

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE RECONCILIATION OF GOLD AND GREEN
IN ROMANCE'S VISION OF REALITY:
VARIATIONS OF A MYTHIC PATTERN
IN THREE MEDIEVAL ROMANCES

BY

PENNY L. JONES SQUARE

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Abstract

Northrop Frye discusses romance in terms of its displacement of myth in a human direction and its re-alignment of reality in an ideal direction, a shift which serves to make the ideal apparent in the real and available to humanity. Using this valuable insight into the nature and function of romance, this thesis demonstrates that romance provides a vision of reality in which the ideal is reconciled with the real. Whereas romance is generally read as fantasy, its vision suggests that it should be read with a regard to the truth it embodies. It does not present a perfect world unattainable in reality, but a complete world in which the ideal and real are reconciled. This complete world has always been available to man. Romance reveals this world to remind him of its attainability.

Romance modifies the ideal to present an attainable ideal. One of the devices romance uses to accomplish this is to take myth and re-create it in human terms. This re-creation of myth, by displacing its divine or ideal world in a human direction, serves to make romance suggestive of mythic patterns more closely related to the reality of human experience. This thesis examines three Medieval romances, Sir Orfeo, Sir Launfal, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, through the medium of one such mythic pattern. The mythic pattern informing these specific romances fulfills romance's reconciling function and is therefore suggestive of the shape of romance in general.

The hero of romance is human though graced with touches of divinity. The mythic pattern describes the process by which this human hero comes to terms with his natural limitations in order to realize his

divine potential. This, in turn, serves to humanize the ideal the hero represents, to make it attainable in reality. The hero's descending journey into nature defines the shape of this mythic pattern. It is a journey which involves the ideal in the real to effect the necessary reconciliation within the human hero.

This mythic pattern unfolds in three stages: the withdrawal from the court of the golden knight, the potentially perfect representative of the human world; his descent into the green world, of nature or the natural self; and his return to the human world where the reconciliation achieved in him may be extended outward to the renewing of that world. The fulfilled pattern presents a picture of reality in which the gold and the green are harmonized.

Chapter I establishes the existence of this mythic pattern, defines it, and discusses certain of the undisplaced myths to which it alludes. The concepts of the golden and green worlds are explained to justify my choice of the terms, the gold and the green, to discuss this mythic pattern. Chapter I also outlines my approach to the reading of Sir Orfeo, Sir Launfal, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The pattern is present in each but, in each, unfolds a different vision which is determined by the poet's perspective. The pattern will be examined in each romance with a view to defining the distinctive visions it unfolds in each.

Chapters II, III, and IV examine the poetic treatment of the mythic pattern in Sir Orfeo, Sir Launfal, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, respectively. The pattern presented in Sir Orfeo from a divine perspective unfolds a vision of re-creation which emphasizes the pattern's comic promise. The vision of retreat unfolded from the pattern presented

from a human perspective in Sir Launfal suggests but does not emphasize the pattern's tragic potential. The pattern viewed in Sir Gawain from both a human and a divine direction provided by the poem's dual perspective unfolds a vision which is the revelation of the pattern's fulfillment. It expresses both the pattern's tragic potential and its comic promise by its perfect balance of mockery and celebration, sadness and mirth. Chapter V summarizes the significance of this mythic pattern as it relates to the interpretation of these specific romances, and as it relates to the reading of romance in general.

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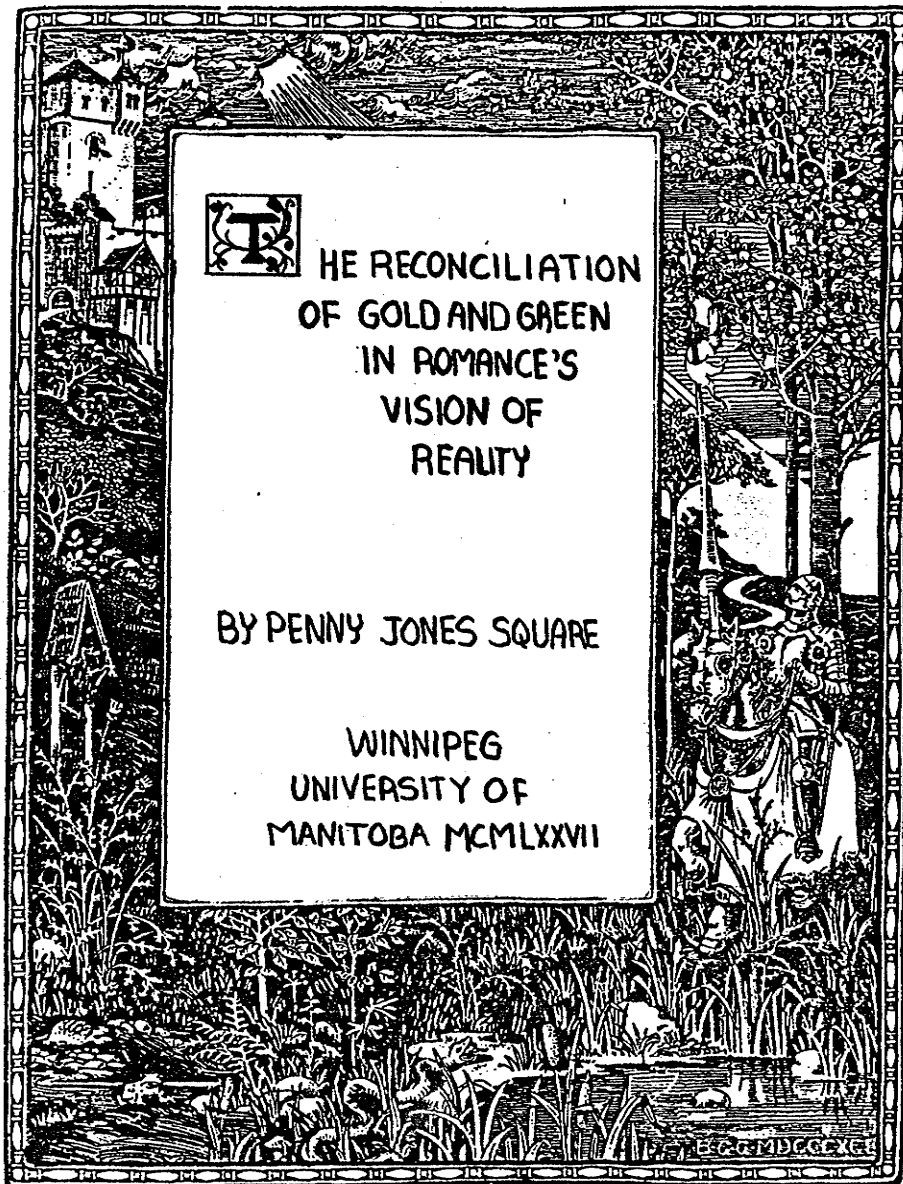
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NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1, which I have chosen for the frontispiece and entitled "The Descent from Gold to Green," is a border design by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue for the periodical, Knicht Errant, I (April, 1892). Figure 2, "Realms of Gold and Green: The Castle and the Forest," is an illustration by Charles Robinson for the title page of Barrington MacGregor's King Longbeard: or, The Annals of the Golden Dreamland (London: John Lane, 1898). Figure 3, "The Knight's Departure," is an illustration by Howard Pyle in his book, The Story of King Arthur and His Knights (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954). Figure 4, "The Sojourn in the Green Wood," and figure 6, "The Re-Ascent from Green to Gold," are designs by Aubrey Beardsley for an edition of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1894). Figure 5, "The Knight's Return," is an illustration by John G. Galsworthy for M.R. Ridley's modern English translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Edmund Ward, 1962).



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CHAPTER I

THE MEETING OF GOLD AND GREEN:

THE MEANING OF THE MYTHIC PATTERN

Northrop Frye has located romance between the realms of myth and realism, between the divine and the natural, the ideal and the real, which, for purposes of this study shall be called the golden and green worlds respectively.¹ For romance is that tendency "to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism" to conventionalize content in an idealized direction."² Thus the realm of romance occupies the middle human world and in the unfolding of its vision of reality romance seeks to effect a reconciliation between the divine order above and the natural one below: to refashion a golden-green world atoned with the divine and attuned to the natural.

Romance gives us not the golden goal of human vision nor the green garden of human nature but the process of reconciliation between them, the familiar and frequent romantic quest to re-create a golden-green world harmonized with the ideal yet rooted in the real.³ The romantic hero is not the divine hero of myth nor the natural man of realism but a human hero with touches of divinity. The romantic hero's quest to reconcile heaven and earth, the golden world of the ideal dream with the green world of reality, mirrors the interior process by which the golden knight comes to terms with the natural man within. Romance does not tell of restoration won by climbing upward out of one's nature, in defiance of human limitation and mortality, to the divine. Rather, romance tells of

restoration won by the descent into one's natural roots, as evidenced by romance's frequent journeys into the green world of Faery, forest, or the equivalent inward realm of self in madness or in exile.⁴ For romance "is largely concerned with an attempt to present the desirable in human, familiar, attainable, and morally allowable terms."⁵ It seeks to explain the divine in natural terms, disclosing by the hero's descending journey the inherent connection between the gold and the green which may be discovered and re-created in every human heart.

Romance, as the medium between myth and realism, tends "to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience."⁶ The romantic hero's quest to effect a reconciliation between the gold and green worlds is one such mythic pattern. It may be defined as the coming into contact of the gold with the green by the descent of the golden aspect in human existence, the potentially perfect knight, into the green world of reality, the natural self, or nature. The hero's journey defines the shape of this pattern and makes manifest its meaning in the rhythm of its imagery, in the meeting of the gold and the green and the movement to reconciliation and return, or separation and retreat. Further examination of this mythic pattern together with an identification of certain of the undisplaced myths to which it alludes and a clarification of the concepts of the golden and green worlds which contribute to the pattern's structure of imagery must precede the specific examinations of the pattern's variations in three Medieval romances. Although this pattern can be seen to be the inherent shape of many romances, as I have suggested above, it provides an infinite variety in its unfolding as, I trust, the following readings, indicative of the pattern's versatility, will make apparent.

The gold and green are recurrent images in romance; star and flower, court and wood, knight and shepherd, Paradise and Faery, are frequently interlaced in romance to tell the timeless tale of the descent of the golden thing into the green world to seek the reconciliation which is the re-creation of the world in time.⁷ The ideal is fulfilled by falling into nature and thereby the natural is sanctified. For romance, which is defined by the descending journey of this mythic pattern, reveals that the ideal must be rooted in the natural if it is not to become an illusion, and the natural must flower forth enlightened by the ideal if it is not to resolve into chaos.

The reminiscence of certain undisplaced myths, both Christian and pagan, is implicit in this mythic pattern and their disclosure may enhance an understanding of this romantic displacement. The pattern may suggest the dying god of Christianity, forsaking divinity and assuming mortality to reconcile fallen man with his golden father, thereby making falling divine, sanctifying this descending journey. There may be a reflection of the golden Venus descending to love Adonis, a dying man, that he may be resurrected an eternal flower, a golden-green thing, or as Spenser puts it: made "eterne in mutabilitie."⁸ Persephone's sad beauty, borne of her annual descent into the death kingdom, may be shadowed forth, for it is as a golden-green thing, a beauty that must pass yet made more beautiful by its passing as Ovid makes clear.

That brow of gloom, which seemed a darker night
To Dis himself, on earth is gay and bright;
As when the sun, which rain-filled clouds concealed,
Issues in triumph forth, and rides revealed.⁹

Thus in Persephone's sad beauty, resplendent with spring promise and reminiscent of winter loss, the gold and the green are reconciled; the truth of

transience is enveloped in the eternal ring of recurrence.

This pattern may also recall the myth of the divine Orpheus' descent, by virtue of his golden harp's harmony, into the death kingdom to seek his earthly bride. In this myth, tragic separation replaces the reconciliation of romance's resolution. For by his clinging backward glance on his beloved, Orpheus refuses the essential consent, demanded by this descending journey, to the green truth of transience that taints all life. Desiring an eternity in his earthly beloved rather than accepting and cherishing her vulnerable nature he loses her and is robbed of all his joy. Thus these myths may be reflected in the magic mirror of this mythic pattern which manifests the meeting of the divine and the earthly if only for a moment.

Where reconciliation is won the pattern reveals a vision of the world made new, in which the golden ideal is refreshed by a touch of green and the natural green sanctified by a touch of gold; the divine is humanized and the human emerges touched with divinity. It is a world new born by the contact of the gold with the green. Behind this fulfilled pattern of romance the divine pattern of Revelation is perceived with its vision of the unfolding of a new heaven and a new earth born of the descent of the Jerusalem bride, at once a golden city and a green garden, to marry the Man-God.

The concepts of the gold and the green present in this mythic pattern may be revealed explicitly as images and implicitly as suggestions of those qualities conveyed by the images. The golden aspect may be conveyed by the image of the court circle that seeks to fashion a perfect society, the earthly counterpart of the heavenly golden city "at the goal of human vision."¹⁰ It may be defined as the human hero's excellence, his

potential perfection, that portion of divinity the knight shares with God. The golden quality may be discovered in the hero's dream, the ideal he upholds, his vision of himself and his world as each ought to be. And the gold may be evident as the eternity in nature's mutability, the golden ring of recurrence within its cycle of change, expressive of the life there is in death.

The green is explicit in the image of the forest into which the knight ventures forth on his quest and is implicit in his fall into nature mirrored in that journey. For the quest into the forest and the fall into nature cannot be separated; man is a microcosm of nature, his blood and its rivers correspond. The green wood often leads to Faery, but this too is a green emblem, graced though it is with a golden aspect. Frye has shown Faery to occupy the same place as ordinary physical nature, as do the forest and inward realm.¹¹ As Tolkien expresses it "The road to fairyland is not the road to Heaven," and the elves encountered there are not supernatural but natural, "far more natural" than we.¹² The realm of Faery is a perilous realm, at once delightful and dangerous, demanding the knight's eternal vigilance, for the golden glow of Faery's magic does not dispell the real claims of human mortality and natural mutability.¹³ Faery is but another image of the green world and as such affords a place around which the golden-green world can crystallize, in which the reconciliation can be effected, and from which the essential return must be made.

Thus the descending journey into the green world, whether of the forest, the natural self, or Faery is a perilous quest. For here the knight confronts realities as well as fantasy, the facts and fears and

failings which he bears into this realm, as well as the death and danger residing here. Wishes do fail here and prohibitions do exist here. The journey into the green world provides the opportunity to confront and so acknowledge the realities of limitation, death, and time residing at the heart of Faery's fantasy. And once these are accepted by the experience of suffering them which brings understanding, the well of the green world springs forth with waters of restorative grace. For then the gold and the green are reconciled in romance's natural miracle.

Hope is reclaimed at this well in the green world as the wound of knowledge now accepted is healed by the waters of grace, promising the reconciliation to be re-enacted in the human heart. In hope the ascending journey is fulfilled as hope adds to the golden ideal the sad wisdom of the green world to transform the human realm golden-green.

The frequency with which this mythic pattern informs romance might suggest that the genre was capable of only a single statement about life. Yet the three romances I have selected, Sir Orfeo, Sir Launfal, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, reveal the varied use of this mythic pattern as it unfolds in each a distinctive vision of the romantic reconciliation according to the poet's perspective. The same story told from different directions provides diversity in affinity: various visions reflected from the single mythic mirror.

The reconciliation of the gold and green manifested in this mythic pattern encompasses both a tragic and comic note. It tells us that perfection is always beyond a man's grasp, that the green will always limit his gold, and yet, it also tells us that if a man come to terms with this truth about his nature he can come as near perfection as this world permits.

What may appear to be a limited compromise, potentially tragic, from the human perspective, focusing as it does on the green term of the equation of reconciliation, from the divine perspective, focusing upon the golden term, may appear to be an unlimited promise, potentially comic.¹⁴ The perspective from which the pattern is viewed thus determines the nature of its final vision.

Sir Orfeo presents the mythic pattern as it unfolds viewed from the divine perspective. The final vision unfolded from the pattern reveals the human world of Orfeo's kingdom re-created golden-green, become "a new earth turned upward, or sacramentally aligned with a new Heaven."¹⁵ We view this new earth with the poet from the perspective of heaven, as it were, from above. Thus its golden aspect, its proximity to heaven, rather than its green aspect, its displacement in a human direction, is the focus of our perspective. From this perspective, the pattern evokes the joy of comedy's affirmation.

The pattern in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is presented from the human perspective provided by Sir Gawain. Here it unfolds a vision of the human world of Arthur's court re-created golden-green as is Orfeo's kingdom, but its green aspect, its human limitation, seems to overshadow the golden aspect of its divine promise. We view this world with Sir Gawain from below, from earth, as it were, rather than from heaven as in Sir Orfeo. From this perspective the pattern evokes something of the sorrow of tragic knowledge. Yet the potential tragedy present in the pattern's final vision viewed from Gawain's perspective is balanced by the poet's larger comic perspective provided by the court's laughter. Although the pattern in Sir Gawain tends more toward the tragic potential implicit in romance's

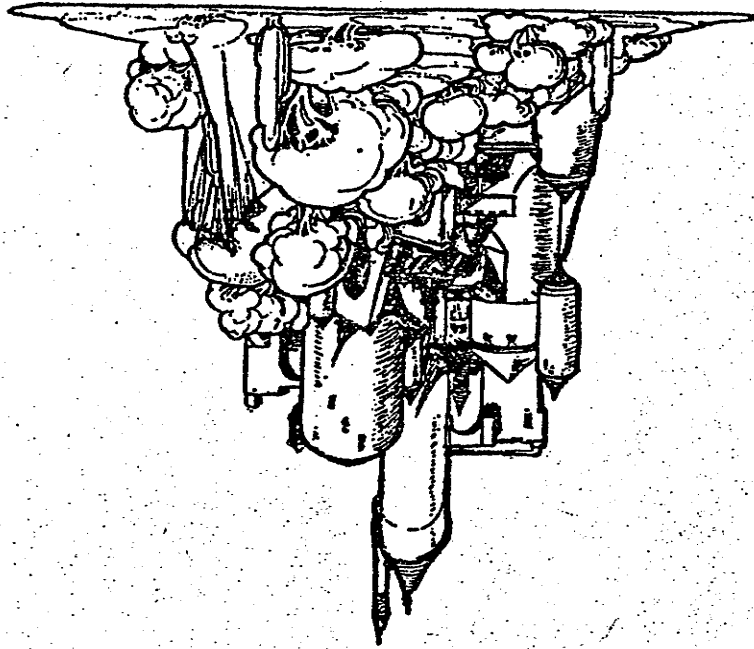
vision of reconciliation yet it reveals the kernel of comedy equally implicit in it, realized in Sir Orfeo.

Sir Launfal also presents the pattern as it unfolds from a human perspective but one very unlike that present in Sir Gawain. The pattern's final vision here reveals the human world of Arthur's court unredeemed by the reconciliation achieved in Sir Launfal. We view this world neither from heaven, as in Sir Orfeo, nor from earth, as in Sir Gawain, but from the realm of Faery into which Sir Launfal retreats. From this perspective the pattern evokes the ambiguity of irony rather than the joy of comedy or the sorrow of tragedy. Or more precisely, the final vision of the pattern in Sir Launfal is a cynical picture presented naively, for the poet is content that his hero has been saved and is unconcerned that the world has been untouched by his achievement.

The human worlds of Sir Orfeo and Sir Gawain are brought into closer alignment with the divine by virtue of the hero's fall into nature, while the human world of Sir Launfal is distanced from the divine by virtue of the hero's retreat into Faery. Although Sir Launfal does indeed return to the court bearing his saving boon the court resists the redemption implicit in the reconciliation borne in him and so it remains a brazen world, neither gold nor green. Because it provides this variation of the mythic pattern and so comments on the very different visions unfolded from the pattern in Sir Orfeo and Sir Gawain, Sir Launfal is considered here. This study is, however, largely concerned with the greater works of Sir Orfeo and Sir Gawain, and less with Sir Orfeo than with Sir Gawain which provides a profounder and more complex treatment of the pattern as evidenced by the dual perspective provided by the Gawain-poet. An

examination of the pattern's unfolding in each of these romances reveals the meaning of reconciliation, romance's restorative virtue, which heals by making whole the gold and the green.¹⁶

Fig. 2. Realms of Gold and Green



CHAPTER II

A DIVINE PERSPECTIVE: THE PATTERN'S

PROMISE IN SIR ORFEO

In Sir Orfeo the mythic pattern unfolds from the divine perspective and the clarity of its final vision of pure joy and fulfilled harmony, which resolves Orfeo's dark descent in a triumphant re-ascent and return reunited with his bride, provides a perfect counter-point to the more ambiguous vision of Sir Launfal and the more complex vision of Sir Gawain.

King Orfeo is descended of more distant divinity than his original namesake, the mythic Orpheus, divine son of the god, Apollo, and the muse Calliope. As romance requires, Sir Orfeo is a human hero with touches of divinity. Although his parents are of divine descent they are not gods: "His fader was comen of King Pluto/And his moder of King Juno."¹ However, even the divine or golden portion inherent in the human Orfeo contains an element of the green world and the natural death it implies, since his father "is comen of King Pluto," a divinity allied with death. The green is not only implicit in Sir Orfeo by virtue of his humanity, inevitably limited by mortality, but is also seen to reside in his very divinity, derived from King Pluto, divine ruler of the death kingdom.

Orfeo must make his descending journey to realize the two realities of the divine and the natural residing in his human breast. The golden king must encounter the natural man within in order that he may re-connect the gold and the green in his own heart and thereby transform

his kingdom golden-green. The two are ultimately reconciled to create an eternity which includes succession, a golden circle turning in measure with the green world, for the first thing the "newe coround" Orfeo does is name his successor (1.548). Thus is the original golden world from which he fell re-created golden-green by virtue of Orfeo's return bearing the gift gleaned from the green world journey; it has absorbed into itself the fact of death and made it no defect in that world. The process is proven perpetual by the inclusion of succession; reconciliation must be re-enacted in each new heir to maintain the presence of paradise on earth.

King Orfeo's origins so clearly anticipate his ultimate destiny that the conclusion, thus concealed in the beginning, seemed to demand disclosure. But before the concluding resolution can be confirmed we must return to the beginning and examine more closely the unfolding of Orfeo's destiny, from its origin to its end.

As is King Orfeo so is his kingdom. The golden aspect which is his divine inheritance has a human counterpart in the excellent royalty with which he graces his kingdom to make it reminiscent of Paradise. This harmonizing virtue is symbolized by Orfeo's mastery of the harp--"ther nothing was/A better harper in no plas." (11.15-16)--a mastery by which he draws a magic circle around his court wherein one

...shulde thinke that he were
 In one of the joys of paradis -
 Such joy and melody in his harping is. (11.20-23)

Thus Orfeo's kingdom recalls the original golden world, the garden God intended to be man's home, a paradise of perfect joy and melodious harmony.

As such, Orfeo's kingdom excludes the reality of man's fall into experience; it is bounded by a magic circle which not only excludes the fallen order without but maintains its inhabitants in a state of innocence within. But although Orfeo is a king with the divine function to fulfill of harmonizing his kingdom upon the pattern of Paradise by the art of his harping, yet he is also a "stalworth man" (1.3), and as a man, tainted with man's fall. So too are his subjects merely men although participants in this paradisaal society born of Orfeo's virtue. Although this kingdom is an image of the other world it seeks to imitate yet is it of this world and, as such, it must come to terms with this world's reality to which it is inevitably and irrevocably related. And so there is an essential incompleteness implicit in Orfeo and his kingdom; their innocence is their virtue but may become their fault. The potential perfection innocence promises may remain ineffective unless it is acted out in the process of perfecting which involves the encounter with experience.

For this ideal order to be fulfilled the magic circle must be broken. Innocence, the golden garden from which man fell, must pass into experience to gain the greater goal man seeks, an innocence beyond and encompassing experience. Without the encounter with the fact of fallen reality the golden ideal cherished by Orfeo and his court becomes but an illusion protected by the magic circle of delusion. Only by the dark descent can the ideal be realized. For the golden thing unfolded in the fall, the inner excellence revealed by the stripping away of Orfeo's external royalty, may be infolded in the re-ascent, made one with his re-won royalty, renewed and reconciled with the green. Then the golden ideal will prove more brilliant yet by virtue of the green that has been added to it.