The Breton *lai* is a poetic form that evolved in England and France during the twelfth century. Originally composed in Anglo-Norman, these relatively brief poems ostensibly originated in the oral legends of Brittany. The Breton *lais* generally retain the themes of longer chivalric poems—tales of adventure and noble love often colored by the supernatural—but their overall structure is much more concise and they are notable for the ways in which they often call attention to their own supposed origins in Breton stories. It is possible that the recitation of the tales was accompanied by music—the *lai proper*—and that (as in *Sir Orfeo*) the narrative originally served as something like a frame for a musical performance.

Eventually, English writers began to produce these works in their own language; *Sir Orfeo* is considered by many critics to be one of the best examples of the Breton *lai* in any language. As with many medieval English poems, the author of *Sir Orfeo* is unknown; the poem shows some signs of having been translated from a French original. The poem exists in three separate manuscripts, the earliest of which dates from the second quarter of the fourteenth century, the other two from the fifteenth century.

*Sir Orfeo* consists of a mixture of classical, romance, and Celtic elements. Its plot structure and main characters mirror those of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, familiar to the Middle Ages particularly through versions in Ovid and Virgil. But the setting has been “domesticated” (the ancient city of Thrace is identified with Winchester) and many of the story’s most distinctive plot elements have been altered to align it with romance rather than with classical myth. Whereas in the classical version Orpheus attempts to rescue Eurydice from Hades, the land of the dead, in this English version *Sir Orfeo*’s task is to rescue Heurodis from the land of the fairies. The queen is not dead but merely “taken”; the king’s descent into the wilderness precedes rather than follows his attempted rescue of the queen. Most strikingly, while the classical versions end in tragedy and loss—as he leads Eurydice from Hades, Orpheus glances back at her and thereby loses her forever—*Sir Orfeo* ends in reunion, recuperation, and recovery. The couple are reunited, the king regains his kingdom, and all live happily ever after. We cannot say with any certainty whether the author knowingly replaced the tragic ending of the classical version with this happier one, or why he did so, or whether readers of the story would have recognized or appreciated such a striking reversal. But these puzzling uncertainties about sources and form do not detract from the skill of the storytelling, in which even the most familiar plot devices are presented with precision, grace, and admirable narrative economy.

The poem was influential not only in its time (Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* and *Wife of Bath’s Tale* drew on some of the story material of *Sir Orfeo*) but also in the twentieth century: J.R.R. Tolkien studied the poem extensively and may well have been influenced by it in writing some portions of *The Lord of the Rings.*
Sir Orfeo

We redeth oft and findeth y-write, written
And this clerkes* cele we it wite,* scholars / know
Layes that ben in harping* are in song
Ben y-founde of ferli thing:* composed about marvelous things
Sum beth of wer* and sum of wo,* some are of war / grief
And sum of joie* and mirthe also,
And sum of trecherie and of gile,* deceit (or, trickery)
Of old aventours* that fel while:* adventures / happened once
And sum of bourdies* and ribaudy,* jokes / ribaldry
And mani ther beth of fairy.*
Of al things that men seth,* relate
Mest of* love, forsothe,* they beth,
In Bretayne this* layes were wrought,* Britanny these / made
First y-founde and forth y-brought,* composed / produced
Of adventours that fel bi dayes,* happened in olden times
Whereof Bretons maked her* layes, their
When kings might our y-here,* anywhere hear
Of ani mervails* that ther were,
Thai ten* an harp in gle* and game
And maked a lay and gaf* it name.
Now of this adventours that weren y-falle* have happened
Y* can tel sum, ac* nought alle.
Ac herkenth,* lordinges that ben trewe,
Ichil* you telle of “Sir Orfewe.”
Orfeo mest* of ani thing
Lovede the gle* of harping, must
glee or music
Siker* was everi gode* harpoure
Of him to have miche* honoure.
Himself he lerned forto* harp,
And leyd* theron his wittes scharp;
He lerned so ther nothing* was
A better harpoure in no plass.*
In al the world was no man borne*
That ones* Orfeo sat before—
And* he might* of his harping here—

Bot he schuld thenche° that he were
In on° of the joies of Paradis,
Swiche melody in his harping is.
Orfeo was a king,
In Ingland an heigh° lording,
A stalworth man and hardi bò° brave as well
Large° and curtès* he was also.
His fader was comen° of King Pluto,
And his moder of King Juno,
That sum time° were as godes
y-hold°
For adventours that thai dede° and told.
This king sojoynd° in “Tracions,
That was a cité of noble defens—° fortifications
For Winchester was cleded* tho° called / then
Tracions,* withouten no.°
The king hadde a quen of priis° queen of excellence
That was y-cleded° Dame Heurodis,
The fairest levedi, for the nones,* lady indeed
That might gon on° bodi and bones,
Ful of love and godenis—°
Ac no man may tell hir fainisse.°
Bifel* so in the comessing° of
it happened / beginning
May
When miri° and hot is the day, merry (pleasant)
And oway° betwixt schours, away
And everi feld° is ful of flours,
And blosme breme° on everi bough blossoms bright
Over al wexeth° miri anought,° everywhere grow / enough
This ich° quen, Dame Heurodis same
Tok to° maidens of priis,
And went in an undrteide° late morning
To play° bi an marshardise,
To se the floures spede and spring
And toe the foules° sing,
Thaite sett hem° down al tne sat themselves

1 Sir Orfeo For this anthology the text used is that prepared by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury for their edition (published by Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo).
2 fairy The word “fairy” here and elsewhere in the poem means “land of the fays” or the “fays” themselves. The word “fay” comes from Old French “fé” derived from the Latin “fata,” “the Fates.”
3 Orfeo … harping Orfeo’s name had a long tradition of being associated with music, art, and the power of eloquence; his name had been understood to mean “beautiful voice.”

4 curtès In medieval texts this word carries much greater weight than today’s “courteous” or “polite”; it connotes courtly, elite, valuable, and cultured behavior as well as generosity.
5 King Pluto … King Juno Plato was, according to classical myth, god of the underworld. Juno was a goddess, the wife of Jupiter, not a king.
6 This king … Tracions Because the poet has set the poem in England, classical and medieval places are conflated; hence, Winchester, the old capital, becomes Thrace.
Loketh so\(^n\) man doth on his fol\(^o\)  
as / for
A, dame, ich biseche,\(^o\) merci!  
I beg you  
Lete ben\(^n\) al this reweful\(^o\) cri,  
let be / pitiful
And tell me what the is,\(^n\) and  
hou,"  
what's bothering you / how
And what thing may the help now."
Tho' lay sche stille atte last  
than
And gan to wepe swithe fast,\(^o\)  
very hard
And sayd thus the King to:
“Alas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!

Sethen" we first togider were,  
since
Ones wroth never we  
neres;\(^o\)  
we were never once angry with each other
Bot ever ich have yloved the  

As mi liif and so thou me;  

Ac now we mot delen ato;\(^o\)  
must separate
Do thi best, for y mot\(^o\) go.  
I must
“Alas!” quath he, “forlorn icham!°  
I am utterly lost
Whider wiltow\(^c\) go, and to whom?°  
where will you / whom
Whider thou gost, ichil\(^b\) with the,  
I will go
And whider y go, thou schalt with me.°\(^c\)

“Nay, nay, Sir, that nought nis!°  
cannot be
Ichil the telle al hou\(^o\) it is:  
all how
As ich lay this undertake
And slepe under our orchardside,

Ther come to me to fair knyghtes,  

Wele y-armed al to rightes,\(^o\)  
quite properly
And bad me komen an heighing\(^o\)  
in haste
And speke with her lond the king.
And ich answerd at\(^e\) wordes bold,  
with
Y durst nought, no y nold.°  
dared not, nor did I want to
Thai priked oyain as thai might drive;

Tho° com her king, also blive,"  
then / as quickly
With an hundred knyghtes and mo,
And damisels an hundred also,
Al on snowe-white stedes;

As white as milke were her wedes.°\(^4\)  
their garments
Y no seighe\(^n\) never yete biforn  
saw

\(^1\) So sche slepe … al y-done Midday, or noon, was considered a perilous time in both folktales and Christian literature.

\(^2\) Whider … with me Cf. Ruth 1.16: “Whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge.” Although Ruth speaks these words not to her husband but to her mother-in-law, Naomi, the lines were frequently associated with marriage.

\(^3\) Thai … drive They rode back again as fast as they could.

\(^4\) Al … her wedes The white horse and the white clothes worn by those who escort or meet the protagonists at the boundary of the Otherworld are common in romance and dream vision literature.
So fair creatures y-core.
The king hadde a croun on hed;
It nas of silv, no of gold red,
Ac it was of a precious ston—
As bright as the sonne it schon.
And as son as he to me cam,
Wold ich, nold ich, he me nam,°
whether I wished or not he took me

155 And made me with him ride
Opon a palfray° bi his side;
And brought me to his palays,
And his riche stedes ichon.°
And sche
And brought me to his palays,
O and made me with him ride
When he that hadde ben king with cr
And then thou schalt with ous° go
Thou schalt with ous go

160 Rivers, forestes, frith with flourres,°
And his riche stedes ichon.°
And sethen° me brought oyain hom° afterwards / back home
Into our owen° orchard,
And said to me thus afterward,
“Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow° be
Right here under this ympe-tre,
And than thou schalt with ous° go
And live with ous evermo.
And yif thou makest ous y-lêt,°
What° thou be, thou worst y-fet,°
And toto° thine limes° al
That nothing help the no schal;
And thei thou best so totorn,° though (even if) you are so torn
Yete thou worst with ous y-born.”°
will be carried with us

165 “O wet”° quath he, “Allas, allas!
Lever me were to lete° mi liif
Than thus to lese° the quen, mi wiiff!”°
He asked conseyl at ich man,°
Ac no man him help no can.
Amorwe° the undertide is come
And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,°
And wele ten hundred knihtes with him,
Ich y-armed, stout° and grim;°
And with the quen wenent he
Right unto that ympe-tre.

170 Thai made scheltr° in ich a side
And praid° him, yif his wille were,
That he no schuld nought fram hem go.
“Do way!”° quath he, “It schal be so!”
Al his kingdom he forsoke;
Bot° a sclavin° on him he toke.°
2 only / pilgrim’s mantle
He no hadde kirtel no hode,°
had neither tunic nor hood
Schert,° ne no other gode,°
shirt / goods
Bot his harp he tok algate°
at any nte
And dede him barfort° out atte gate;
No man most° with him go.
might
O way! What ther was wepe and wo,
When he that hadde ben king with croun
Went so poverlich out of
toun°
in such poverty out of his town
Thurth° wode and over heth°
through / heath
Into the wildernes he geth.°
goes
Nothing he finte° that him° is ays,°
finds / for him / comfort
Bot ever he liveth in gret malais,°
distress
He that hadde y-werd the fowe and
griss,°
covered with weeds
And on bed the purper biis,°
purple linen
Now on hard heth he lith,°
lies
With leves and gresse he him writh,°
covers his cushions
He that hadde had castels and tours,
River, forest, frith with flourrs,
Now, thei it comenci° to sneewe° and
fresë,°
although it begins / snow / freeze
This king mot° make his bed in mese,°
must / must
He that had y-had knihtes of priis
Bifor him kneland,° and levedis,
knelling
Now seth he nothing that him liketh,
Bot wilde wormes° bi him striketh.°
snakes / glide
He that had y-had plëntë
Of mete and drink, of ich deyntë,°
delicacy
Now may he al day digë° and wrote°
dig / grub
Er he finde his fille of rote,°
roots
In somer he liveth bi wild fruë,°
fruit
And berien bot gode lité,°
berries of little worth

1 scheltr° From the OE “scyld-truma,” a tribal battle formation in which warriors used their shields to create a wall of defense.
2 Al his kingdom … be toke Among scholars, considerable disagreement surrounds Orfeo’s exile. It has been seen as an act of despair, atonement, or spiritual retreat, as part of a process of initiation for Orfeo, as an expression of the great love (or too great a love) Orfeo has for Heurodis.
In winter may he nothing finde
Bot rote, grases, and the rinde.  

Al his bodi was owaye dwine"  
For missays,° and al to-chine."  
Lord! who may telle the sore°  
This king sufferd ten yere and more?

His here° of his herd,° blac and Rowe,°  
To his gidel-stede° was growe.

His harp, whereon was al his gle,°  
He hidde in an holwe° tre;  
And when the weder° was clere and bright,

He toke his harp to him wel right
And harped° at his owen will.°  
Into alle the wode the soun gan
schille,°  
That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth
For joie abouten him thi teth,*  
And alle the foules° that ther were
Come and sete° on ich a br;°
To here his harping a-fine—
So mich° melody was therin;
And when he his harping lette° wold,°
No best* bi him abide nold.°
He might se him bisides,*  
Oft in hot undertides,
The king o fairy with his rout°
With dim cri and blowinge,*
And houndes also with him berking;°
Ac no best° thi no nome,*  
No never he nist wther they
become.*  
And other while° he might him se
As a gret ost° bi hi te,*  
Wele atourned,° ten hundred knightes,
Ich y-armed to his rightes,*
Of cuntenaunce° stout and fers,
With mani desplaid° baners,
And ich his swerd y-drawe hold—
Ac never he nist whider° thai
wold,°
And otherwile he seighe° other thing:
Knightes and levedis com dancinge

In queynt° atire, gisely,*  
Quenyt pas° and softly;
Tabours and trunpes yede° hem
bi,
And al maner menstraci,*  
And on a day° he seighhe him biside
Sexti° levedis on hors ride,
Gentil° and jolif as brid on ris;°
Nought o man amonges hem ther
nis;°
And ich a faucoun on hond
bere,*
And ridden on haukin bi o° rivere.

Of game that founde wel gode haunt—°
Maulardes,° hayroun,° and
cormeraunt;°
The foules of the water aniseth,
The faucouns hem wel deviseth;°
Ich faucoun his pray slough—°
That seigh Orfeo, and lough:°

"Parfax!"° quath he, "ther is fair game;
Thider ichil," bi Godes name;
Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!°
He aros, and theder gan te,*

To a levedi he was y-come,
Biheld, and hath wele undernome,*
And seth bi al thing that it is
His owen quen, Dam Heurodis.
Yern° he biheld hir, and sche him eke," eagerly / also
Ac noither° to other a word no speke;
For messais° that sche on hime seigh,
That° had ben so riche and so heighe,
The teres fel out of her eighe."°

And the other levedis this y-seighge
And maked hir oway to ride—
Sche most with him no lenger abide.
"Allas!" quath he, "now me is wo!"
Whi nil° deth now me slo,*
Allas, wrecche, that y no might
Dye now after this sight!
Allas! to long last° mi liif,
When y no dar nought with mi wiif,
No lye° to me, o° word speke.

Allas! Whi nil min hert breke!

1 °He toke his harp . . . abide nold° The tradition of harping as a way of "taming" the animals has roots in pre-Christian material as well as in the classical myth of Orpheus and in the Biblical story of David.

2 °Ich . . . se!° I was accustomed to seeing such sport!
And henge his harp upon his back,
And had well gone to gon—
It seemed to him as if it was she,
And when he had bidden al that thing,

As bright as sonne on somers° day
As sun on summer's

The butras° com out of the diche° buttresses / masts
Of rede gold y-arched riche.

As bright as doth at none° the sonne.
No man may tell, no truth in thought,
No man may tell, no thought in truth,

1 Degiselich and batalid stout Wonderful with strong battlements.

Parfay!° quath he, “icham” a minstril, lo! I am
To solas° thy lord with my gle," entertain / minstrelsy
Yif his swee wille be."

The porter undede° the gate anon
And let him into the castel gon.

Than he gan bihold about al,° look all around
And seighe liggeand° within the wall remaining, living
Of folk that were thider y-brought

And thought dede, and nare nought.° believed to be dead, but were not
Sum stode° withouten hade," stood / head
And sum non armes nade,° had no arms

And sum thurth° the bodi hadde wounde,° through
And sum lay wode,° y-bounde,° mad
And sum armed on hors sete," sat
And sum asstranged as thai etc;° they ate
And sum were in water adreynt," drowned
And sum with fire al forschreynt.° shriveled

Wives lay ther on childe bedde,

Sum ded and sum awedde,° driven mad

And wonder fele° ther lay bisides wondrous many
Right as° thai slepe her° undertides;° just as / their

Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,° taken
With faire thider y-come."° enchantment brought there

Ther he seighe his owen wi,°
Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,° dear life

Slepe under an ympe-tre— she
Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he,°

And when he hadde bihold this merivails alle,° all these marvels

He went into the kinges halle.
Than seighe he ther a semly° sight,
That unnethe° bihold he him might.

That unnethe° bihold he him might. scarcely
When he hadde biholden al that thing,

He kneled adoun biforn the king;

O lord," he seyd, “yif thit wille were,
Mi menstraci thou schust y-her,"° should hear

The king answered, “What man arrow,° are you
That art hider y-comen now?

Ich, no non° that is with me, neither I, nor no one
No sent never after the."° you
The Auchinleck Manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ ms. 19.2.1), fol. 302r, the last 26 lines of the first column (lines 417–34).
And tempreth his harp, as he wele can,
And bliseful notes he ther gan,
That al that in the palayes were
Com to him for to listen,
And liggeth adoun to his fete—
That was his o
er liif,
That men might him bihold and se.
Ther he tok his herbar;
To here his gle he hath gode will,
his (Orfeso’s) / be (the king)
Great pleasure / songs
The riche quen also hadde he.  
When he hadde stint his harping,
“Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.
Now aske of me what it be,”
Largelich ichil the pay;
Now spoke, and tow might say.”
“Sir,” he seyd, “ich biseche the
Thatow woldest give me
That ich levedi, bright on ble,”
That slepeth under the ympe-tree.”
“Nay!” quath the king, “that nought nere!”
A sori couple of you it were,
For thou art lene, rowe and blac,
And she is lossum,” withouten lac;”
A lothlich thing it were, forthi,
To sen” hir in thi compani.
“O sir!” he seyd, “gentil king,
Yete were it a wele fourle thing”
To here a lesing of thi mouthe!

So, sir, as ye seyd nouth,  
What ich wold aski, have ya schold,  
And nedes thou most thi word hold.”  
The king seyd, “Sethen it is so,
Take hir bi the hond and go;
Of hir ichil thatow be blithe.”
He kneled adoun and thonked him swithe,
His wiif he tok bi the hond,
And dede him swithe out of that lond,
To Winchester he is y-come,
That was his ownen cité;
Ac no man knewe that it was he.

As a minstrel of pover liif,
And asked tidinges of that lond,
And who the kingdom held in hond.
The pover begger in his cote,
Told him everich a grot:
Hou her quen was stole owy,
Ten yer gon,” with fairy,
And hou her king en exile yede,
But no man nist in wiche thede,
And how the steward the lond gan hold,
And other mani thinges him told.

Amorwe, oyain nonetide,
the next day, towards noon
He makedy his wiif ther abide;
The beggers clothes he bowred anon
And heng his harp his rigge opon,
And went him into that cité
That men might him bihold and se.
Ehrs and barouns bold,
Buriays and levedis him gun bihold.
“Lo!” thai seyd, “swiche a man!

1 For knoweleche … wende He did not dare go lest he be recog-
nized.
Hou long the hene° hongeth him opant° hair / upon
Lo! Hou his berd hongeth to his kne! lost
He is y-clongen also° a tre" gnarled like
And, as he yede in the strete,

510
With his steward he gan mete, and loude he° set on him° a
crie: he (Orfœo) / him (the steward)
“Sir steward!” he seyd, “merci!
Icam° an harpoure of hethenisse;° I am / from heathendom
Help me now in this destresse!”

515
The steward seyd, “Com with me, come;
Of that ichave," thou schalt have some. what I have
Everich gode harpoure is welcom me to
For mi lordes love, Sir Orfœo.”

520
In the castel the steward sat atte mete," table
And mani lording was bi him sete;
Ther were trompours° and tabourers," trumpeters / drummers
Harpoors fele," and crouders— 1
Miche melody thai maked alle.
And Orfœo sat stille in the halle

525
And herkneth; when thai ben al stille,
He toke his harp and tempred schille;° tuned it loudly
The blissefulst° notes he harped there
That ever ani man y-herd with ere—
Ich man liked wele his gle.

530
The steward bisheld and gan y-se," began to perceive
And knewe the harp als blive." at once
“Menstrel!” he seyd, "so mot thou
thrive," if you wish to thrive
Where hadestow" this harp, and hou° did you get / how
Y pray that thou me telle now.”

535
“Lord,” quath he, “in uncouthe thede unknown
Thurth a wildernes as y yede,
Ther y founde in a dale
With lyouns a man to torn in small pieces
smaile," And wolves him frete° with teth so scharp. had devoured

540
Bi him y fond this ich° harp;
same
Wele ten yere it is y-go.”
“Ol!” quath the steward, “now me is wo!
That was mi lord, Sir Orfœo!
Allas, wereche, what schal y do,

That have swich a lord y-lore?° hair / upon
A, way° that ich was y-bore! lost
That him° was so hard grace
y-yarked," to him / bitter fortune allotted
And so vile deth y-marked!”° (a) death was ordained
Adoun he fel aswoun° to grounde; in a faint
His barouns him tok up in that stounde° moment
And telleth him how it° geth—
it (the world)
“It is no bot of mannes
deth!”° there is no remedy for man’s death!

550
King Orfœo knewe wele bi than
His steward was a trewe man
And loved him as he aught to do,
And stont up, and seyt thus, “Lo,
Steward, heroino now this thing;
Yif ich were Orfœo the king,
And hadde y-suffred ful yore° very long ago
In wildernisse miche sore,” much sorrow
And hadde ywonen mi quen o-wy
Out of the lond of fairy,
And hadde y-brought the levedi hende° gracious
Right here to the tounes ende,
And with a begger her in y-nome," had placed her
And were mi-self hinder y-come
Poverlich to the, thus stille,
For to asay° thi gode wille,
test
And ich founde the thus trewe,
Thou no schust it never rewē," should never regret it
Sikerlich," for love or ay," surely / fear
Thou schust° be king after mi day;
should
And yif° thou of mi deth hadest ben
blithe," but if / happy
Thou schust have voided, also

560
been banished immediately
Tho all tho that therein
That it was 2 King Orfœo underyeate,
And the steward him wele knewe—
Over and over the bord he thewe," overturned the table
And fel adoun to his° fet;
his (Sir Orfeo)
So dede everich lord that ther sete,
And all thai seyd at o crine," in one cry
“Ye beth our lord, sir, and our king!”
Glad thai were of his live;° life
To chaumber thai ladde him als belive° led him immediately

570
And bathed him and schaved his berd,

575

580

585

1 crouders “Croud-players.” The word probably derives from the Welsh “crwth,” a Celtic string instrument which was played with a bow and plucked with the fingers. However, the MED refers to this line in Sir Orfœo and interprets the word as “one who plays the crowd.”

2 "Tho all tho … That it was " Then all those recognized that it was.
And tired him as a king apert;
And sethen, with gret processioun,
Thai brought the quen into the toun
With al maner menstraci—
Lord! ther was grete melody!
For joie thai wepe with her eighe
That hem so sounde y-comen seighe.
Now King Orfeo newe coround is,
And his quen, Dame Heurodis,
And lived long afterward,
And sethen was king the steward.
Harpours in Bretaine after than

Herd hou this mervaile bigan,
And made henof a lay of gode
likeing,
And nempned it after the king.
That lay "Orfeo" is y-hote;
Gode is the lay, swete is the note.
Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!

Explicit.