan
Herd hou þis meruaile bigan,
& made her-ȝif a lay of gode likeing,
& nempnde it after þe king.
The implication of these lines is that anyone like Orfeo, who "mest of ani bing/Loued gle of harping" (11:25-26), and who honored "eueri gode harpour" (1.27), could have his good name, like Orfeo's, made immortal in song. Such an attractive possibility must surely have tempted even the most miserly listeners to give with an open hand. As was discussed earlier, the one who gives "no schust it neuer rewe" (1.570), but the one who does not "schust haue voided, al-so swipe' (1.574).

In short, the poet manages to avoid direct appeal to his audience for gifts by using the ruse of associating himself with Orfeo, an ideal minstrel. Through Orfeo's transitions from king to wandering minstrel to beggar, then, the poet progressively intensifies the association of himself with the needy Orfeo and at the same time he subtly makes his need for assistance known. The poet's reluctance to request a specific reward surfaces in the fairy king's broad offer of reward, and association again comes into play (this time between the audience and the two kings) as a means of encouraging his noble audience to give gifts as freely as did those fictional nobles, Orfeo and the fairy king. Finally, the poet indirectly appeals to his listener's respect for the power of minstrelsy by implying that generosity could be rewarded with far-reaching fame through song.

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Although it is very unlikely that the primary purpose of *Sir Orfeo* was to extract funds from its audience, it seems fairly evident that the poet of this lay had begging in mind during its composition. Through the use of much the same begging devices as were used in *Widsith*, the poet is able to unobtrusively present his needs (or those of the performer, if the two are distinguishable), and simultaneously motivate his audience to reward him for the entertainment or instruction that he provides. These elaborate begging devices (ruse of association, exaggeration of need or merit, reluctance to specify reward, reminders of the noble responsibility of gift-giving, and appeals to the audience's desire for fame) sometimes work together, sometimes separately, but cumulatively they effectively advance the poet's clandestine campaign to plead without pestering, to ask without annoying, in hopes of getting something more for his wallet than "a pullet, a lace collar, a silver candlestick, (or) a flask of wine."61

Although the minstrels, like the gleomen, ultimately came to be regarded as vagabonds and their craft eventually gave way to the popularity of the printed broadside, these oral poets of both the Anglo-Saxon and Middle Ages performed an important function for which their meagre earnings were well-deserved:

61 Rowbotham, p. 168.
The minstrels had service which cannot be paralleled today. Where they came they brought news of foreign courts and famous heroes. Their songs brought near at hand and into vividness events that were remote in distance and time. Their recitations were memorials. Their music gladdened the hall and quickened rude revels with the touch of grace. Lords and rulers were their sponsors, and the generous gifts of princes to singer were a patronage of the poetry and song which preserved this ancient material of chronicle and legend.62

Bibliography

I. Widsith


II. Sir Orfeo


Vita

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