The meaning of "ympe-tree" in *Sir Orfeo*

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RESUMEN: En este breve artículo me propongo arrojar alguna luz sobre el debatido significado e interpretación de la palabra "ympe-tre(e)" en el poema medieval inglés *Sir Orfeo*, de principios del siglo XIV. El poema, que pervive en tres copias de unos 600 versos está basado en el *Orfeo y Eurídice* de la mitología clásica, pero adaptado al mundo medieval caballeresco. En el intento de traducción del poema he encontrado entre otros el escollo antedicho de *ympe-tree*, que aparece cinco veces, difícil por su profundo enraizamiento en un mito que aparentemente va más allá de las estrictas fronteras del mito griego.

ABSTRACT: My purpose in this brief article is to shed some light on the controversial meaning and interpretation of the word "ympe-tre(e)" in the English Medieval poem *Sir Orfeo* from the beginning of the 14th century. The poem survives in three copies of some 600 verses and it is based on *Orfeo and Euridice* of the classical mythology, but it has been adapted, however, to the world of medieval chivalry. In my attempt at translating the poem into Spanish I came accross some snags, like the mentioned *ympe-tree*, appearing five times in the text and which proves hard to comprehend, if only because it is deeply rooted in a myth that may go well beyond the boundaries of Greek mythology.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ympe- tree. Sir Orfeo. Poesía medieval inglesa.

KEY WORDS: Ympe-tree. Sir Orfeo. English Medieval poetry.

1. Introduction

In 1335 Bliss's (1954) edition of the Auchinleck MS we are handling one can read in line 69:

> They sete hem doun alle three
> Under a faire *ympe-tree*,
> And wel soon this faire quene
> Fel on sleep upon the grene.

In line 70 there appears the word *ympe-tree*[1]. Now, a fundamental question may be raised here: what is the meaning of this compound word?. Our attempt at a translation of the poem is hampered by this unexpected snag, since the meaning of the word is far from clear and, needless to say, its interpretation has given rise to a number of controversies. However, this problem was first raised because the original meaning proves elusive, therefore giving way to a number of speculative hypotheses.

For critical readers, though, it seems that the main debate has hinged around the possible symbolic meanings conveyed by this obsolete, odd word. It is my purpose in this paper to tackle this translational snag and throw some tentative light on the origin and likely meaning of this mysterious word. What seems apparent is, if one is an attentive reader, that the tree of our concern, the five times mentioned tree, has a symbolic and iconological meaning. The episodic context where it appears can suggest some hints and no less so the linguistic 'collocative' meaning of the word.

The first appearance is in the above quoted lines, where the impe-tree is collocated with the positive adjective *faire* and it is identified with the place under which Dame Heurodis, the queen, went to enjoy herself playing. It is, therefore, the tree in the middle of an orchard, which reminds us of the secluded, private garden of Arcadia that the classical writers invoke as *locus amoenus*. In such idyllic spot she fell asleep on the grass.

In the second appearance, on line 166, the queen is summoned by the foreign king of her dreams to meet him the following morning:

> Right heer under this *ympe-tree*,
> And than thou shalt wyth us go
> And lyve wyth us evere-mo.

If she does not comply with the summoning, she is threatened to be torn to pieces. That frightening nightmare scares her to the point of giving a sudden outcry when she wakes up.

The third appearance is on line 186 where we can read:

> And wyth the quene wente they
> Right unto that *ympre-tree*.

The reference is to the group of Orfeo's armed knights who are to defend their queen from the summoning of the mysterious foreign king in the very place where she is going to be taken away through a magic enchantment (*awey i-twight*).

The fourth time the tree is mentioned is on line 407, thus:

> Ther he saw his owene wyf,
> Dame Heurodis, his leve lyf,
> Slepe under an *ympre-tree*.

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[1] Also spelt in ME *ympe-tre*, it appears in modern dictionaries as *imp*, which is now obsolete, meaning *graft* or *engraft*, hence the frequent translation as *grafted tree* (in Middle English Dictionary).

The context is the place whereto the queen was taken (the nether world). There she was found by Orfeo, her seeking husband, asleep under the grafted tree. Orfeo then put his talents into practice and plays the minstral harp so well that the king grants him a gift. As expected, he begs him to be granted:

That ilke lady, bright on blee
That slepeth under the *ympre-tree.*

That fifth appearance of the cited word comes up on line 455, when her husband is attempting to rescue her from that hiding place, an alien world, where she is found sound asleep.

2. The ME poem *Sir Orfeo*

Sir Orfeo is an English medieval poem of about 600 lines written in imitation an Anglo-Norman (i.e. Old French) *lai.* As is well known, the French language was displaced by English towards the beginning of the 14th century as the main relevant instrument for writing literary works in England. Such overthrow had much to do with a few English narrative poems that enhanced the self-identity as a concious attitude by English. In effect, the literary and entertaining values of English narrative poems were held in high esteem by an increasingly wider and wider reading public. And although the retelling resulted in a widely different story, it is a well-written piece of fiction that had undergone some major changes towards the ending of the classical story.

On the other hand, Sir Orfeo is also a text of an orally transmitted Breton lay. This means that some of its features in the rhymes suggest that the versions were influenced by oral improvised reciting. In broad terms, the literary versions in Middle English, mostly based on Norman sources, meant a fresh revision and departure from the model. So much so when they can hardly be called actual translations. As Stevick (1971: xii): "and in its actual telling *Sir Orfeo* is a very good narrative, probably the best of the fairy romances that have survived".

Sir Orfeo survives in three extant texts that were copied in the 14th and 15th centuries and are part of compilations of texts of various sorts:

a) the Auchinleck MS of about 1335
b) MS Harley 3910 of about 1410
c) MS Ashmole 61 of about 1490

The text I follow here is based on that established for the Auchinleck version, the earliest and the best, in the edition by A. J. Bliss (Oxford, 1954) which includes the corrections and reconstruction of the first 38 lines. It is sure that the extant copy of about 600 verses is almost contemporary to the original, probably in the mid-13th, as a likely translation from an Anglo-Norman text, and eventually perhaps from an Old French original.

The term *ympre tree* has been translated as "grafted tree" or a tree in an orchard that bears fruit. The authoritative *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* [2] gives

[2] Edited and enlaged by T. Northcote Toller. It is based on the MS collections of Joseph Bosworth. Oxford University Press, first ed. 1898 (reprint 1972)

under the entry *impe* the meanings of *An imp, scion, graft, shoot*, with various quotations in Old English. Undoubtedly all those words, though different in meaning, have obvious etymological as well as mythological connections. as I will show in the remainder of this brief paper.

It is relevant for our purpose the quotation from the 14th century poem *Piers Plowman*[3], where Piers, the land labourer, tells about his job:

I was the coventes gardyner, for to graffe *ympes* (P.P. 5, 137)

Now what relations does the word bear with the rest of synonyms given by the ASD? The verb *graffe* was previously spelt *grafan* and *græfe*, pret. *grof*, past part. *grafen* with the meaning of the manual labourer's tasks of *digging (up) and delving* and the associated *carve*. A gardener, it seems obvious, had to dig up and plant, therefore also prune, offshoots of trees. Hence a *grafted tree* is both a cultivated (in the sense of not growing wild), as well as a pruned tree.

However, in modern dictionaries[4] *grafted tree* means a tree that has been undergone a process of implantation, since a *graft* has come to mean a implanted piece of a tree into the body of another tree. Now the other synonyms seem to be realated to this: a *shoot* is metonymically referred to the shooting young branches of a tree, as also is an *off-shoot*, the new branch stemmed from an old one, in a like manner to sons stemming from parents, as the metaphor goes. A *scion* is defined by *LDCE* as: "a living part of a plant usu. a young shoot, that is cut off, esp. for fixing onto another plant as a graft". So the idea of implantation is prevalent today as the central meaning of the word graft. An inference to be drawn is that it is a tree that bears fruit in an orchard.

In E. Klein's etymological dictionary[5] we find that *graft* is derived from Old French *grafe* meaning "a shoot for grafting", ultimately derived from Latin *graphium*, a pencil or writing style, and this in turn from Greek "γραφεῖον". This seems to me an deviated kind of etymology, or perhaps we may say that two lexemes originated from different sources happen to coincide in theie morphology. In this particular case, this coincidence has caused that the two lexemes have been conflated into one single etymological source.

It is all very well with those synonyms making reference to plants, whether off-shoots, gratfs etc. The most difficult word, however, to account for is *ympe* (imp in its modern spelling), since today it is used in a quite different sense.

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[3] *Piers Plowman* is one of the most famous medieval alliterative poems whereof over fifty manuscripts have survived. It was written in a South-West Midlands dialect and its author was William Langland. There are three versions of the poem, which are supposed to be revisions done by the author himself. The spellings, however, differ somewhat in the extant 50 odd versions.

[4] In the common *LDCE* we find the following definition: *graft* v. [T (on, onto)] to put into a plant or body as a graft: *they grafted a piece of skin to his thigh...*

[5] *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Elsevier Scientific Publ Co. Amsterdam, 1971. It seems that the alleged etymology given in the *ASD*, i.e. Old Saxon *graban* and Icelandic *grafan* has little to do with Kleins's sources from Latin and Greek.

In *Skeat's Etymological Dictionary* the Old High German **impitunga* has the meaning of insertion, while Klein's *Comprehensive Etymological* provides the following information:

Imp, n, a little devil –ME, *impe*, fr. OE. *impa*, 'shoot, graft; young tree' fr. *impian*, 'to graft'. See *imp*,v.

As suggested we look up the next entry and find that as a verb, meaning also 'to graft' or 'to engraft' has its origin in VL (vulgar Latin) **imputare* and from late latin *impotus* 'graft', in turn from Greek έμφυτος 'implanted' which is itself a derivative adjective from the verb έμφύΕιν 'to implant'.

In the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* we find that the Old English **imp** is a noun meaning firstly a *young shoot* of a plant; a *sapling*; a *sucker*, a *scion*; secondly, by extensive simile a young person; also a shoot or slip used in grafting; a *graft* (late Middle English) and by extensive simile a *scion* or descendant, esp. of a noble family; an *offspring*, a child, and thus follower, an adherent, especially of glory, chivalry. Then a child of the Devil; a *little devil*. Also a young man, a youth; a lad, a boy. Whence, a mischievous child; a scamp, an urchin.

This is related to the next and it coincides somewhat with what was pointed by Skeat's etymology, i.e. Old High German alleged use, now obsolete, of the verb *impfen*, borrowed from Latin *impotus*, graft. and in this turn from Greek *emphutos*, implanted, engrafted, thus coinciding with Klein's dictionary. The source makes reference to:

Imp *v.t.* [OE *impian* corresp. To OHG *impfōn* (G *impfen*), shortened analogues of *impitōn* (MHG *impfeten*) is derived from Proto-Romance, and from medieval latin *impotus*, graft and in turn from Greek *emphutos*, implanted, engrafted, verbal adjective of *emphuein*, from *en-* IM- + *phuein* plant.

So much for the etymology of the word, where today's surviving meaning "imp" is used as an metaphorical extension of off-shoot (in Spanish vastago), namely, a young man, and as a derivative a mischievous child, a son of the devil. In the remainder of the paper I shall briefly pursue the interpretation of *ympre-tree* in the context of this medieval chivalry poem.

3. Mythical interpretation of *ympre-tree*

From Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI: 287-99), to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (lines 718-25) to the Hardian novel entitled *Under the Greenwood Tree*, there is a recurring motif of a tree that is invested with some supernatural, magic value. In *Sir Orfeo* the *ympe-tre(e)* Heurodis is abducted by the fairy king to the Underworld.

For a start, the variation in Sir Orfeo with respect to other tales dealing with the myth of Orfeo[6] His name had been invariably associated with the power

[6] See Luis Gil, *Transmision Mitica*, Ed. Planeta, Barcelona 1975. Gil is concerned with influences and variations of Orfeo's myth from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. He argues there that "Orfeo y

of art and more specifically with the power of music and in a lesser extent, to the power of eloquence. By playing his harp, just like a Middle Age minstrel, he becomes a narrator of his own life. As we read in lines 25-26:

Orfeo, moste of any thyng,
Loved to glee of harpyng;

In this line it is worth mentioning the 6th century writer Fulgentius[7], who used this myth in the context of education in the arts. The etymology of Orfeo's name gives us the clue, he argues, about the meaning of the myth. Thus, Orfeo stands for 'oreafone' [*oraia phone*] meaning 'incomparable sound', and Eurydice [*eur dike*] meaning 'deep judgement'.

The playing of the harp makes king Orfeo comparable to the Biblical king David, and is a proof of his nobility and his embodiment of a hero of minstrelsy. It also evokes the world of courtly romance, where the court royal figures, king and queen, are the heroes of a courtly exploit[8]. That he was 'curteys' is explicitly told in the poem.

Thus, in line 39 ff. we can read:

Orfeo was a king,
In Inglond an heighe lording,
A stalworth man and hardi bo;
Large and curteys he was also.
His fader was comen of King Pluto,
And his moder of King Juno,

Orfeo is then a king and high lord in England, of attractive outward appearance and 'courtly'. In addition he has most noble, mythical anscestors, no other than the pagan god Pluto and queen Juno[9]. The former was the god of the underworld in the classical myth, and the latter was the goddess, the wife of Jupiter. Similarly in the Middle Ages, G. Chaucer[10] makes Pluto, be 'king of Fayerye', his wife is 'Proserpina and al hire fayerye'.

On the other hand, Heurodis is associated with the weakness and passivity of the courtly woman. Therefore, she can embody the symbolism borne by Eve traditionally representing the temptation due to her beauty and lust, which in turn leads to madness. Actually Heurodis fell asleep under the ympe-tree, or fruit-bearing tree that reminds the readers of the tree (an 'apple-tree' in vulgar versions) in Paradise.

Euridice participa de las caracteristicas del mito propiamente dicho, de la saga y del cuento popular" (p. 123)

[7] *Mythologies* 3:10

[8] See J.B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1970.

[9] Juno, as is well known, was a godess, the wife of Jupiter, and not a king as suggested by the author of Sir Orfeo, or else this mistake may be the fault of the Auchinleck MS scribe, as thit is not so in the other two extant MSS.

[10] G. Chaucer, *Merchant's Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge U. Press, IV, p. 2227

According to Luis Gil[11], the tree has of old been linked to humankind religious beliefs. Heurodis, in effect, is abducted to the magic world of the fairies (*lond o'fairy*), being therefore connected to the dead souls in the Otherworld.

Eurodis is described as "the fairest lady that evere was born". She is a representation in the 14th century of womanship and feminity, a epitome of the ideal courtly woman. In lines 53-56 she is given outward and inward features:

The fairest lady, for the nones,
That myghte gon of body and bones;
Ful of love and of goodnesse-
But no man may telle hir fairnesse.

Chaucer makes a parody of the elf-queen as a desired lover in the dreams of *Sir Thopas*[12], a queen of the forest that is an embodiment of natural, lusty love in the groves and under the trees. There he wrote that Sir Thopas while "he priketh thurgh a fair forest" he was "fil in love-lovynge" and then he has the knight say:

"Me dremed al this nyght, pardee,
An elf-queene shal my lemman be
And slepe under my goore".

That is the sort of lady suitable for his coutly love, he believes. So he stirred his horse into the wild country in order to meet that lady. Only knights could enter that wild forest, the chosen ones:

For in that contree was ther noon
That to him durste ride or goon,
Neither wyf ne childe;

In the case of Orfeo's love bonds, he is married and follows her, for the sake of his love pledge, to the fairy kingdom (or the Otherworld), where she is abducted. The abducting appears as death in most of later versions and imitations[13].

Heurodis is abducted to a place that differs somewhat from the classical Hades where Eurydice goes after death. The place is ambiguously described as terryfying and beautiful, macabre and faerie at the same time. She had fallen in the hands of the fairy forces, a rival king, in medieval terms. Note the resemblance Heurodis bears to Eve, who is deceived by a devil. She fell an easy

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[11] In *Transmision Mitica*, Ed. Planeta, Barcelona 1975 p. 141-3. In this chapter on Orpheus' myth, Gil argues that the tree is associated on the one hand with the dreams and, on the other, with the access of the Otherworld. In the Canto VI of *Aeneid* the tree is linked to both. "Vigilia y sueño, vida y muerte, son parejas de contrarios asociadas por la mente humana desde antaño y que plantea el problema de su interrelación....¿Será el dormirse de Herodis un despertar a la otra vida, y su dormir en la ultratumba un retorno a la vigilia de ésta?"

[12] G. Chaucer, *Sir Thopas*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge U. Press, p. 787 ff.

[13] Most of them are mentioned in Luis Gil, *Transmisión Mítica*, Ed. Planeta, Barcelona 1975. In *Sir Orfeo*, he as the king rescues his wife from the fairy kingdom by means of his own art, as harp player. The happy end, their return to Winchester (mythic capital of Britain) to celebrate her rescue differs from faithful versions to the classical myth, where Orfeo loses his wife for ever. See R. Graves, *Gods and Heroes in Ancient Greece*, Macmillan, London 1960.

prey –in our Jewish Christian tradition as it is written in the Old Testament (*Genesis*)- of the devil, while lying under a grafted tree.

The notion of a grafted tree is also reminiscent of the "golden bough" in Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI: 287-99). Also the well-known British anthropologist J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*[14] (1922) the tree is considered a worshipped symbol. But this as a representation of a myth that goes further back into the very roots of human culture, has been a frequent issue of discussion among mythologists of all kinds of persuasions.Thus, Mircea Eliade, in his review of Jan de Vries' *Betrachtungen zum Märchen* mentions the well-known scholar Otto Huth[15] who put forward the reductionist idea that in old tales the travel means a travel to the Otherworld, and moreover, that those tales hark back to the Megalithic times: "Según Otto Huth, los dos motivos dominantes de los cuentos, el viaje al más allá y las bodas de tipo real, pertenecen a la "religión megalítica"[16].

However, Eliade has underlined the assumption that the Cosmogony is closely linked to the birth of the New Year in most religions in the Middle East. According to him Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Isralites and other peoples in the nearby areas felt the need of periodically renewing the origin and rebirth of the world. To meet this demand the rites implied consisted in a cult stage symbolizing the renewal of cosmogony. This would account for the agricultural fertility myths, the battle against chaotic forces and the return to Paradise, as in the Jewish tradition.[17]

If that interpretation is correct, then the myth of Orfeo is deeply rooted in our own tradition as a "rite of initiation", which consists of a heroe's proof and overcoming of it in actual experience. There are then some necessary ingredients in it which ahould be mythically interpreted as the death and the ensuing rising back (resurrection) of the individual, in clear analogy to the reiterative rising and setting of the sun, as well as the seasons' yearly wheel of return.[18]

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[14] In Chapter IX entitled "the Worship of Trees" in *The Golden Bough*, MacMillan Press Ltd, London 1922 (reprinted 1976), he notes that "In Greece beautiful woods of pine, oak, and other trees still linger on the slopes of the high Arcadian mountains, still adorn with their verdure the deep gorge through which the Ladon hurries to join the sacred Alpheus, and were still, down to a few years ago, mirrored in the dark blue waters of the lonely lake of Pheneus."

[15] Otto Huth, *Märchen und Megalithreligion*, Paideuma, V, Berlin 1950

[16] Mircea Eliade, *Mito y Realidad*, Guadarrama, Madrid 1968 (3ª Ed. 1978) p. 204 It is however held as most plausible by recent Evolutionary Psychology the idea that our deep psychological reactions have remained unchanged ever since Prehistoric times, when man was a hunter-gatherer. See J. Barkow, L. Kosmides and J. Tooby, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford U. Press, Oxford and New York 1992

[17] M. Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'Éternel Retour*, Flammarion, Paris 1949, p. 80 ff.

[18] G. S. Kirk in a seminal work, *El Mito*, Barcelona, Seix Barral 1973, discusses the excesses of some interpretations of classical myths like those proposed by Lévy-Bruhl and Ernst Cassirer, while he evaluates positively some Lévi-Strauss' functional ideas.

Concluding remarks

Now turning again to the translation of the *ympe-tree* as grafted tree, what should the reader interpret as "grafted" and what would this imply?

In the Spanish translation would be "un árbol injertado". The inference to be made here is that the vegetable world was intervened by man in order to make it bear fruit.[19] This intervention means, in mythical terms, a process of "sexualization" of the tree. As Eliade[20] reminds us, in the ancient *Code of Hammurabi* in Mesopotamia there were laws regulating the grafting or artificial fertilization of date-trees and fig-trees, and some Arabic and Hebrew tradition in that sense. And in relation to the orgiastic practices connected with the fertilization by grafting of lemon-trees there is a good source of information in S. Tolkowsky's,[21] where Ibn Washya's work on Nabatean agriculture is mentioned. That author explains that the Mesopotamians attached the terms male and female when referring to trees. Aparently there were fertilization rites based on homeopathy among those peoples, in a like manner to other cultures in New Guinea, as discussed by the British anthropologist B. Malinowski.[22]

So "árbol injertado" is a correct translation of the *ympe-tree*, in spite of preferences of some analysts for a particular fruit tree, the apple tree. This fruit has been culturally placed at the top of the ranking among the mythical fruits. One has only to remember later translations of the *Genesis* for a start. In fact there is no such fruit either in the original Hebrew or in St Jerome's *Vulgata* from around 400 AD. The reference to an "apple" may have been originated in the Greek-Roman mythology, namely, in the famous apple of contention when in Thetis and Peleo's wedding banquet the envious Eris threw a golden apple to be contended by Juno, Venus and Minerva who rivalled in beauty. This event caused the Paris' role as referee by the will of Jupiter, his rapture of Helen and the ensuing war of Troy.

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[19] Julio Caro Baroja, *Ritos y mitos equivocos*, Istmo, Madrid 1974

[20] M. Eliade, *Herreros y Alquimistas*, Taurus y Alianza, Madrid 1974

[21] S. Tolkowsky, *Hesperides, a History of the Culture and Use of Citrus Fruits*, London 1938, pp. 129 ff.

[22] B. Malinowski, *Magia, Ciencia y Religion*, Planeta-Agostini, Barcelona 1985