

SIR ORFEO

c. 1325

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*¹

We redeth oft and findeth y-write,^o *written*
 And this clerkes^o wele it wite,^o *scholars / know*
 Layes that ben in harping^o *are in song*
 Ben y-founde of ferli thing:^o *composed about marvelous things*
 5 Sum bethe of wer^o and sum of wo,^o *some are of war / grief*
 And sum of joie^o and mirthe also, *gaiety*
 And sum of trecherie and of gile,^o *deceit (or, trickery)*
 Of old aventours^o that fel while;^o *adventures / happened once*
 And sum of bourdes^o and ribaudy,^o *jokes / ribaldry*
 10 And mani ther beth of fairy.²
 Of al thinges that men seth,^o *relate*
 Mest o^o love, forsothe,^o they beth. *most of / in truth*
 In Breteyne this^o layes were wrought,^o *Brittany these / made*
 First y-founde^o and forth y-brought,^o *composed / produced*
 15 Of aventours that fel bi dayes,^o *happened in olden times*
 Wherof Bretouns madek her^o layes. *their*
 When kinges might our y-here^o *anywhere hear*
 Of ani mervailles^o that ther were, *marvels*
 Thai token^o an harp in gle^o and game *took / minstrelsy*
 20 And madek a lay and gaf^o it name. *gave*
 Now of this aventours that weren y-falle^o *have happened*
 Y^o can tel sum, ac^o nought alle. *I / but*
 Ac herkneth,^o lordinges that ben trewe, *but listen*
 Ichil^o you telle of “Sir Orfewe.” *I will*
 25 Orfeo mest^o of ani thing *most*
 Lovede the gle^o of harping.³ *glee or music*
 Siker^o was everi gode^o harpouir *sure / good*
 Of him to have miche^o honour. *much*
 Himself he lerned forto^o harp, *he taught himself to*
 30 And leyd^o theron his wittes scharp; *applied*
 He lerned so ther nothing^o was *in no way*
 A better harpouir in no plas.^o *anywhere*
 In al the warld was no man bore^o *born*
 That ones^o Orfeo sat before— *once*
 35 And^o he might^o of his harping here— *if / could*

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 *féerie* 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 “*fée*” 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.”

Bot he schuld thenche^o that he were *think*
 In on^o of the joies of Paradis, *one*
 Swiche melody in his harping is.
 Orfeo was a king,
 40 In Ingland an heighe^o lording, *high*
 A stalworth man and hardi bo;^o *brave as well*
 Large^o and curteys⁴ he was also. *generous*
 His fader was comen^o of King Pluto, *descended from*
 And his moder of King Juno,⁵
 45 That sum time^o were as godes *who once*
 yhold^o *considered to be gods*
 For aventours that thai dede^o and told. *did*
 This king sojournd^o in Traciens, *dwelled*
 That was a cité of noble defens—^o *fortifications*
 For Winchester was cleped^o tho^o *called / then*
 50 Traciens,⁶ withouten no.^o *denial*
 The king hadde a quen of priis^o *queen of excellence*
 That was y-cleped^o Dame Heurodis, *called*
 The fairest levedi, for the nones,^o *lady indeed*
 That might gon on^o bodi and bones, *walk about in*
 55 Ful of love and godenisse—^o *goodness*
 Ac no man may telle hir fairnise.^o *beauty*

 Bifel^o so in the comessing^o of *it happened / beginning*
 May
 When miri^o and hot is the day, *merry (pleasant)*
 And oway^o beth winter schours, *away*
 60 And everi feld^o is ful of flours, *field*
 And blosme breme^o on everi bough *blossoms bright*
 Over al wexeth^o miri anought,^o *everywhere grow / enough*
 This ich^o quen, Dame Heurodis *same*
 Tok to^o maidens of priis, *two*
 65 And went in an undrentide^o *late morning*
 To play^o bi an orchardside, *enjoy themselves*
 To se the floures sprede and spring
 And to here the foules^o sing. *birds*
 Thai sett hem^o doun al thre *sat themselves*

⁴ *curteys* 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* Pluto was, according to classical myth, god of the underworld. Juno was a goddess, the wife of Jupiter, not a king.

⁶ *This king ... Traciens* Because the poet has set the poem in England, classical and medieval places are conflated; hence, Winchester, the old capital, becomes Thrace.

70	Under a fair ympe-tre, ^o	<i>grafted tree</i>	Loketh so ^o man doth on his fo! ^o	<i>as / foe</i>
	And wel sone ^o this fair quene	<i>very quickly</i>	A, dame, ich biseche, ^o merci!	<i>I beg you</i>
	Fel on slepe ^o opon the grene.	<i>asleep</i>	Lete ben ^o al this reweful ^o cri,	<i>let be / pitiful</i>
	The maidens durst ^o hir nought awake,	<i>dared</i>	115 And tel me what the is, ^o and	
	Bot lete hir ligge ^o and rest take.	<i>let her lie</i>	hou, ^o	<i>what's bothering you / how</i>
75	So sche slepe til after none, ^o	<i>noon</i>	And what thing may the help now.”	
	That undertide ^o was al y-done. ^{o1}	<i>until midday / past</i>	Tho ^o lay sche stille atte last	<i>then</i>
	Ac, as sone as sche gan ^o awake,	<i>began (to)</i>	And gan to wepe swithe fast, ^o	<i>very hard</i>
	Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make; ^o	<i>terrible outcry made</i>	And seyð thus the King to:	
	Sche froted ^o hir honden ^o and hir fete,	<i>rubbed / hands</i>	120 “Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!	
80	And crached hir visage ^o —it bled		Sethen ^o we first togider were,	<i>since</i>
	wete— ^o	<i>scratched her face / profusely</i>	Ones wroth never we	
	Hir riche robe hye al to-rett ^o	<i>she tore all to pieces</i>	neres; ^o	<i>we were never once angry with each other</i>
	And was reveyd ^o out of hir wit.	<i>driven</i>	Bot ever ich have yloved the	
	The two maidens hir biside		As mi liif and so thou me;	
	No durst with hir no leng ^o abide,	<i>longer</i>	125 Ac now we mot delen ato; ^o	<i>must separate</i>
85	Bot ourn ^o to the palays ful right ^o	<i>ran / immediately</i>	Do thi best, for y mot ^o go.”	<i>I must</i>
	And told bothe squier and knight		“Allas!” quath he, “forlorn icham! ^o	<i>I am utterly lost</i>
	That her ^o quen awede wold, ^o	<i>their / was going mad</i>	Whider wiltow ^o go, and to wham? ^o	<i>where will you / whom</i>
	And bad ^o hem go and hir at-hold. ^o	<i>bade / seize</i>	Whider thou gost, ichil ^o with the,	<i>I will go</i>
	Knightes urn ^o and levedis also,	<i>ran</i>	130 And whider y go, thou schalt with me.” ²	
90	Damisels sexti and mo. ^o	<i>numbering sixty and more</i>	“Nay, nay, Sir, that nought nis! ^o	<i>cannot be</i>
	In the orchard to the quen hye come, ^o	<i>they came</i>	Ichil the telle al hou ^o it is:	<i>all how</i>
	And her up in her armes nome, ^o	<i>their arms took</i>	As ich lay this undertide	
	And brought hir to bed atte last,		And slepe under our orchardside,	
	And held hir there fine fast. ^o	<i>very securely</i>	135 Ther come to me to fair knightes,	
95	Ac ever she held in o ^o cri	<i>persisted in one</i>	Wele y-armed al to rightes, ^o	<i>quite properly</i>
	And wold ^o up and owy. ^o	<i>wished (to go) / away</i>	And bad me comen an heighing ^o	<i>in haste</i>
	When Orfeo herd ^o that tiding	<i>heard</i>	And speke with her lord the king.	
	Never him nas wers for		And ich answerd at ^o wordes bold,	<i>with</i>
	nothing. ^o	<i>had he been as grieved by anything</i>	140 Y durst nought, no y nold. ^o	<i>dared not, nor did I want to</i>
	He come with knightes tene ^o	<i>ten</i>	Thai priked oyain as thai might drive; ³	
100	To chaumber, right bifor the quene,		Tho ^o com her king, also blive, ^o	<i>then / as quickly</i>
	And bi-held, ^o and seyð with grete pité, ^o	<i>beheld her / sorrow</i>	With an hundred knightes and mo,	
	“O lef liif, ^o what is te, ^o	<i>dear life / with you</i>	And damisels an hundred also,	
	That ^o ever yete ^o hast ben so stille ^o	<i>who / yet / calm</i>	145 Al on snowe-white stedes;	
	And ^o now gredest wonder schille? ^o	<i>but / cries strangely shrilly</i>	As white as milke were her wedes. ^{o4}	<i>their garments</i>
105	Thy bodi, that was so white y-core, ^o	<i>exquisitely</i>	Y no seighe ^o never yete bifore	<i>saw</i>
	With thine nailes is all to-tore. ^o	<i>torn to pieces</i>		
	Allas! thy rode, ^o that was so red,	<i>face</i>		
	Is al wan, as ^o thou were ded	<i>pale as (if)</i>		
	And also thine fingres smale ^o	<i>slender</i>		
110	Beth al blodi and al pale.			
	Allas! thy lovesum eyyen to ^o	<i>lovely two eyes</i>		

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: “Wither 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 creatours y-core.
 The king hadde a croun on hed;
 150 It nas of silver, 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,^o *whether I wished or not he took me*
 155 And made me with him ride
 Opon a palfray^o bi his side; *horse*
 And brought me to his palays,
 Wele atird^o in ich ways,^o *adorned / every way*
 And schewed me castels and tours,^o *towers*
 160 Rivers, forestes, frith with flours,^o *woods with flowers*
 And his riche stedes ichon.^o *gorgeous steeds each one*
 And sethen^o me brought oyain hom^o *afterwards / back home*
 Into our owhen^o orchard, *own*
 And said to me thus afterward,
 165 “Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow^o be *that you*
 Right here under this ympe-tre,
 And than thou schalt with ous^o go *us*
 And live with ous evermo.
 And yif thou makest ous y-let,^o *a hindrance for us*
 170 Whar^o thou be, thou worst y-fet,^o *wherever / will be fetched*
 And totore^o thine limes^o al *torn apart / limbs*
 That nothing help the no schal;
 And thei thou best so totorn,^o *though (even if) you are so torn*
 Yete thou worst with ous y-born.”^o *will be carried with us*
 175 When King Orfeo herd this cas,^o *matter*
 “O we!”^o quath he, “Allas, allas!
 Lever me were to lete^o mi liif *I'd rather lose*
 Than thus to lese^o the quen, mi wiif!” *lose*
 He asked conseyl at ich man,^o *advice from each person*
 180 Ac no man him help no can.
 Amorwe^o the undertide is come *the next day*
 And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,^o *taken*
 And wele ten hundred knightes with him,
 Ich y-armed, stout^o and grim;^o *strong / fierce*
 185 And with the quen wenten he
 Right unto that ympe-tre.

Thai made scheltrom¹ in ich a side
 And praid^o him, yif his wille were, *prayed*
 That he no schuld nought fram hem go.
 “Do way!”^o quath he, “It schal be so!” *enough!*
 Al his kingdom he forsoke;
 Bot^o a sclavin^o on him he toke.² *only / pilgrim's mantle*
 He no hadde kirtel no hode,^o *had neither tunic nor hood*
 Schert,^o ne no nother gode,^o *shirt / goods*
 Bot his harp he tok algate^o *at any rate*
 And dede him barfot^o out atte gate; *passed barefoot*
 No man most^o with him go. *might*
 O way! What ther was wepe and wo,
 235 When he that hadde ben king with croun
 Went so poverlich out of
 toun!^o *in such poverty out of his town*
 Thurth^o wode and over heth^o *through / heath*
 Into the wildernes he geth.^o *goes*
 Nothing he fint^o that him^o is ays,^o *finds / for him / comfort*
 240 Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.^o *distress*
 He that hadde y-werd the fowe and
 griis,^o *worn the variegated and grey fur*
 And on bed the purper biis,^o *purple linen*
 Now on hard hethe he lith,^o *lies*
 With leves and gresse he him writh.^o *covers himself*
 245 He that hadde had castels and tours,
 River, forest, frith with flours,
 Now, thei it comenci^o to snewe^o and
 frese,^o *although it begins / snow / freeze*
 This king mot^o make his bed in mese.^o *must / moss*
 He that had y-had knightes of priis
 250 Bifor him kneland,^o and levedis, *kneeling*
 Now seth he nothing that him liketh,
 Bot wilde wormes^o bi him striketh.^o *snakes / glide*
 He that had y-had plenté
 Of mete and drink, of ich deynté,^o *delicacy*
 255 Now may he al day digge^o and wrote^o *dig / grub*
 Er he finde his fille of rote.^o *roots*
 In somer he liveth bi wild frut,^o *fruit*
 And berien bot gode lite;^o *berries of little worth*

¹ *scheltrom* 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 . . . he 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.

- 260 In winter may he nothing finde
 Bot rote, gras, and the rinde.^o *bark*
 Al his bodi was oway dwine^o *away dwindled*
 For missays,^o and al to-chine.^o *hardship / chapped*
 Lord! who may telle the sore^o *sorrow*
 This king sufferd ten yere and more?
 265 His here^o of his berd,^o blac and rowe,^o *hair / beard / rough*
 To his girdel-stede^o was growe. *waist*
 His harp, whereon was al his gle,^o *pleasure*
 He hidde in an holwe^o tre; *hollow*
 And when the weder^o was clere and bright, *weather*
 270 He toke his harp to him wel right
 And harped^o at his owen wille.^o *played / own desire*
 Into alle the wode the soun gan
 schille,^o *sound began to resound*
 That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth
 For joie abouten him thai teth,^o *gathered*
 275 And alle the foules^o that ther were *birds*
 Come and sete^o on ich a brere^o *sat / every briar*
 To here his harping a-fine— *much*
 So miche^o melody was therin;
 And when he his harping lete wold,^o *would leave off*
 280 No best^o bi him abide nold.^{o1} *beast / would remain*
 He might se him bisides,^o *nearby*
 Oft in hot undertides,
 The king o fairy with his rout^o *company*
 Com to hunt him al about
 285 With dim cri and bloweing,^o *blowing (of horns)*
 And houndes also with him berking;^o *barking*
 Ac no best thai no nome,^o *but they took no beast (game)*
 No never he nist whider they
 bicome.^o *nor did he ever know where they went*
 And other while^o he might him se *at other times*
 290 As a gret ost^o bi him te,^o *army / went*
 Wele atourned,^o ten hundred knightes, *equipped*
 Ich y-armed to his rightes,^o *all properly armed*
 Of cuntenaunce^o stout and fers, *appearance*
 With mani desplaid^o baners, *unfurled*
 295 And ich his swerd y-drawe hold—
 Ac never he nist whider^o thai
 wold.^o *knew not whither / went*
 And otherwile he seighe^o other thing: *saw*
 Knightes and levedis com daunceing
- In queynt^o atire, gisely,^o *elegant / skilfully*
 300 Queynt pas^o and softly; *graceful steps*
 Tabours and trunpes yede^o hem
 bi, *drums and trumpets went*
 And al maner menstraci.^o *sorts of minstrelsy*
- And on a day^o he seighe him biside *on a certain day*
 Sexti^o levedis on hors ride, *sixty*
 305 Gentil and jolif as brid on ris;^o *lively as a bird on bough*
 Nought o man amonges hem ther
 nis;^o *not a single man was with them*
 And ich a faucoun on hond
 bere,^o *each a falcon on her hand bore*
 And riden on haukin bi o^o rivere. *a-hawking by a*
 Of game thai founde wel gode haunt—^o *great plenty*
 310 Maulardes,^o hayroun,^o and
 cormeraunt;^o *mallards / heron / cormorant*
 The foules of the water ariseth,
 The faucouns hem wele deviseth;^o *marked*
 Ich faucoun his pray slough—^o *prey killed*
 That seigh Orfeo, and lough:^o *laughed*
 315 “Parfay!”^o quath he, “ther is fair game;
 Thider ichil,^o bi Godes name;
 Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!”² *by my faith I’ll go*
 He aros, and thider gan te.^o *began to approach*
 To a levedi he was y-come,
 320 Biheld, and hath wele undernome,^o *perceived*
 And seth bi al thing that it is
 His owen quen, Dam Heurodis.
 Yern^o he biheld hir, and sche him eke,^o *eagerly / also*
 Ac noither^o to other a word no speke; *neither*
 325 For messais^o that sche on him seighe,
 That^o had ben so riche and so heighe, *sadness*
 The teres fel out of her eighe.^o *who*
 The other levedis this y-seighe
 And maked hir oway to ride—
 330 Sche most with him no lenger abide.
 “Allas!” quath he, “now me is wo!”
 Whi nil^o deth now me slo?^o *will not / slay*
 Allas, wreche, that y no might
 Dye now after this sight!
 335 Allas! to long last^o mi liif, *too long lasts*
 When y no dar nought with mi wiif,
 No hye^o to me, o^o word speke. *nor she / one*
 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!

- Parfay!" quath he, "tide wat bitide,^o *come what may*
 340 Whiderso this^o levedis ride, *wherever these*
 The selve^o way ichil streche—^o *same / hasten*
 Of liif no^o deth me no reche."^o *nor / I do not care*
 His sclavain he dede on also
 spac^o *pilgrim's gown he put on quickly*
 And henge his harp opon his bac,
 345 And had wel gode wil to gon—^o *great desire to go*
 He no spard^o noither stub^o no ston. *avoided / stump*
 In at a roche^o the levedis rideth, *Into a rock*
 And he after, and nought abideth.
 When he was in the roche y-go,^o *gone*
 350 Wele thre mile other mo,
 He com into a fair cuntray^o *country*
 As bright so sonne on somers^o day, *as sun on summer's*
 Smothe and plain^o and al grene— *smooth and level*
 Hille no dale nas ther non y-sene.^o *was not to be seen*
 355 Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,
 Riche and real^o and wonder heighe.^o *royal / wondrously high*
 Al the utmast wal^o *all of the outermost wall*
 Was clere and schine^o as cristal; *bright*
 An hundred tours ther were about,
 360 Degiselich and bataild stout.¹
 The butras^o com out of the diche^o *buttresses / moat*
 Of rede gold y-arched riche.
 The voursour^o was avowed^o al *vaulting / adorned*
 Of ich maner divers aumal.^o *with every kind of enamel*
 365 Within ther wer wide wones,^o *spacious dwellings*
 Al of precious stones;
 The werst piler on to biholde
 Was al of burnist^o gold. *burnished*
 Al that lond was ever^o light, *always*
 370 For when it schuld be therk^o and night, *dark*
 The riche stones light gonne^o *stone's light shone*
 As bright as doth at none^o the sonne. *noon*
 No man may telle, no thenche^o in thought, *nor think*
 The riche^o werk that ther was wrought.^o *exquisite / made (done)*
 375 Bi al thing him think^o that it is *it seems to him*
 The proude court of Paradis.
 In this castel the levedis alight;^o *dismounted*
 He wold in after, yif^o he might. *wished to enter if*
 Orfeo knokketh atte gate;
 380 The porter was redi therate
 And asked what he wold hav y-do.^o *wanted (to do)*
- "Parfay!" quath he, "icham^o a minstrel, lo! *I am*
 To solas^o thi lord with mi gle,^o *entertain / minstrelsy*
 Yif his swete wille be."
 385 The porter undede^o the gate anon *undid*
 And lete him into the castel gon.
- Than he gan bihold about al,^o *look all around*
 And seighe liggeand^o within the wal *remaining, living*
 Of folk that were thider y-brought
 390 And thought dede, and nare
 nought.^o *believed to be dead, but were not*
 Sum stode^o withouten hade,^o *stood / head*
 And sum non armes nade,^o *had no arms*
 And sum thurth^o the bodi hadde wounde, *through*
 And sum lay wode,^o y-bounde, *mad*
 395 And sum armed on hors sete,^o *sat*
 And sum astrangled as thai ete;^o *they ate*
 And sum were in water adreynt,^o *drowned*
 And sum with fire al forschreynt.^o *shriveled*
 Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
 400 Sum ded and sum awedde,^o *driven mad*
 And wonder fele^o ther lay bisides *wondrous many*
 Right as^o thai slepe her^o undertides; *just as / their*
 Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,^o *taken*
 With fairi thider y-come.^o *enchantment brought there*
 405 Ther he seighe his owen wiif,
 Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,^o *dear life*
 Slepe under an ympe-tre—
 Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he.^o *she*
 And when he hadde bihold this mervails
 alle,^o *all these marvels*
 410 He went into the kinges halle.
 Than seighe he ther a semly^o sight, *fair*
 A tabernacle blisseful^o and bright, *canopy beautiful*
 Therin her maister king sete
 And her quen, fair and swete.
 415 Her crounes, her clothes schine so bright
 That unnethe^o bihold he him might. *scarcely*
 When he hadde biholden al that thing,
 He kneled adoun bifor the king;
 "O lord," he seyde, "yif it thi wille were,
 420 Mi menstraci thou schust y-here."^o *should bear*
 The king answered, "What man artow,^o *are you*
 That art hider y-comen now?
 Ich, no non^o that is with me, *neither I, nor no one*
 No sent never after the.^o *you*

¹ *Degiselich and bataild stout* Wonderful with strong battlements.

- 425 Sethen° that ich here regni° gan, *since / reign*
 Y no fond never so folhardi° man *foolhardy*
 That hider to ous durst wende° *to us dared come*
 Bot that ic him wald ofsende.”¹
 “Lord,” quath he, “trowe° ful wel, *believe*
 430 Y nam bot a pover menstrel;
 And, sir, it is the maner of ous
 To seche mani° a lordes hous— *seek many*
 Thei° we nought welcom no be, *although (even if)*
 Yete we mot proferi° forth our gle.” *must offer*
- 435 Bifor the king he sat adoun
 And tok his harp so miri° of soun,° *merry / sound*
 And tempreth° his harp, as he wele
 can,° *tunes / knows well how to do*
 And blisseful notes he ther gan,° *began*
 That al that in the palays were
 440 Com to him forto here,° *to listen*
 And liggeth° adoun to his fete— *lie*
 Hem thinketh° his melody so swete. *they think*
 The king herkneth° and sitt ful stille;° *listens / sits quietly*
 To here his° gle he° hath gode
 wille. *his (Orfeo's) / he (the king)*
- 445 Gode bourde° he hadde of his gle;° *great pleasure / songs*
 The riche quen also hadde he.° *she*
 When he hadde stint° his harping, *stopped*
 Than seyde to him the king,
 “Menstrel, me liketh° wel thi gle. *pleases me*
 450 Now aske of me what it be,° *whatever you wish*
 Largelich° ichil the pay; *generously*
 Now speke, and tow might asay.”° *if you wish to find out*
 “Sir,” he seyde, “ich biseche the° *beseech you*
 Thatow° woldest give me *that you*
 455 That ich° levedi, bright on ble,° *same / of complexion*
 That slepeth under the ympe-tree.”
 “Nay!” quath the king, “that nought
 nere!° *that could never be*
 A sori° couple of you it were, *ill-matched*
 For thou art lene, rowe° and blac, *lean, rough*
 460 And sche is lovesum,° withouten lac;° *beautiful / blemish*
 A lothlich° thing it were, forthi,° *loathly / therefore*
 To sen° hir in thi compayni.” *see*
 “O sir!” he seyde, “gentil king,
 Yete were it a wele fouler thing° *much more disgraceful*
 465 To here a lesing of° thi mouthel! *hear a lie from*
- So, sir, as ye seyde nouthe,° *just now*
 What ich wold aski,° have y
 schold,° *wished to ask for / I should*
 And nedes° thou most thi word hold.” *by necessity*
 The king seyde, “Sethen it is so,
 470 Take hir bi the hond and go;
 Of° hir ichil thatow be
 blithe.”° *with / I wish that you be happy*
 He kneled adoun and thonked him swithe.° *quickly*
 His wiif he tok bi the hond,° *hand*
 And dede° him swithe out of that lond,° *went / land*
 475 And went him out of that thede—° *country*
 Right as he come, the way he yede.° *went*
 So long he hath the way y-nome° *taken*
 To Winchester he is y-come,
 That was his owen cité;
 480 Ac no man knewe that it was he.
 No forther° than the tounes ende *further*
 For knoweleche no durst he wende,²
 Bot with a begger, y-bilt ful
 narwe,° *whose house was very small*
 Ther he tok his herbarwe° *lodging*
 485 To him and to° his owen wiif *for himself and for*
 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° *cottage*
 490 Told him everich a grot:° *every scrap*
 Hou her quen was stole owy,° *away*
 Ten yer gon,° with fairy,° *ago / by magic*
 And hou her king en° exile yede,° *into / went*
 But no man nist° in wiche thede;° *no one knew / country*
 495 And how the steward the lond gan hold,
 And other mani thinges him told.
- Amorwe, oyain nonetide,° *the next day, towards noon*
 He maked his wiif ther abide;° *stay there*
 The beggers clothes he borwed anon
 500 And heng his harp his rigge° opon, *back*
 And went him into that cité
 That men might him bihold and se.
 Erls and barouns bold,
 Buriays° and levedis him gun bihold. *burgesses (citizens)*
 505 “Lo!” thai seyde, “swiche a man!

¹ Bot that ... ofsende Unless I wished him summoned.

² For knoweleche ... wende He did not dare go lest he be recognized.

- Hou long the here° hongeth him opan!° *hair / upon*
 Lo! Hou his berd hongeth to his kne!
 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° sett on him° a
 crie: *he (Orfeo) / him (the steward)*
 “Sir steward!” he seyde, “merci!
 Icham° an harpoure of hethenisse;° *I am / from heathendom*
 Help me now in this destresse!”
 515 The steward seyde, “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 Orfeo.”
 In the castel the steward sat atte mete,° *table*
 520 And mani lording was bi him sete;
 Ther were trompours° and tabourers,° *trumpeters / drummers*
 Harpours fele,° and crouders—¹ *many*
 Miche melody thai maked alle.
 And Orfeo sat stille in the halle
 525 And herkneth; when thai ben al stille,
 He toke his harp and tempred schille;° *tuned it loudly*
 The blissefulest° notes he harped there *most beautiful*
 That ever ani man y-herd with ere—
 Ich man liked wele his gle.
 530 The steward biheld and gan y-se,° *began to perceive*
 And knewe the harp als blive.° *at once*
 “Menstrel!” he seyde, “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 uncouthen° thede *unknown*
 Thurth a wildernes as y yede,
 Ther y founde in a dale
 With lyouns a man totorn smale,° *torn in small pieces*
 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.”
 “O!” quath the steward, “now me is wo!
 That was mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
 Allas, wreche, what schal y do,
- 545 That have swiche a lord y-lore?° *lost*
 A, way° that ich was y-bore! *O, woe*
 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 aswon° to grounde; *in a faint*
 550 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!*
 King Orfeo knewe wele bi than
 His steward was a trewe man
 And loved him as he aught to do,
 555 And stont up, and seyde thus, “Lo,
 Steward, herkne now this thing:
 Yif ich were Orfeo the king,
 And hadde y-suffred ful yore° *very long ago*
 560 In wildernisse miche sore,° *much sorrow*
 And hadde ywon mi quen o-wy
 Out of the lond of fairy,
 And hadde y-brought the levedi hende° *gracious*
 Right here to the tounes ende,
 565 And with a begger her in y-nome,° *had placed her*
 And were mi-self hider y-come
 Poverlich to the, thus stille,
 For to asay° thi gode wille, *test*
 And ich founde the thus trewe,
 570 Thou no schust it never rewe.° *should never regret it*
 Sikerlich,° for love or ay,° *surely / fear*
 Thou schust° be king after mi day;
 And yif° thou of mi deth hadest ben
 blithe,° *but if / happy*
 Thou schust have voided, also
 swithe.”° *been banished immediately*
 575 Tho all tho that therin
 That it was² King Orfeo underyete,
 And the steward him wele knewe—
 Over and over the bord he threwe,° *overturned the table*
 And fel adoun to his° fet; *his (Sir Orfeo)*
 580 So dede everich lord that ther sete,
 And all thai seyde at o criinge:° *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*
 585 And bathed him and schaved his berd,

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 Orfeo* 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 ^o him as a king apert; ^o	<i>clothed / openly</i>	Herd hou this mervaile bigan,	
	And sethen, ^o with gret processioun,	<i>afterwards</i>	And made herof ^o a lay of gode	
	Thai brought the quen into the toun		likeing, ^o	<i>made of it / great delight</i>
	With al maner menstraci—		600 And nempned ^o it after the king.	<i>named</i>
590	Lord! ther was grete melody!		That lay “Orfeo” is y-hote; ^o	<i>called</i>
	For joie thai wepe with her eigne		Gode is the lay, swete is the note.	
	That hem so sounde y-comen seighe.		Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care: ^o	<i>sorrow</i>
	Now King Orfeo newe coround ^o is,	<i>newly crowned</i>	God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!	
	And his quen, Dame Heurodis,			
595	And lived long afterward,		Explicit. ^o	<i>the end</i>
	And sethen ^o was king the steward.	<i>and after that</i>	—c. 1325	
	Harpours in Bretaine after than			