METAMORPHOSES

TRANSLATED AND WITH NOTES BY

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INTRODUCTION BY

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W.W.NORTON & COMPANY NEW YORK LONDON

2004

Book X

Orpheus and Eurydice

From there, dressed in his saffron mantle, Hymen
went on his way, traversed the boundless heavens
until he came to Thrace, where he'd been summoned
by the voice of Orpheus—to no avail,
for though the god appeared, he did not bring
the words that customary use has sanctioned,
nor countenances radiating joy,
nor omens of good fortune for the couple;
even the torch he carried merely sputtered,
emitting only tear-producing smoke,
not catching fire when he whirled it round.

And the aftermath was even more unpleasant,
for as the bride was strolling through the grass,
attended by the naiads, she dropped dead,
bitten on her ankle by a snake.

When Orpheus had mourned sufficiently
in the upper air, he bravely went below
lest he should leave the underworld untried;
he made his way there by the Spartan Gates,
and passing through the superficial forms
of those who had been buried up above,
he came to Proserpina and her spouse,
the ruler of this unattractive kingdom,
and master of the shades.

The Thracian bard
plucked at his lyre and began to sing:
"Great god and goddess, appointed to govern in Hades,
into which every living creature relapses,
if it is rightful for me, if I am permitted
to shun all evasions, speaking the truth to you plainly,
know that I have not come down here to your kingdom
just for the view, or to chain up the three-headed Cerberus,
that monstrous child of Medusa, bristling with serpents;

my wife is the cause of my journey: she stepped on an adder
whose venom cut her life short as it spread through her body.
I won't deny that I wished to—and tried to—endure it,
but Love overcame me. Above, this god is quite famous;
whether he has the same status down here, I'm not certain,
but even so, I would think him to be as well known,
for unless that tale of long-ago rape was invented,
the selfsame deity joined the pair of you, also!
If that's the case, then I, by all of these frightening places,
by mighty Chaos and by this realm of the silent, I beg you
to weave once again Eurydice's fate, done too swiftly.

"We are all owed to you wholly, and though we may linger,
later or sooner all hasten to this single dwelling.
Everyone heads for this place, the home that is final.
Your rule is the longest that any human encounters;
she will be yours by right and dwell down here also,
when her years are accomplished: I ask for her life as a favor,
but if the Fates should deny me the gift I am seeking
on behalf of my wife, be sure that I will remain here,
and you may take pleasure then in a double destruction."

These words, accompanied on the plucked strings,
so moved the bloodless spirits that they wept;
Tantalus did not seek the receding water,
and on his wheel lay Ixion, astounded;
the birds let go the liver, and the daughters
of Danaüs were resting by their urns,
while you, O Sisyphus, sat on your stone.

Then, for the first time ever, overcome
by the effects of song, the Furies wept,
nor could Persephone reject his prayer,
nor he who rules the underworld deny him;
Eurydice was called up from her place
among the newly dead, and awkwardly
came forward, limping from her recent wound.

The Thracian bard accepted her, together
with the condition set for her release:
that he may not look back at all, until
he'd exited the valley of Avernus,
on pain of revocation of this gift.

He started out upon the soundless path
that rises steeply through dense fog and darkness
until they had come almost to the border
of the upper earth; here Orpheus, afraid
that she would fail him, and desiring
a glimpse of his beloved, turned to look:
at once she slipped back to the underworld,
and he, because he wanted to embrace her,
or *be* embraced by her, stretched out his arms—
but seized on nothing, that unlucky man,
unless it was the abnegating air.

And she now, who must die a second death,
did not find fault with him, for what indeed
could he be faulted for, but his constancy?
"Farewell," she cried out to him one last time,
and he had scarcely heard her cry before
she took her place again among the dead.

The second time his wife died, Orpheus
collapsed into no different a stupor
than that which came upon that timid fellow
who looked upon the triple-headed dog,
his middle throat encircled with thick chains;
that fellow's trembling did not cease until
his former nature did, as stoniness
arose and spread throughout his human frame;
or as Olenos, who, though innocent,
took on a fault wishing to seem guilty;
and you, luckless Lethaea, once so proud
of your great beauty, and once joined to him:

two hearts that beat as one are now transformed
into a pair of stones on humid Ida.

Orpheus prayed, desiring in vain
to cross the river Styx a second time,
but was prevented by the border guard;
for seven days he sat by the river's banks,
unkempt, unshaven, and unfed, with naught
but care and sorrow for his nourishment;
complaining that the gods below were cruel,
he sought out lofty Rhodope and Haemus.

Three times the Sun had finished out the year
in Pisces of the waters. Orpheus
had fled completely from the love of women,
either because it hadn't worked for him
or else because the pledge that he had given
to his Eurydice was permanent;
no matter: women burned to have the bard,
and many suffered greatly from rejection.
Among the Thracians, he originated
the practice of transferring the affections
to youthful males, plucking the first flower
in the brief springtime of their early manhood.

The catalogue of trees

There was a hill and on this hill there was
an open space, a level area
made green by all the grasses growing there.

The place lacked shade, until that poet born
of heaven came to be in residence,
and plucking his resounding lyre strings,
he summoned many shade trees to his presence:
the oak tree sacred to great Jupiter,
a grove of poplars (once Heliades)
and the Italian oak, with deep green leaves;
soft linden, beech and laurel (still unwed)

with the tender hazel and the useful ash
(providing us with spears and javelins);
pine without knots, the acorn-laden ilex,
the genial plane tree and the maple too,
(unrivaled in the brilliance of its hue);
and river-dwelling willows, lotus trees,
thin tamarisk and boxwood evergreen,
and myrtle with its berries green and black,
viburnum with *its* berries gray and blue,
and you as well, O twining ivy, came,
along with tendriled vines and the vine-clad elm,
the mountain ash, the spruce, the arbutus
(encumbered with its fruit of brilliant red)
and victory's reward, the supple palm,
and the pine tree, bare to near its shaggy top,
so pleasing to Cybele, Mother of the Gods,
since her beloved Attis put aside
his manhood for that trunk in which he stiffened.

Cyparissus

And present in the midst of this commotion
was the cone-shaped cypress, who, though now a tree,
was once a boy, beloved of that god
by whom the bow and lyre are both strung.

Dear to the nymphs of the Carthaean fields
was an enormous stag whose branching antlers
most generously shaded his own head.
They glowed with gilding, and around his neck
and on his shoulders lay a jeweled collar.
A silver amulet tied to his brow
jiggled when he moved, and matching pearls
hung from each ear. Fearless by nature, he
would go into the homes of perfect strangers
and offer up his neck to their caresses.

But he was pleased by you above all others,

Book XI

The death of Orpheus

Meanwhile, as Orpheus compelled the trees
and beasts to follow him with suchlike songs,
and made the very stones skip in his wake,
behold: a raving mob of Thracian women
with the pelts of wild beasts draped across their breasts
observed him from the summit of a hill
setting the words to music on his lyre.

One of them tossed her hair in the light breeze:
"Look over there!" she cried. "The one who scorns us!"
And with no more ado, she cast her lance
at the vocalizing mouth of Apollo's seer;
it struck without wounding, being wreathed in leaves.

Another's weapon was the stone she cast,
that even in midflight was overwhelmed
by words and music joined in harmony,
and, as though begging pardon for its mad daring,
fell at the poet's feet.

Nevertheless,
the level of their mindless rage increased
and measure fled: mad fury was in charge,
but even so, their weapons would have been
made mild by the enchantment of his song,
had not the shrill clamor of Phrygian flutes,
the breaking tones of horns, the frenzied drums,
and the Bacchantes' applause and ululations
together overwhelmed his lyre's music;
when Orpheus no longer could be heard,
the stones were reddened with a poet's blood.

Up until now, his voice had held in thrall
the countless birds, the snakes, the surging beasts
that were the indication of his triumph:
all these the Maenads savagely drove off,
then turned their bloody hands against the poet

and swarmed upon him as the birds will do,
when in the daylight they discern an owl
among them, dazed; or as when, in the arena,
on the morning of the games, the fated stag
is torn by dogs, and bleeds into the sand;
just so the Maenads search the poet out
and throw at him their wands wrapped in green leaves,
not meant for such a use.

Then some hurl clods,
and others, branches broken from the trees,
while others are still busy throwing rocks;
and, lest their madness lack for proper weapons
there happened to be oxen yoked nearby,
tilling the soil—and not too far from them,
some brawny peasants, breaking the hard ground,
sweating at their labors.

But when these men saw
the Maenads surging toward them, they took off,
abandoning their work and implements;
scattered throughout the vacant fields now lay
their hoes and rakes and mattocks, which the Maenads
captured, and having torn apart the oxen
whose horns had threatened them, they hastened back
to finish off the seer, who, with raised hands,
spoke words unheeded for the first time ever,
his voice not moving them the slightest bit;
the sacrilegious women struck him down,
and past those lips—ah, Jupiter!—to which
the stones would listen and the beasts respond,
his exhaled ghost receded on the winds.

For you now, Orpheus, the grieving birds,
the thronging beasts, the sharp, unyielding rocks,
the trees that often gathered for your songs,
and which, like men who tear their hair in grief,

have shed their leaves for you—all these now wept,
and it is said that rivers were increased
by their own tears, and water nymphs galore
distressed their tresses and dressed all in grey.

His limbs lay scattered all about; his head
and lyre, as they glide on down your stream,
O Hebrus, now (miraculously!) mourn;
the plaintive lyre makes some kind of moan,
the lifeless tongue moans on along with it,
the moaning riverbanks respond in turn.

Now head and lyre are borne down to the sea
beyond their native stream, until they reach
the coast of Lesbos, near Methymna's walls:
here, as it lay at risk on foreign sands,
that head (its locks still dripping with salt spray)
was set upon by a ferocious snake;
just as the serpent spread its jaws to strike,
Phoebus at last appeared and drove it off,
then turned the serpent's open jaws to stone,
just as they were—and will forever be.

The shade of Orpheus now fled below,
and recognized all he had seen before;
and as he searched through the Elysian Fields,
he came upon his lost Eurydice,
and passionately threw his arms about her;
here now they walk together, side by side,
or now he follows as she goes before,
or he precedes, and she goes after him;
and now there is no longer any danger
when Orpheus looks on Eurydice.

The real metamorphosis is his death

The transformation of the Maenads

Nevertheless, Bacchus did not permit
the murder of his seer to go unpunished,
and as he grieved for Orpheus, he bound

Seneca's Retelling of the Orpheus Legend

Hercules Furens, lines 569-89. Translation by Frank Justus Miller

Immites potuit flectere cantibus
umbrarum dominos et prece supplici
Orpheus, Eurydicen dum repetit suam.
quae silvas et aves saxaque traxerat
ars, quae praebuerat fluminibus moras,
ad cuius sonitum constiterant ferae,
mulcet non solitis vocibus inferos
et surdis resonat clarius in locis,
deflent Eurydicen Threiciae nurus,
deflent et lacrimis difficiles dei,
et qui fronte nimis crimina tetrica
quaerunt ac veteres excutiunt reos
flentes Eurydicen iuridici sedent,
tandem mortis ait 'vincimur' arbiter,
'evade ad superos, lege tamen data:
tu post terga tui perge viri comes,
tu non ante tuam respice coniugem,
quam cum clara deos obtulerit dies
Spartam que aderit ianua Taenari.'
odit verus amor nec patitur moras:
munus dum properat cernere, perdidit.
Quae vinci potuit regia carmine.
haec vinci poterit regia viribus.

Orpheus had power to bend the ruthless lords
of the shades by song and suppliant prayer,
when he sought back his Eurydice.
The art which had drawn the trees and birds and rocks,
which had stayed the course of rivers, at whose
sound the beasts had stopped to listen,
soothes the underworld with unaccustomed strains,
and rings out clearer in those unhearing realms.
Eurydice the Thracian brides bewail; even the gods,
whom no tears can move, bewail her;
and they who with awful brows investigate
men's crimes and sift out ancient wrongs, as
they sit in judgment, bewail Eurydice. At length
death's lord exclaims: "We own defeat; go forth
to the upper world, yet by this appointed doom –
fare thou as comrade behind thy husband, and thou,
look not back upon thy wife until bright day
shall have revealed the gods of heaven, and
the opening of Spartan Taenarus shall be at hand."
True love hates delay and brooks it not;
while he hastes to look upon his prize, 'tis lost.
The realm which could be overcome by song,
that realm shall strength have power to overcome.

Boethius' Retelling of Seneca's Retelling of the Orpheus Legend

The Consolation of Philosophy, Book Three, Meter 12. Translation by David R. Slavitt

Felix, qui potuit boni
fontem visere lucidum,
felix, qui potuit gravis
terrae solvere vincula.
Quondam funera coniugis
vates Threicius gemens
postquam flebilibus modis
silvas currere mobiles,
amnes stare coegerat
iunxitque intrepidum latus
saevis cerva leonibus
nec visum timuit lepus
iam cantu placidum canem,
cum flagrantior intima
fervor pectoris ureret
nec, qui cuncta subegerant

Happy is he who is able
to find the fountain of goodness,
and happy, too, is he
who can free himself from the chains
that bind him to heavy earth.
Orpheus long ago sang
his dirge for Eurydice's death
and rooted trees ran to hear
and running rivers stopped
to listen. The hind lay down
with the savage lion in safety,
and the hare and the coursing hound,
were rapt and at peace together
in the notes of his mournful threne
that soothed every heart that heard it -
but not that of the singer,

mulcerent dominum modi,
inmites superos querens
infernas adiit domos.
Illic blanda sonantibus
chordis carmina temperans,
quicquid praecipius deae
matris fontibus hauserat,
quod luctus dabat impotens,
quod luctum geminans amor,
deflet Taenara commovens
et dulci veniam prece
umbrarum dominos rogat.
Stupet tergeminus novo
captus carmine ianitor,
quae sontes agitant metu
ultrices scelerum deae
iam maestae lacrimis madent;
non Ixionium caput
velox praecipitat rota
et longa site perditus
spernit flumina Tantalus;
vultur dum satur est modis,
non traxit Tityi iecur.
Tandem 'Vincimur!' arbiter
umbrarum miserans ait.
'Donamus comitem viro
emptam carmine coniugem;
sed lex dona coherceat,
ne dum Tartara liquerit
fas sit lumina flectere.'
quis legem det amantibus?
Maior lex amor est sibi.
Heu noctis prope terminos
Orpheus Eurydicen suam
vidit, perdidit, occidit.
Vos haec fabula respicit
quicumque in superum diem
mentem ducere quaeritis;
nam qui Tartareum in specus
victus lumina flexerit,
quicquid praecipuum trahit,
perdit dum videt inferos.

whose grief burned all the more fiercely,
and, wailing, he raged at the gods.
He dared to venture below
where his lyre's music echoed
that he drew from his instrument
and the gifts of his mother, the muse,
as he sang of his loss that his love
made only the harder to bear.
The dead quickened with feeling
the griefs of his sweet singing
as he made his plea to the gloomy
lords of the underworld
and begged that they might relent.
The three-headed dog at the gate
fell utterly silent, enchanted.
The Furies who terrify
the souls of the guilty melted
and tears coursed down their cheeks.
Ixion at his turning
wheel stopped for the moment,
and Tantalus, tormented,
paused in his quest for water.
Even the vulture ceased
to tear at Tityus' liver.
Hades himself announced:
"We grant this man his wife,
bought by his wonderful singing.
But the terms of the gift are these -
that as he is leaving our realm
he may not look back or look down."
But who can give rules to lovers?
The heart makes its own decrees.
Alas, alas! At the very
verge of the dark kingdom,
Orpheus had his moment
of doubt, and turned and saw,
and lost the woman forever.
This old and familiar tale
is yours, as you make your ascent
leading your mind to the light,
for if, in a moment of weakness,
you should look back on the darkness,
the excellence you have achieved
you will lose, looking back, looking down.

The Alfredian Old English Retelling of Boethius' Retelling of Seneca's Retelling of the Orpheus Legend

B Text, Chapter XXXV, §7

Ongon þa singan ond cwæð: Gesæalig bið se mon þe mæg geseon þone hluttran æwellm þæs hehtan godes, ond of him selfum aweorpan mæg þa þiostro his modes. We sculon get of ealdum leasum spellum ðe sum bispell reccan. Hit gelamp gio ðætte an hearpere wæs on þære þeode þe Ðracia hatte, sio was on Creca rice. Se hearpere was swiðe ungefræglice god, þæs nama was Orfeus. He hæfde an swiðe ænlic wif, sio wæs haten Eurudice. Ða ongon mon secgan be þam hearpere þæt he mihte hearpian þæt se wuda wagode ond þa stanas hi styredon for þam swege, ond wilde deor ðær woldon to irnan ond standon swilce hi tame wæron, swa stille þeah hi men oððe hundas wið eodon, ðæt hi na ne onscunedon. Þa sædon hi þæt ðæs hearperes wif sceolde acwelan ond hire sawle mon sceolde lædon to helle. Ða sceolde se hearpere weorþan swa sarig þæt he ne mihte ongemong oðrum monnum bion, ac teah to wuda ond sæt on ðam muntum ægþer ge dæges ge nihtes, weop ond hearpode þæt ða wudas bifodon ond þa ea stodon, ond nan heort ne onscunode nanne leon, ne nan hara nanne hund, ne nan neat nyste nanne andan ne nænne ege to oðrum for þære mirhþe þæs sones. Ða ðæm hearpere þa þuhte þæt hine þa nanes ðinges ne lyste on þisse worulde, þa ðohte he þæt he wolde gesecan helle godu, ond onginnan him oleccan mid his hearepan ond biddan þæt hi him ageafan eft his wif. Þa he ða þider com, þa sceolde cuman þære helle hund ongean hine, þæs nama wæs Cerverus, se sceolde habban þrio heafda; ond ongan fægenian mid his steorte ond pleigan wið hine for his hearpunga. Ða was þær eac swiðe egeslic geatweard, þæs nama sceolde beon Caron; se hæfde eac þrio heafda, ond se was swiðe oreald. Ða ongon þe hearpere hine biddan þæt he hine gemundbyrde þa hwile þe he ðære wære, ond hine gesundne eft þonan brohte. Ða gehet he him þæt, forðæm he wæs oflyst þæs seldcuþan sones. Ða eode he furðor, oð he gemette þa graman gydena ðe folcisce men hatað Parcas, þa hi secgað þæt on nanum men nyton nan are, ac ælcum men wrecen be his gewyrhtum. Ða hi secgað þæt wealdan ælces monne wyrde. Ða ongann he biddan hiora miltse; þa ongunnon hi wepan mid him.

Ða eode he furðor, ond him urnon ealle helwaran ongean ond lædon hine to hiora cyninge ond ongunnon ealle sprecan mid him ond biddan þæs he bæd. Ond þæt unstille hweol ðe Ixion wæs to gebunden Lavita cyning for his scilde, þæt oðstod for his hearpunga. Ond Tantalus se cyning þe on þisse worulde ungemetlice gifre was, ond him þær þæt ilce yfel fyligde, þæs gifernesse he gestilde. Ond se ultor sceolde forlætan þæt he slat ða lifre Ticcies þæs cyninges þe hine ær mid ðy witnode. Ond eall hellwara witu gestildon ða hwile þe he beforan ðam cyninge hearpode. Ða he ða lange ond lange hearpode, þa clipode se hellwara cyning ond cwæð. Uton agifan þam esne his wif, forþam he hi hæfð geearnod mid his hearpunga. Bebead him þa þæt he geare wiste þæt he hine næfre underbæc ne besawe, siððan he þonanweard wære, ond sæde gif he hine underbæc besawe þæt he sceolde forlæten þæt wif. Ac þa lufe mon mæg swiðe uneaþe forbeodan; wilawei, hwæt Orfeus þa lædde his wif mid him oð he com on þæt gemære leohtes ond ðeostro. Þa eode þæt wif æfter him. Þa he forð on þæt leoht com, þa beseah he hine underbæc wið ðæs wifes. Ða losede heo him sona. Ðas leasan spell lærað gewhilcne man þara ðe wilnað helle ðeostro to flionne ond to ðæs soðan Godes liohte to cumenne, þæt he hine ne besio to his ealdum yfelum swa þæt he hi eft swa fullice fullfremme swa he hi ær dyde. Forþam swa hwa swa mid fullon willan his mod went to þam yflum þe he ær forlet ond hi þonne fullfremeð ond hi him þonne fullice liciað, ond he hi næfre forlætan ne þencð, ðonne forlyst he eall his ærran god buton he hit eft gebete.

Translation by Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine

He began then to sing and said, 'Happy is the man who can see the clear source of the highest good, and cast from himself the darkness of his mind. We must yet again give you an example from old false

stories. It happened long ago that there was a harper in the country that is called Thrace, which was in the kingdom of the Greeks. The harper, whose name was Orpheus, was remarkably good. He had a very excellent wife, who was called Eurydice. Then people began saying of the harper that he could harp so that the wood moved and the rocks stirred themselves because of the sound, and wild animals would run there and stand still as if they were tame, so still that though men or hounds went towards them they did not flinch. Then they said that the harper's wife died and her soul was taken to hell. Then the harper became so sorrowful that he could not live among other men but took to the woods and sat in the mountains both day and night, weeping and harping so that the woods trembled and the rivers stood still, and no hart feared a lion, and no hare a hound, and no animal felt hostility or fear towards another because of the sweetness of the sound. When it seemed to the harper that nothing pleased him in this world, then he thought that he would seek the gods of hell and try to charm them with his harp and ask that they give him back his wife. When he came there, then the hound of hell came to meet him, whose name was Cerberus, who had three heads, and began to show pleasure with his tail and play with him because of his harping. Then there was also there a very fearsome porter, whose name was Charon. He also had three heads and he was extremely old. Then the harper asked him to protect him while he was there, and to bring him back from there unharmed. Then he promised him that, because he was charmed by the unusual sound. Then he went further until he met the fierce goddesses whom ordinary people call Parcae, who, they say, show no favor to anyone but take vengeance on each man according to his merits. Those control everyone's fate, they say. Then he asked for their mercy; then they wept with him.

Then he went further and all the inhabitants of hell ran to meet him and led him to their king and all addressed him and asked for what he asked for. And the ceaseless wheel to which Ixion king of the Lavite was bound for his crime stood still because of his harping. And Tantalus the king who was exceedingly greedy in this world, and that same torment followed him there, he stilled that greed. And the vulture stopped tearing the liver of the king Tityus, which previously tormented him with that. And all the punishments of hell's residents stopped while he harped before the king. When he had harped for a long time, then the king of hell's inhabitants called out and said: "Let us give the fellow his wife because he has earned her with his harping." He commanded him then that he should take care that he never looked behind him after he was on his way from there, and said that if he looked behind him he would lose his wife. But one cannot prohibit love very easily. Alas, Orpheus then led his wife with him until he came to the boundary of light and darkness. Then his wife went after him. When he came out into the light then he looked back towards his wife. Then she was lost to him immediately. These false stories teach everyone of those who wish to flee the darkness of hell and to come into the light of the true God, that he should not look behind him to his old evils so that he commits them again as fully as he did them before. For whoever with full desire turns his mind to the evils that he abandoned before and commits them then and takes full pleasure in them, and never intends to leave them, he then loses all his earlier goods, unless he makes amends for it again.'

The Answer

BY ANNE FINCH, COUNTESS OF WINCHILSEA

To Pope's Impromptu

Disarmed with so genteel an air,
  The contest I give o'er;
Yet, Alexander, have a care,
  And shock the sex no more.
We rule the world our life's whole race,
  Men but assume that right;
First slaves to ev'ry tempting face,
  Then martyrs to our spite.
You of one Orpheus sure have read,
  Who would like you have writ
Had he in London town been bred,
  And polished too his wit;
But he poor soul thought all was well,
  And great should be his fame,
When he had left his wife in hell,
  And birds and beasts could tame.
Yet venturing then with scoffing rhymes
  The women to incense,
Resenting heroines of those times
  Soon punished his offense.
And as the Hebrus rolled his skull,
  And harp besmeared with blood,
They clashing as the waves grew full,
  Still harmonized the flood.
But you our follies gently treat,
  And spin so fine the thread,
You need not fear his awkward fate,
  The lock won't cost the head.
Our admiration you command
  For all that's gone before;
What next we look for at your hand
  Can only raise it more.
Yet sooth the ladies I advise
  (As me too pride has wrought)
We're born to wit, but to be wise
  By admonitions taught.

The Broadview Anthology of

BRITISH LITERATURE

Volume 1
The Medieval Period

Third Edition

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Sir Orfeo

c. 1325

The Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*, whose author remains unknown, survives in three medieval manuscripts. Of these three, the Auchinleck Manuscript provides the earliest and most reliable text. Dating from between 1331 and 1340, the Auchinleck Manuscript is a compilation of a wide variety of Middle English texts, including romances, saints' lives, moral poems, and religious verse texts. The manuscript is an unusual example of commercial book production in which one editor-scribe coordinated a small group of professional scribes to produce the item to commission. The scribes may have worked in different locations, but the editor-scribe, who copied the majority of the items in the manuscript (including *Sir Orfeo*), was likely based in London. Linguistic evidence places his dialect in the Westminster-Middlesex area.

Although the Auchinleck manuscript was likely designed with a specific customer in mind, little is known of its ownership before the early 1740s, when it came into the hands of Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck (1706–82), father to James Boswell (1740–95), the famed biographer of Samuel Johnson (1709–84). Boswell passed it on to the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, which in turn donated it to the National Library of Scotland in 1925. *Sir Orfeo* has long been acknowledged as one of the gems of Auchinleck's impressive collection of eighteen Middle English romances; among the eight unique to the manuscript are *Lay le Freyne* and the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*. Since A. J. Bliss's edition of 1954, which reproduced all three extant versions of the poem, *Sir Orfeo* has garnered increasing critical attention. Many scholars have commented on the charm of the poem and the way in which the poet veils interpretive depth with an enchanting fairytale lightness.

The plot of *Sir Orfeo* is based on the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, cast in a distinctively medieval form. Medieval readers would have been familiar with the classical myth from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, as well as Virgil's *Georgics*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and commentaries on all three of these texts. For the classical authors, the crux of the story lies in Orpheus's error, the backward glance that costs him the wife he thought he had won back from the dead. The changes to the myth in *Sir Orfeo* produce instead a romance narrative of loss balanced by restoration: Heurodis does not die but is stolen away by the fairy king and successfully recovered from the Otherworld by her devoted husband. Another major change is that Orfeo is a king; the Auchinleck scribe additionally makes him ruler of England, with his royal seat at the ancient capital of Winchester. After regaining Heurodis, Orfeo returns to reclaim his kingdom. The steward whom Orfeo left to rule in his stead proves loyal (unlike similar figures in many other romances), and, at the end of the poem, Orfeo is restored as king and the steward becomes his heir. The alterations from the classical version of the myth create a satisfying structural movement appropriate to the mode of romance. The poet's changes produce a pattern of doubling: the loss and restoration of Orfeo's queen is paralleled by the loss and restoration of his kingdom, and the mortal realm is mirrored by the fairy king's Otherworld. At the same time, re-situating Orfeo as a king and incorporating an episode where the steward's loyalty to him is tested allows subtle political valences to emerge. Some scholars have suggested connections between *Sir Orfeo* and contemporary events, particularly the controversial deposition of Edward II in 1327. Although the poet makes no explicit comment on his own time, the grieving Orfeo's neglect of his kingdom reminds the reader of the ongoing tension between public duties and private needs that dogged late medieval kingship.

The medieval alterations to the Orpheus myth have led some scholars to propose a lost source for *Sir Orfeo*. Several French romances of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries mention a *lai*

d'Orphey, which could be a source for the Middle English poem. Although these references do not give us any indication of what form this version of the story took, they suggest that the poem may have its origins in the Breton lay tradition. This impression is reinforced by the prologue that *Sir Orfeo* shares with its Auchinleck companion *Lay le Freyne*, in which the poet places Orfeo's own musical skills in the context of lays from Brittany. The Breton *lais* may have originally been oral stories of adventure, sung to the accompaniment of a harp. The twelfth-century poet Marie de France claimed she collected and put them into verse, but her Breton *lais*, short romances on the subject of love and chivalry, show a sophisticated authorial hand. There are six Middle English Breton lays, including two translated directly from Marie (*Lay le Freyne* and Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*) and Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale," which has no known source. Like Marie's *lais*, *Sir Orfeo* blends Celtic elements with classical tradition. The classical underworld, for example, is transposed into the fairy Otherworld, inhabited not by the dead but by the "taken" (living mortals stolen away by the fairies). Some features of *Sir Orfeo* suggest the influence of the Celtic folktales, which also informed the Breton *lais*. The *ympe-tre* (grafted tree) under which Heurodis falls asleep before being abducted has counterparts in Celtic folklore where the apple tree, often the product of grafting and therefore symbolic of human meddling with nature, is associated with fairy kidnappings. Similarly, Orfeo's exile in the wilderness may have its origin in the Celtic trope of the wild man of the woods. Some critics connect *Sir Orfeo* directly to the Irish tale of the *Wooing of Étaín*, in which a fairy carries off a lady despite the armed guard prepared to resist him, but many of the Celtic features recur across a range of folktales.

Although the mystery of whether or not there was a French source for the poem remains unsolved, most critics agree that the *Orfeo* poet's elegant reworking of classical and Celtic elements in a narrative context appropriate for Middle English romance sets him apart as an author in his own right. The poet's presentation of human emotion draws in the reader: we are led from Heurodis's passionate distress at the prospect of being separated from her husband, through Orfeo's deep but controlled grief on losing her, to the steward's wordless delight in Orfeo's return. For all its visual beauty, the glittering fairy kingdom—with its tortured, inert bodies and its silent halls—proves emotionally barren compared to its human counterpart. The poem contrasts this static world with the transformative nature of human suffering and joy in the mortal realm, expressed most vividly by Orfeo's unsurpassed music.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The prologue of *Sir Orfeo* is missing from the Auchinleck Manuscript, where a page has been removed. Versions of the prologue appear in the two fifteenth-century manuscripts, Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61. The *Orfeo* prologue also appears in Auchinleck in the poem *Lay le Freyne*, translated from a *lai* of Marie de France. Since there is no prologue in Marie's original poem, the Auchinleck poet probably drew on the prologue of *Sir Orfeo*—or possibly, as Gabrielle Guillaume suggests, the prologue may have been intended for a collection of lays. Editors have used the *Lay le Freyne* prologue in Auchinleck to reconstruct the *Sir Orfeo* prologue; this anthology follows A.J. Bliss and Anne Laskaya in taking the first 12 lines from *Lay le Freyne*, reconstructing lines 13–24 from Harley 3810, and incorporating lines 25–38 on Orfeo's harping before A begins at 39 rather than where Harley has them at 33–46. Placing Orfeo's harping in close proximity to the discussion of making poetry in the prologue emphasizes the themes of poetry and music and the role of art and culture in rule.

⌘⌘⌘

Sir Orfeo[1]

We redeth oft and findeth y-write,° *written*
And this clerkes° wele it wite,° *educated men / know*
Layes that ben in harping° *are played on the harp*
Ben y-founde of ferli thing:° *devised of strange matters*
Sum bethe of wer° and sum of wo,° *some of war / woe*
And sum of joie and mirthe also,
And sum of trecherie and of gile,° *deceit*
Of old aventours° that fel *adventures*
while;° *happened long ago*
And sum of bourdes° and ribaudy,° *bawdy jests / ribaldry*
And mani ther beth° of fairy. *many there are*
Of al thinges that men seth,° *tell*
Mest o° love, forsothe, they beth. *mostly of*
In Breteyne° this layes[2] were wrought, *Brittany*
First y-founde° and forth y-brought,° *created / brought forth*
Of aventours that fel bi dayes,° *happened in bygone days*
Wherof Bretouns° maked *Bretons (men of Brittany)*
her° layes. *their*
When kinges might our y-here° *anywhere hear*
Of ani mervailes° that ther were, *wonders*
Thai token° an harp in gle and *took*
game° *musical entertainment and revelry*
And maked a lay and gaf° it name. *gave*
Now of this aventours that weren y-falle° *happened*
Y° can tel sum, ac° nought alle. *I / but*
Ac herkneth,° lordinges that ben trewe, *but listen*
Ichil° you telle of Sir Orfewe. *I will*
Orfeo mest° of ani thing *most*
Lovede the gle° of harping. *music*
Siker° was everi gode harpour *certain*
Of him to have miche° honour. *much*
Himself he lerned forto harp,° *he taught himself to harp*
And leyd theron his wittes scharp;
He lerned so ther nothing was° *in no way*
A better harpour in no plas.°[3] *place*
In al the warld was no man bore° *born*
That ones° Orfeo sat bifore— *once*
And° he might of his harping here—° *if / hear*
Bot he schuld thenche° that he were *think*
In on° of the joies of Paradis, *one*
Swiche° melody in his harping is. *such*
Orfeo was a king,[4]
In Inglond[5] an heighe° lording, *high*
A stalworth man and hardi bo;° *a man both strong and brave*
Large and curteys° he was also. *generous and courteous*
His fader was comen° of King Pluto, *descended from*
And his moder of King Juno,[6]
That sum time were as godes yhold° *held as gods*
For aventours that thai dede° and told. *did*
This king sojournd° in Traciens, *lived*
That was a cité of noble defens—
For Winchester was cleped tho° *called then*
Traciens, withouten no.° *doubt*
The king hadde a quen of priis° *a queen of worth*
That was y-cleped° Dame Heurodis, *called*
The fairest levedi, for the nones,° *lady of the time*
That might gon on° bodi and bones, *walk in*
Ful of love and godenisse—° *virtue*
Ac° no man may telle hir fairnise.° *but / beauty*
Bifel so in the comessing of May[7]
When miri° and hot is the day, *delightful*
And oway° beth winter schours,° *away / showers*
And everi feld° is ful of flours,° *field / flowers*
And blosme breme° on everi bough *blossom bright*
Over al wexeth° miri anough,° *grows / enough*
This ich° quen, Dame Heurodis *same*

[1] *Sir Orfeo* The present text has been prepared for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* by Ruth Lexton.

[2] *In Breteyne this layes* The poem *Sir Orfeo* is one of a small group of Middle English poems described as Breton lays—a poem in the style of the twelfth-century French *lais* of Marie de France.

[3] *ther nothing was ... in no plas* In Middle English, the double negatives do not cancel each other out but intensify meaning.

[4] *Orfeo was a king* The Auchinleck manuscript begins with this line on f.300a.

[5] *Inglond* Place names that consistently locate the poem in England are unique to the Auchinleck manuscript. The poet identifies classical Thrace with English Winchester.

[6] *King Juno* While Orfeo is positioned here as a king of England, the names of his ancestors recall the classical myth on which the story is loosely based. Pluto was the god of Hades, the classical underworld. Juno was not a king but Jupiter's sister and wife, a powerful, capricious, and sometimes vengeful goddess. While "King" may be a scribal error here, the term adds to the possible layers of interpretation.

[7] *Bifel ... May* So it happened at the beginning of May. In medieval folklore, May is often a time of fairy activity. In medieval romance and lyric, May is also associated with courting and love-longing. By setting Heurodis's abduction in May, the poet invokes the courtly love tradition as well as fairy tales.

Tok to maidens of priis,° *two worthy maidens*
And went in an undrentide[1]
To play bi an orchardside,[2]
To se the floures sprede and spring
And to here the foules° sing. *birds*
Thai sett hem doun° al thre *sat themselves down*
Under a fair ympe-tre,[3]
And wel sone this fair quene
Fel on slepe opon° the grene. *upon*
The maidens durst hir nought awake,
Bot lete hir ligge° and rest take. *but let her lie*
So sche slepe til after none,° *noon*
That undertide was al y-done.[4]
Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,° *awoke*
Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;[5]
Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,[6]
And crached hir visage—it bled wete.[7]
Hir riche robe hye al to-rett° *she tore all to pieces*
And was reveysed out of hir wit.[8]
The two maidens hir biside
No durst with hir no leng° abide, *longer*
Bot ourn° to the palays ful right° *ran / straight*
And told bothe squier and knight
That her° quen awede wold,° *their / would go mad*
And bad hem go and hir at-hold.[9]
Knightes urn° and levedis° also, *ran / ladies*
Damisels sexti and mo.° *sixty and more*
In the orchard to the quen hye° come, *they*
And her up in her armes nome,° *caught her up in their arms*
And brought hir to bed atte last,
And held hir there fine fast.° *very firmly*
Ac ever she held in o° cri *one*
And wold up° and owy.° *wanted to get up / away*
When Orfeo herd that tiding
Never him nas wers for nothing.[10]
He come with knightes tene° *ten*
To chaumber, right bifor the quene,
And bi-held, and seyd with grete pité,
"O lef liif, what is te,
That ever yete hast ben so stille
And now gredest wonder schille?[11]
Thy bodi, that was so white y-core,° *matchlessly*
With thine nailes is all to-tore.° *torn up*
Allas! thy rode,° that was so red, *face*
Is al wan,° as thou were ded; *ashen pale*
And also thine fingres smale° *elegantly shaped*
Beth al blodi and al pale.
Allas! thy lovesum eyyen to° *two beautiful eyes*
Loketh so° man doth on his fo! *as*
A, dame, ich biseche,° merci! *I beg*
Lete ben° al this reweful° cri, *let be / pitiful*
And tel me what the is, and hou,[12]
And what thing may the help now."
Tho° lay sche stille atte last *then*
And gan to wepe swithe fast,° *very hard*
And seyd thus the King to:
"Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
Sethen° we first togider were, *since*
Ones wroth never we nere;[13]
Bot ever ich have yloved the
As mi liif and so thou me;
Ac now we mot delen ato;° *we must be separated*
Do thi best, for y mot° go." *I must*
"Allas!" quath he, "forlorn icham!° *I am*
Whider wiltow go, and to wham?[14]

[1] *undrentide* Although usually translated as "noon," this term can refer to almost any time of day from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Noon was regarded as a time of spiritual danger in Christian tradition and of vulnerability to fairies in folklore.

[2] *orchardside* Royal orchards of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were enclosed spaces intended to separate cultivated plants from the wilderness and to provide an outdoor area where members of the court could safely entertain themselves.

[3] *ympe-tre* Grafted tree. In both Celtic folklore and other Middle English Breton lays, fairy abduction is often connected to an apple tree or another tree with grafted branches.

[4] *That undertide ... y-done* The morning had completely passed.

[5] *Sche crid ... make* She sobbed and made a terrible outcry.

[6] *Sche ... fete* She chafed her hands and her feet.

[7] *And crached ... it bled wete* And scratched her face until it was wet with blood.

[8] *reveysed out of hir wit* Driven out of (or robbed of) her wits. The onset of madness causes the queen to mutilate herself.

[9] *And bad ... at-hold* And told them to go and restrain her.

[10] *Never ... nothing* Never did anything make him so unhappy.

[11] *O lef ... schille?* Oh, dear life, what is with you, who have always been so calm, and now cry out so terribly?

[12] *And tel ... hou* What is wrong with you and how (it happened).

[13] *Ones ... nere* We were never once angry (with each other).

[14] *Whider ... to wham?* Where will you go and to whom?

Whider thou gost, ichil with the,
And whider y go, thou schalt with me."[1]
"Nay, nay, Sir, that nought nis!° *cannot be*
Ichil° the telle al hou it is: *I will*
As ich lay this undertide
And slepe under our orchardside,
Ther come to me to° fair knightes, *two*
Wele y-armed al to rightes,° *at all points*
And bad me comen an heighing° *quickly*
And speke with her° lord the king. *their*
And ich answerd at° wordes bold, *with*
Y durst nought, no y nold.° *I dared not, nor would I*
Thai priked oyain as thai might drive;[2]
Tho° com her king, also blive,° *then / as hastily*
With an hundred knightes and mo,
And damisels an hundred also,
Al on snowe-white stedes;
As white as milke were her wedes.° *their clothes*
Y no seighe° never yete bifore *saw*
So fair creatours y-core.° *peerless*
The king hadde a croun on hed;
It nas° of silver, no° of gold red, *was not / nor*
Ac it was of a precious ston—
As bright as the sonne it schon.° *shone*
And as son as he to me cam,
Wold ich, nold ich, he me nam,[3]
And made me with him ride
Opon a palfray[4] bi his side
And brought me to his palays,
Wele atird° in ich ways,° *decorated / every way*
And schewed me castels and tours,° *towers*
Rivers, forestes, frith with flours,° *meadowland with flowers*
And his riche stedes ichon;° *each one*
And sethen° me brought oyain hom° *then / home again*
Into our owhen° orchard, *own*
And said to me thus afterward,
"Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow° be *that you*
Right here under this ympe-tre,
And than thou schalt with ous° go *us*
And live with ous evermo.
And yif thou makest ous y-let,° *if you try to prevent us*
Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,[5]
And totore° thine limes° al *torn to pieces / limbs*
That nothing help the no schal;
And thei thou best° so totorn, *even though you are*
Yete thou worst with ous y-born."[6]
When King Orfeo herd this cas,° *set of circumstances*
"O we!"° quath he, "Allas, allas! *woe*
Lever me were to lete° mi liif *I would rather lose*
Than thus to lese° the quen, mi wiif!" *lose*
He asked conseyl at ich man,° *advice from every man*
Ac no man him help no can.[7]
Amorwe° the undertide is come *on the morrow*
And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,° *seized*
And wele ten hundred knightes with him,[8]
Ich y-armed, stout and grim;
And with the quen wenten he
Right unto that ympe-tre.
Thai made scheltrom[9] in ich a side
And sayd thai wold there abide
And dye° ther everichon, *die*

[1] *Whider thou gost ... with me* Wherever you go I will (go) with you Wherever I go you will (go) with me. Critics have noted that this line echoes Ruth 1.16: "for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." In the Middle Ages, these words were associated with the marriage vow.

[2] *Thai priked ... might drive* They rode back again, hurrying as fast as they could.

[3] *Wold ich ... he me nam* Whether I would or not, he took me. Compare Heurodis's first effort at resistance above, line 140.

[4] *palfray* Palfrey horse. A small saddle horse often used by women in the Middle Ages. Heurodis's palfrey contrasts with the "snowe-white stedes" ridden by the fairy company. Steeds were powerful horses that could be used for tournaments or battle.

[5] *Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet* Wherever you are, you will be taken. The fairy king's threat to tear Heurodis to pieces if she does not come with him contrasts with Orfeo's loving promise at lines 129–30 to go wherever she goes.

[6] *Yete ... y-born* Yet you will be brought with us.

[7] *He asked ... help no can* In romance and in real life, the medieval king was expected to seek the advice of his nobles.

[8] *ten hundred knightes with him* As with the other numbers in the poem (sixty maidens at line 90, a hundred knights at lines 143–44) the poet simply means to indicate a large number. Ten hundred suggests an infinite force; Orfeo exerts all the military might available to him in his effort to protect his queen.

[9] *scheltrom* Close-formed ranks of armed men or a compact body of troops. The term derives from the Old English *scyld-truma*, shield-wall or shield-troop, a standard Anglo-Saxon battle formation in which warriors used their shields to form a defensive phalanx.

Er° the quen schuld fram hem gon. *before*
Ac yete amiddes hem ful right[1]
The quen was oway y-twight,° *snatched*
With fairi forth y-nome.° *taken*
Men wist never wher sche was bicome.[2]
Tho° was ther criing, wepe and wo! *then*
The king into his chaumber is go,
And oft swoned° opon the ston,° *swooned / stone*
And made swiche diol° and *such sorrow*
swiche mon° *such lamentation*
That neighe his liif was y-spent—° *that he nearly died*
Ther was non amendement.
He cleped° togider his barouns, *called*
Erls, lordes of renouns,° *good reputations*
And when thai al y-comen were,
"Lordinges," he said, "bifor you here
Ich ordainy° min heighe steward[3] *appoint*
To wite° mi kingdom afterward; *rule*
In mi stede° ben he schal *place*
To kepe mi londes overal.
For now ichave° mi quen y-lore,° *I have / lost*
The fairest levedi° that ever was bore, *lady*
Never eft y nil no woman se.[4]
Into wildernes ichil te° *I will go*
And live ther evermore
With wilde bestes in holtes hore;° *dreary woods*
And when ye understond that y be spent,° *dead*
Make you than a parlement,[5]
And chese° you a newe king. *choose*
Now doth your best with al mi thing."
Tho° was ther wepeing in the halle *then*
And grete cri among hem alle;
Unnethe° might old or yong° *barely / young*
For wepeing speke a word with tong,° *tongue*
Thai kneled adoun al y-fere° *together*

[1] *Ac yete amiddes hem ful right* And yet from their very midst.

[2] *Men wist ... was bicome* Men never knew where she had gone. Similar phrases are used of the fairies themselves and of Orfeo and Heurodis; see lines 288, 296, and 494.

[3] *min heighe steward* The office of the steward of the realm in medieval England was usually entrusted to a high-born noble.

[4] *Never eft y nil no woman se* I will never again see any woman.

[5] *Make you than a parlement* Critics have connected the parliament mentioned here with the events of January 1327, when Edward II was deposed by a hostile parliament and his son Edward III was chosen as king.

And praid° him, yif his wille were, *begged*
That he no schuld nought fram° hem go. *from*
"Do way!" quath he, "It schal be so!"
Al his kingdom he forsoke;
Bot° a sclavin° on him he toke. *only / pilgrim's cloak*
He no hadde kirtel no hode,° *coat nor hood*
Schert, ne scho, no nother gode,[6]
Bot his harp he tok algate° *at any rate*
And dede him barfot° out atte gate; *barefoot*
No man most° with him go. *might*
O way!° What ther was wepe and wo, *alas*
When he that hadde ben king with croun
Went so poverlich° out of toun! *wretchedly*
Thurth wode° and over heth° *through wood / heath*
Into the wildernes he geth.° *goes*
Nothing he fint that him is ays,° *finds that is comfortable for him*
Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.° *hardship*
He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,[7]
And on bed the purper biis,° *fine purple linen*
Now on hard hethe he lith,° *lies*
With leves and gresse he him writh.[8]
He that hadde had castels and tours,° *towers*
River, forest, frith with flours,° *meadowland with flowers*
Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,[9]
This king mot° make his bed in mese.° *must / moss*
He that had y-had knightes of priis° *great worth*
Bifor him kneland, and levedis,° *ladies*
Now seth° he nothing that him liketh, *sees*
Bot wilde wormes° bi him striketh.° *serpents / glide*
He that had y-had plenté
Of mete and drink, of ich deynté,° *delicacy*
Now may he al day digge and wrote° *dig and grub*
Er he finde his fille of rote.° *roots*
In somer he liveth bi wild frut,° *fruit*
And berien bot gode lite;° *berries though (they are of) little good*
In winter may he nothing finde
Bot rote,° grases, and the rinde.° *roots / husks*
Al his bodi was oway dwine° *wasted away*

[6] *Schert, ne scho ... gode* Shirt, nor shoe, nor other goods.

[7] *hadde y-werd the fowe and griis* Worn the variegated fur and the grey fur. Luxury furs like these were a sign of wealth and status.

[8] *With leves and gresse he him writh* Covers himself with leaves and grass.

[9] *thei it comenci to snewe and frese* Although it starts to snow and freeze.

For missays,° and al to-chine,° *from want / chapped*
Lord! who may telle the sore° *trouble*
This king sufferd ten yere and more?
His here° of his berd, blac and rowe,° *hair / unkempt*
To his girdelstede° was growe. *waist*
His harp, whereon was al his gle,° *joy*
He hidde in an holwe° tre; *hollow*
And when the weder° was clere and bright, *weather*
He toke his harp to him wel right
And harped at his owhen° wille. *own*
Into alle the wode the
soun gan schille,° *the sound resounded*
That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth° *were*
For joie abouten him thai teth,° *approach*
And alle the foules° that ther were *birds*
Come and sete° on ich a brere° *perched / briar*
To here° his harping afine—° *hear / better*
So miche° melody was therin; *much*
And when he his harping lete wold,° *would stop*
No best° bi him abide nold.° *beast / would stay*
He might se him bisides,
Oft in hot undertides,[1]
The king o° fairy with his rout° *of / company*
Com to hunt him al about
With dim° cri and bloweing,° *faint / blowing (horns)*
And houndes also with him berking;° *barking*
Ac no best thai no nome,
No never he nist whider they bicome.[2]
And other while° he might him se *at other times*
As a gret ost° bi him te,° *host / went*
Wele atourned,° ten hundred knightes, *equipped*
Ich y-armed to his rightes,° *armed to every point*
Of cuntenaunce° stout and fers,° *countenance / fierce*
With mani desplaid baners,° *unfurled banners*
And ich his swerd y-drawe hold—° *held his drawn sword*
Ac never he nist whider thai wold.[3]
And otherwile he seighe° other thing: *saw*
Knightes and levedis° com daunceing *ladies*
In queynt atire, gisely,° *elegant clothing, skillfully*
Queynt pas and softly;° *graceful steps and gently*
Tabours and trunpes yede° hem bi, *drums and trumpets went*
And al maner menstraci.° *all manner of minstrelsy*
And on a day he seighe° him biside *saw*
Sexti levedis° on hors ride, *sixty ladies*
Gentil and jolif as brid on ris;
Nought o man amonges hem ther nis;[1]
And ich a faucoun° on hond bere, *falcon*
And riden on haukin° bi o rivere. *hawking*
Of game thai founde wel gode haunt—° *plenty*
Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt;[5]
The foules of the water ariseth,
The faucouns hem wele deviseth;° *aim*
Ich° faucoun his pray slough.° *each / slew*
That seigh° Orfeo, and lough:°[6] *saw / laughed*
"Parfay!"° quath he, "ther is fair game; *indeed*
Thider ichil,° bi Godes name; *I will go there*
Ich was y-won° swiche werk to se!" *accustomed*
He aros, and thider gan te.° *went that way*
To a levedi° he was y-come, *lady*
Biheld, and hath wele undernome,° *recognized*
And seth° bi al thing that it is *sees*
His owhen° quen, Dam Heurodis. *own*
Yern° he biheld hir, and sche him eke,° *eagerly / also*
Ac noither° to other a word no speke; *but neither*
For messais° that sche on him seighe,° *suffering / saw*
That° had ben so riche and so heighe, *who*
The teres fel out of her eighe.° *eyes*
The other levedis this y-seighe° *saw*
And maked hir oway° to ride— *away*
Sche most° with him no lenger abide. *could*
"Allas!" quath he, "now me is wo!
Whi nil° deth now me slo?° *why will not / kill*
Allas, wroche,° that y no might *wretch*
Dye now after this sight!
Allas! to° long last mi liif, *too*
When y no dar nought with mi wiif,
No hye° to me, o° word speke. *nor she / one*
Allas! Whi nil° min hert breke! *why will not*
Parfay!"° quath he, "tide wat bitide,° *indeed / happen what may*

[1] *hot undertides* Again, the fairies emerge into the human world at the dangerous time of midday.

[2] *Ac no best ... they bicome* But they never caught any beasts / Nor did he ever know where they went.

[3] *Ac never ... thai wold* But he never knew where they were going.

[1] *Gentil and jolif ... ther nis* Charming and merry as a bird on a bough; / There is not one man among them.

[5] *Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt* Mallards, heron, and cormorant.

[6] *Ich faucoun ... and lough* Orfeo breaks his vow not to look at any other women and vocalizes in direct speech for the first time since he left his kingdom.

Whiderso° this levedis ride, *wherever*
The selve° way ichil streche—° *same / I will proceed*
Of liif no deth me no reche."° *care*
His sclavain he dede on also spac[1]
And henge° his harp opon his bac,° *hung / upon his back*
And had wel gode wil to gon—
He no spard° noither stub° no ston. *did not spare / stump*
In at a roche° the levedis rideth, *rock*
And he after, and nought abideth.
When he was in the roche y-go,
Wele thre mile other mo,
He com into a fair cuntray° *country*
As bright so sonne° on somers° day, *as sun / summer's*
Smothe and plain° and al grene—° *even / green*
Hille no dale nas ther non y-sene.° *was there not seen*
Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,° *saw*
Riche and real° and wonder heighe.° *royal / amazingly high*
Al the utmast wal° *all the outermost wall*
Was clere and schine° as cristal; *bright*
An hundred tours° ther were about, *towers*
Degiselich and bataild stout.[2]
The butras° com out of the diche° *buttresses / moat*
Of rede gold y-arched° riche. *arched*
The vousour was avowed al° *the vaulting was all colored*
Of ich maner divers aumal.[3]
Within ther wer wide wones,° *spacious dwelling-places*
Al of precious stones;
The werst° piler on to biholde *worst*
Was al of burnist° gold.[4] *burnished*
Al that lond was ever light,
For when it schuld be therk° and night, *dark*
The riche stones light gonne° *began to shine*
As bright as doth at none° the sonne. *noon*

No man may telle, no thenche° in thought, *imagine*
The riche werk that ther was wrought.° *created*
Bi al thing him think° that it is *it seems to him*
The proude court of Paradis.
In this castel the levedis alight;
He wold in° after, yif° he might. *wished to come in / if*
Orfeo knokketh atte gate;
The porter was redi therate° *at it*
And asked what he wold hav y-do.° *wished to do*
"Parfay!" quath he, "icham° a minstrel, lo! *I am*
To solas° thi lord with mi gle,° *entertain / music*
Yif his swete° wille be." *sweet*
The porter undede° the gate anon *unlocked*
And lete° him into the castel gon. *let*
Than he gan bihold° about al, *began to look*
And seighe liggeand° within the wal *saw lying*
Of folk that were thider y-brought
And thought dede,° and nare nought.° *dead / were not*
Sum stode withouten hade,° *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 astrangled as thai ete;°[5] *choked as they ate*
And sum were in water adreynt,° *drowned*
And sum with fire al forschreynt.° *shriveled*
Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
Sum ded and sum awedde,° *gone mad*
And wonder fele° ther lay bisides *very many*
Right as thai slepe her undertides;[6]
Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,° *seized*
With fairi thider y-come.[7]
Ther he seighe his owhen wiif,
Dame Heurodis, his lef° liif, *dear*
Slepe under an ympe-tre—
Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he.° *she*

[1] *His sclavain ... also spac* He put on his cloak at once.

[2] *Degiselich and bataild stout* Wonderfully crenellated and strong.

[3] *Of ich maner divers aumal* With various kinds of enamel. Different effects could be achieved by using different enameling techniques.

[4] *Within ther wer ... of burnist gold* The architectural details the poet includes here make the fairy castle not only a palace of romance but also a realistic royal residence. The flying buttress, for example, was a French innovation, introduced to England in the late thirteenth century, and represents the latest in architectural advances. Details such as the burnished pillars and crenellated walls indicate that the palace is both beautiful and built to withstand attack.

[5] *And sum armed ... as thai ete* Compare Ashmole 61: "And som onne hors ther armys sette / And som wer strangyld at ther mete / And men that wer nomen wyth them ete."

[6] *Right as ... undertides* Just as they were when sleeping in the morning, i.e., when they were taken.

[7] *Of folk that ... thider y-come* In composing this catalogue of the dead and the taken, the author may have drawn on Hades, the classical land of the dead, as well as Celtic traditions of the fairy Otherworld.

And when he hadde bihold this
mervails° alle, *these marvels*
He went into the kinges halle.
Than seighe he ther a semly° sight, *attractive*
A tabernacle[1] blisseful° and bright, *delightful*
Therin her° maister king sete *their*
And her quen, fair and swete.
Her° crounes, her clothes schine so bright *their*
That unnethe bihold he him might.[2]
When he hadde biholden al that thing,
He kneled adoun bifor the king:
"O lord," he seyd, "yif it thi wille were,
Mi menstraci thou schust y-here."° *should hear*
The king answered, "What man artow,° *are you*
That art hider y-comen now?
Ich, no non° that is with me, *I, nor no one*
No sent never after the.
Sethen° that ich here regni gan,° *since / began to reign*
Y no fond never so folehardi° man *foolhardy*
That hider to ous durst wende
Bot that ic him wald ofsende."[3]
"Lord," quath he, "trowe° ful wel, *believe*
Y nam bot a pover menstrel;° *I am only a poor minstrel*
And, sir, it is the maner of ous° *our way*
To seche mani° a lordes hous— *visit many*
Thei° we nought welcom no be, *though*
Yete we mot proferi° forth our gle." *must offer*
Bifor the king he sat adoun
And tok his harp so miri° of soun, *merry, pleasing*
And tempreth° his harp, as he wele can, *tunes*
And blisseful notes he ther gan,° *began*
That al that in the palays were
Com to him forto here,° *hear*
And liggeth adoun to his fete—° *lie down at his feet*
Hem thenketh° his melody so swete. *they think*
The king herkneth° and sitt ful stille; *listens*
To here his gle he hath gode wille.[4]
Gode bourde° he hadde of his gle; *great enjoyment*
The riche quen also hadde he.° *she*

When he hadde stint° his harping, *stopped*
Than seyd to him the king,
"Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.
Now aske of me what it be,
Largelich ichil the pay;° *generously I will pay you*
Now speke, and tow might asay."° *and you might try*
"Sir," he seyd, "ich biseche the° *I implore you*
Thatow° woldest give me *that you*
That ich° levedi, bright on ble,° *same / face*
That slepeth under the ympe-tree."
"Nay!" quath the king, "that nought nere!° *that could not be*
A sori couple of you it were,[5]
For thou art lene, rowe and blac,° *lean, unkempt, and swarthy*
And sche is lovesum,° withouten lac; *beautiful*
A lothlich° thing it were, forthi,° *repulsive / therefore*
To sen hir° in thi compayni."[6] *see her*
"O sir!" he seyd, "gentil king,
Yete were it a wele fouler° thing *much more grievous*
To here a lesing° of thi mouthe! *hear a falsehood*
So, sir, as ye seyd nouthe,° *now*
What ich wold aski,° have y schold, *I wished to request*
And nedes thou most° thi word hold."[7] *you needs must*
The king seyd, "Sethen° it is so, *since*
Take hir bi the hond° and go; *hand*
Of hir ichil thatow° be blithe." *I wish that you*
He kneled adoun and thonked him swithe.° *very much*
His wiif he tok bi the hond,
And dede him swithe° out of that lond, *went quickly*
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
To Winchester he is y-come,[8]
That was his owhen cité;
Ac no man knewe that it was he.
No forther than the tounes° ende *town's*

[1] *tabernacle* Raised platform or dais covered with a canopy.

[2] *unnethe bihold he him might* He could scarcely look (at them).

[3] *That hider … ofsende* That he dared come here to us unless I wished to send for him.

[4] *To here his … gode wille* To hear his (Orfeo's) music, he (the king) had good will.

[5] *A sori couple of you it were* You would make a wretched couple.

[6] *"Nay!" quath the king … compayni* The fairy king appears not to recognize Orfeo here but refuses his request on the grounds that the couple would be aesthetically ill-matched.

[7] *Yete were it … thi word hold* The rash promise is a feature of romance and folklore. The poet also draws here on the importance of "trouthe," keeping one's word, in medieval English culture.

[8] *So long … y-come* He stayed on the path so long that he arrived at Winchester.

For knoweleche he no durst wende,[1]
Bot with a begger, y-bilt ful narwe,° *lodged very humbly*
Ther he tok his herbarwe° *shelter*
To him and to° his owhen 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*
Told him everich a grot:° *every detail*
Hou her° quen was stole owy,° *their / stolen away*
Ten yer gon,° with fairy, *years ago*
And hou her° king en exile yede,° *how their / went*
But no man nist in wiche thede;° *knew in which country*
And how the steward the lond gan hold,
And other mani thinges him told.
Amorwe, oyain nonetide,° *towards noon*
He maked his wiif ther abide;
The beggers clothes he borwed° anon[2] *borrowed*
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,
Burlays° and levedis him gun *burgesses (citizens)*
bihold.° *began to see*
"Lo!"° thai seyd, "swiche a man! *look*
Hou long the here° hongeth him opan!"° *hair / upon*
Also thai seyd, everychon,
How the mosse grew hym upon:
"Lo! Hou his berd° hongeth to his kne! *beard*
He is y-clongen also° a tre!" *withered as*
And, as he yede° in the strete, *walked*
With his steward he gan mete,° *met*
And loude he sett on him a crie:
"Sir steward!" he seyd, "merci!
Icham° an harpour of hethenisse;° *I am / foreign parts*
Help me now in this destresse!"
The steward seyd, "Com with me, come;
Of that ichave,° thou schalt have some. *I have*
Everich gode harpour is welcom me to
For mi lordes love, Sir Orfeo."
In the castel the steward sat atte mete,° *meat (i.e. a meal)*
And mani lording was bi him sete;
Ther were trompours and
tabourers,° *trumpet-players and drummers*
Harpours fele,° and crouders—[3] *many*
Miche melody thai maked alle.
And Orfeo sat stille in the halle
And herkneth; when thai ben al stille,
He toke his harp and tempred schille;° *tuned loudly*
The blissefulest° notes he harped there *most delightful*
That ever ani man y-herd with ere—° *ear*
Ich man liked wele his gle.° *music*
The steward biheld and gan y-se,
And knewe the harp als blive.° *immediately*
"Menstrel!" he seyd, "so mot thou thrive,° *as you live*
Where hadestow° this harp, and hou?° *did you get / how*
Y pray that thou me telle now."
"Lord," quath he, "in uncouthe
thede° *unknown country*
Thurth° a wildernes as y yede,° *through / I wandered*
Ther y founde in a dale
With lyouns° a man totorn *by lions*
smale,° *ripped to small pieces*
And wolves him frete° with teth so scharp. *gnawed*
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, *wretch*
That have swiche a lord y-lore?° *lost*
A, way° that ich was y-bore° *woe / born*
That him was so hard grace y-yarked,[4]
And so vile deth y-marked!"° *destined*
Adoun he fel aswon° to grounde; *in a swoon*
His barouns him tok up in that stounde° *moment*
And telleth him how it
geth—° *this is how it goes (i.e., how the world is)*
"It nis no bot of mannes deth!"[5]

[1] *For ... no durst wende* In case of recognition, he dared go no further. Orfeo maintains his disguise in his own city as he has in the Otherworld.

[2] *The beggers ... anon* Since Orfeo is already in disguise as a minstrel, his borrowing of the beggar's clothes is puzzling. A possible explanation is that he fears the pilgrim's cloak he took when he left will be recognized at court.

[3] *crouders* String-players. Possibly from Welsh "crwth," a stringed instrument like a violin. An alternative definition comes from the MED, where this line from *Sir Orfeo* is used as an example for *crouder*, meaning "one who plays the crowd."

[4] *That him was so hard grace y-yarked* To him was such adverse fate ordained.

[5] *It nis no bot of mannes deth* There is no remedy for a man's death.

King Orfeo 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, herkne now this thing:
Yif ich were Orfeo the king,[1]
And hadde y-suffred ful yore° *a very long time*
In wildernisse miche sore,° *much sorrow*
And hadde ywon° mi quen o-wy° *won / away*
Out of the lond of fairy,
And hadde y-brought the levedi hende° *courteous*
Right here to the tounes ende,
And with a begger her in y-nome,° *taken her in*
And were mi-self hider y-come
Poverlich to the,° thus stille, *in poverty to you*
For to asay° thi gode wille, *test*
And ich founde the thus trewe,
Thou no schust it never rewe.° *should never regret it*
Sikerlich,° for love or ay,° *certainly / fear*
Thou schust be king after mi day;
And yif thou of mi deth hadest ben blithe,° *pleased*
Thou schust have voided, also
swithe."° *been banished at once*
Tho° all tho° that therin sete *then / those*
That it was King Orfeo underyete,° *realized*
And the steward him wele knewe—
Over and over the bord° he threwe, *table*
And fel adoun to his° fet; *(Orfeo's)*
So dede everich lord that ther sete,
And all thai seyd at o° criing: *one*
"Ye beth our lord, sir, and our king!"
Glad thai were of his live;° *life*
To chaumber thai ladde° him als blive° *led / quickly*
And bathed him and schaved his berd,
And tired° him as a king apert;° *dressed / openly*
And sethen,° with gret processioun, *afterwards*
Thai brought the quen into the toun
With al maner menstraci—
Lord! ther was grete melody!
For joie thai wepe with her eighe° *their eyes*
That hem so sounde y-comen seighe.[2]
Now King Orfeo newe coround° is, *crowned*
And his quen, Dame Heurodis,
And lived long afterward,
And sethen° was king the steward.[3] *afterwards*
Harpours in Bretaine after than
Herd hou° this mervaile° bigan, *heard how / marvel*
And made herof a lay of gode likeing,° *great delight*
And nempned° it after the king. *named*
That lay "Orfeo" is y-hote;° *called*
Gode is the lay, swete is the note.
Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
God graunt ous° alle wele to fare! Amen. *us*

Explicit
—c. 1331–40

[1] *Yif ich were Orfeo the king* Orfeo's "if" here lends a curiously conditional note to his speech.

[2] *That hem ... y-comen seighe* Who saw them (Orfeo and Heurodis) come back safely.

[3] *And sethen ... steward* Although the poet does not mention whether or not Orfeo and Heurodis have children, the succession of the steward implies that they do not.

THE GEOFFREY CHAUCER PAGE

Sir Orfeo

Translated into Modern English

We read full oft, and find it writ,
As ancient clerks give us to wit,
The lays that harpers sung of old
Of many a diverse matter told.
Some sang of bliss; some heaviness;
And some of joy and gladsomeness.
Of treason some, and some of guile;
Of happenings strange that chanced awhile!
Of knightly deeds; of ribaldry;
And some they tell of Faerie.
But of all themes that men approve
Methinks the most they be of Love.
In Britain first these lays were wrought
There were they made, and thence were brought.
They told of venturous deeds and days,
Whereof the Britons made their lays,
For, an they heard a story told
Of wondrous hap that chanced of old,
They took their harp withouten fail,
Made them a lay, and named the tale.
And of the deeds that thus befell
A part, not all, is mine to tell;
So hearken, lordings, true and leal,
The tale of Orfeo's woe and weal.

This Orfeo, he was king with crown,
A mighty lord of high renown,
A stalwart man, and hardy too,
Courteous and free of hand also.
His parents might their lineage trace
To Pluto, and to Juno's race,
Who, for their marvels manifold,
Were held as gods in days of old.
Now chief of all the arts that be
Sir Orfeo loved good minstrelsy,

He honoured much the harpers' skill,
And harboured them of right good will.
Himself upon the harp would play,
And set thereto his mind alway,
Till such his skill that, far or near,
No better harper might ye hear.
For never man of woman born,
Altho' for sorrow all forlorn,
But an he heard Sir Orfeo play
Forgot his heaviness straightway,
And deemed himself in Paradise
For joy of such sweet melodies.

In Traciens Orfeo held his court,
A city strong, a goodly fort,
And with him reigned his queen so fair,
Dame Heurodis, beyond compare
The fairest lady, so I read,
That ever ware this mortal weed;
So full of love and gentleness
That none might tell her goodliness.

It was the coming in of May,
When gay and gladsome is the day,
Banished the chilly winter showers,
And every field is full of flowers,
When blossoms deck the bough so green,
And every heart is glad, I ween,
That Heurodis, the queen, was fain
To take unto her maidens twain,
And go forth on a morning tide
For pastime to an orchard side,
To hear the birds sing loud and low,
And watch the blossoms bud and blow.
And there they sat them down all three
Beneath a spreading elder tree;
And as they sat in shadows green
A slumber deep o'ertook the queen.
That sleep her maidens dare not break,
But let her lie, nor bade her wake;
And so she slept the morning through
Until the day to even drew.

But when she woke, ah me, the change!
Strange were her words, her actions strange;
She wrung her hands, and tore her face
Till that the blood ran down apace;

Her goodly robes she soon had torn,
As if of sense she were forlorn.
Affrighted were those maidens twain,
Back to the hall they ran amain,
And of their lady's woeful plight
They told each gallant squire and knight,
And aid to hold the queen they sought,
For sure they deemed her all distraught!

Forth run the knights, the ladies run,
Full sixty maids, if ever a one,
Swift to the orchard shade they hie,
And take the queen up speedily;
They bear her to her couch at last,
And there by force they hold her fast,
But she crieth what no man understands,
And will up and away from their holding hands.
Straight to the king they brought the word,
('T was the sorriest tidings he ever heard,)
Ten of his knights he called that hour,
And gat him to his lady's bower;
He looked on the queen right woefully,
And spake: "Sweet heart what aileth thee?
Wast ever wont to be so still,
And now thou criest wondrous shrill!
Thy flesh, but now so soft and white,
Hast torn with thy nails, a doleful sight!
Thy face, this morn so rosy red,
is pale and wan, as thou wert dead;
Alack! and Alas! for thy fingers small,
Bloody they are, and white withal,
And thine eyes, so lovesome and shining clear,
Are e'en as a man's whose foe draws near.
Sweet heart, I prithee, hear my plaint,
Cease for a while thy sore complaint,
And say who hath wronged thee, when and how?
And if never a man may help thee now?"

Still was the queen for a little space,
While the bitter tears they flowed apace,
And she spake to the king with voice so drear:
"Alas, Sir Orfeo, lord most dear,
Since first the day we to wed were fain,
No word of wrath chanced between us twain
But I, thy wife, have loved thee
E'en as my life, as thou hast me;
But now must we part, Ah woe the day!

Do what thou wilt, for I must away!"

"Alack," quoth the king: "forlorn am I,
Where goest thou, Sweeting, to whom, and why?
Whither thou goest I go with thee,
And where I may be shalt thou bide with me!"

"Nay, sir, nay, 't is an empty word,
For hearken and hear what hath chanced my lord:
As I lay but now by our orchard side,
And slumbered away the morning tide,
There came two gentle knights to me,
Armed at all points as knights should be,
And bade me come, nor make delay,
To speak with their lord the king straightway.
But I answered back, in queenly mood,
I might not, and would not if I could.
They turned them about, and fled amain,
And swift came the king with all his train,
A hundred knights, I wis, had he,
And a hundred maidens, fair to see;
And each one rode on a snow-white steed,
And each was clad in a snow-white weed,
Of all the folk that mine eyes have seen
They were the fairest folk, I ween.

The king ware a crown upon his head,
But it was not wrought of gold so red,
Nor of silver, but eke of a precious stone,
Bright as the noonday sun it shone.
And e'en as he came, without yea or nay,
Needs I must ride with him straightway,
An I would or no, I must with him ride;
He gave me a palfrey by his side,
And he brought me unto his palace fair,
Builded and garnished beyond compare.
He showed me castles, and goodly towers,
Rivers and forests, meads with flowers,
And many a goodly steed and tall --
Then he turned again from his castle hall,
And brought me back to my orchard tree,
And spake in such wise as I tell to thee:
`Lady, to-morrow I bid thee be
Here, on this spot, 'neath this elder tree,
Hence shalt thou ride with me away,
To dwell at my court for ever and aye.
And if thou delayest to do my will

Or here, or there, it shall be thine ill;
For no man may help thee, or hold thee now,
Did they tear thee limb from limb, I trow,
For living or dying, or whole or torn,
Must thou ride with us to-morrow's morn!'"

"Alas!" cried the king: "now woe is me,
In sorry case methinks we be,
For liever were I to lose my life
Than thus to be robbed of my queen, my wife."
Counsel he craveth in this his need,
But no man knoweth a fitting rede.

'T is the morrow's dawn, and with courage high,
Sir Orfeo arms him fittingly,
And full a thousand knights with him
Are girded for combat stout and grim.
Forth with the queen they now will ride
To the elder tree by the orchard side,
And there in its shadow they take their stand,
And a shield-wall build on either hand,
And each man sweareth he here will stay,
And die, ere his queen be reft away.
Yet e'en as their lips might form the vow
The queen was gone, and no man knew how,
For the fairy folk, they have cast their spell,
And whither they bear her no man may tell!

Oh! then there was wailing, I ween, and woe,
To his chamber straight the king doth goo
And he casteth him down on the floor of stone,
And he maketh such dole, and such bitter moan,
That well nigh he wept his life away,
But counsel or aid was there none that day.
Then he bade his men come, one and all,
Earls, barons, and knights, to his council hall,
And they came -- and he spake: "My lords so dear,
I take ye to witness before me here
That I give my high steward, and seneschal,
The rule of my lands and kingdoms all;
I will have him stay in this my stead,
And rule the land, e'en as I were dead;
For since I have lost my wife, the queen,
The fairest lady this earth hath seen,
To dwell in the wilderness am I fain,
And look on no woman's face again,
But to spend my days, for evermore,

With the beasts of the field, in the woodland hoar.
And when ye know that my days be done
Then come ye together, every one,
And choose you a king. -- Now I go my way,
Deal with my goods as best ye may!"

Then a voice of weeping rose in the hall,
And a bitter cry from one and all,
Scarce might they speak, or old or young,
For fast-flowing tears that chained their tongue;
But they fell on their knees with one accord,
And they prayed, an so it might please their lord,
That he should not thus from his kingdom go --
"Go to," he quoth: "it must needs be so!

Thus Sir Orfeo forth would fare,
Only a staff in his hand he bare,
Neither kirtle he took, nor hood,
Shirt, nor other vesture good,
But alway he took his harp in hand,
And gat him, barefoot, out of the land.
Never a man might with him go --
Alack I there was weeping, I ween, and woe,
When he who aforetime was king with crown
Passed, as a beggar, out of the town.

By woodland and moorland the king hath passed,
To the wilderness is he come at last,
There findeth he naught that his soul may please,
But ever he liveth in great misease.
He that was wrapt in fur withal
And slumbered soft 'neath purple and pall,
On the heather he now must rest his head,
With leaves and grass for a covering spread.
He that had castles, halls with towers,
Rivers, forests, fields with flowers,
Must make his bed 'neath the open sky
Though it snow and freeze right piercingly.
Once knights and ladies, a goodly train,
To do him service were ever fain;
Now none are in waiting to please the king,
But the worms of the woodland coil and spring.
He that erstwhile might take his fill
Of food, or drink, as should be his will,
Now must he dig and delve all day
For the roots that may scarce his hunger stay.
In summer-time hath he fruit to eat,

The hedgerow berries, sour and sweet,
But in winter he liveth in sore misease,
On roots, and grasses, and bark of trees,
Till all his body was parched and dry,
And his limbs were twisted all awry;
Dear Lord, who may tell what sorrow sore
Sir Orfeo suffered, ten year, and more!
His beard, once black, is grey, I trow,
To his girdle clasp it hangeth low.

His harp, which was wont to be his glee,
He keepeth safe in a hollow tree,
And when the sun shone bright again
To take that harp he aye was fain,
And to temper the cords as should seem him good,
Till the music rang through the silent wood,
And all the beasts that in woodland dwell
For very joy at his feet they fell;
And all the birds in the forest free
Were fain to seek to the nearest tree,
And there on the branch they sat a-row
To hearken the melody sweet and low;
But when his harp he had laid aside
Nor beast nor bird would with him abide.

Oft-times, I ween, in the morning bright,
Sir Orfeo saw a fairer sight,
For he saw the king of the Fairies ride
A-hunting, down by the forest side;
With merry shout, and the horn's gay blast,
And the bay of the hounds the hunt swept past,
But never the quarry they ran to bay,
And he knew not whither they went alway.
In other fashion he'ld come again,
With a warlike host in his royal train,
Full thousand riders richly dight,
Each armed as becometh a valiant knight,
Of steadfast countenance, tried and true;
Full many a banner above them flew,
As they rode with drawn sword, on warfare bent,
But never he wist the way they went.

And then they would come in other guise:
Knights and ladies in joyous wise,
In quaint attire, as of days gone by,
Pacing a measure soberly,
To sound of tabor and pipe they pass,

Making sweet music, across the grass.
Again it chanced that he saw one day
Sixty ladies, who rode their way
Gracious and gay as the bird on the tree,
And never a knight in that company.
Falcon on hand those ladies ride,
On hawking bent, by the river side;
Full well they know it as right good haunt
Of mallard, of heron, and cormorant.
But now hath the waterfowl taken flight,
And each falcon chooseth his prey aright,
And never a one but hath slain its bird --
Then Sir Orfeo, laughing, spake this word:
"By faith, but those folk have goodly game,
I will get me thither, in Heaven's name,
Of old was I wont such sport to see -- "

Thus he came to that goodly company,
And stayed his steps by a lady fair,
He looked on her face, and was well aware,
By all the tokens of truth, I ween,
That 't was Heurodis, his own sweet queen!
Each on the other to gaze was fain,
Yet never a word passed betwixt the twain,
But at sight of her lord in his sorry plight,
Who aforetime had been so fair a knight,
The tears welled forth, and flowed amain --
Then the ladies round they seized her rein,
By force must she ride with them away,
For with her lord might she longer stay.

"Alack!" quoth the king: "woe worth the day,
Thou sluggard, Death, why make delay?
Oh! wretched me that I live, I ween,
After the sight that mine eyes have seen!
Alas, that I needs must live my life
When I may not speak with my love, my wife!
And she dare not speak to her lord so true --
Now break my heart for ruth and rue!
I'faith," he quoth: "whate'er betide,
Whithersoe'er those ladies ride
That self-same way shall my footsteps fare,
For life, or death, I have little care!"

Then with staff in hand, and harp on back,
He gat him forth on the toilsome track,
Nor for stock nor for stone will he hold him still,

But goeth his way of right good will.
Thro' a cleft in the rock lies the Fairy way
And the king he follows as best he may;
Thro' the heart of the rock he needs must go,
Three miles and more, I would have ye know,
Till a country fair before him lay,
Bright with the sun of a summer's day;
Nor hill nor valley might there be seen
But level lands, and pastures green,
And the towers of a castle met his eye,
Rich and royal, and wondrous high.
The outer wall of that burg, I ween,
Was clear and shining, as crystal sheen,
And a hundred towers stood round about,
Of cunning fashion, and building stout.
Up from the moat sprang the buttress bold,
Arched and fashioned of good red gold.
The castle front was of carven stone,
All manner of beast might ye see thereon,
And the dwelling rooms within that hall
Of precious stones were fashioned all,
The meanest pillar ye might behold
Was covered all over with burnished gold.
Throughout that country 't was ever light,
For e'en when the hour was mirk midnight
Those goodly jewels they shone, each one,
Bright as at midday the summer sun.
'T was past all speech, and beyond all thought,
The wondrous work that there was wrought,
Sir Orfeo deemed that at last his eyes
Beheld the proud palace of Paradise.

In at the gate rode the Fairy train,
And the king to follow them was full fain,
He knocketh loud at the portal high,
And the warder cometh speedily,
He asketh him where he fain would go?
"A harper am I" quoth Sir Orfeo;
"And methinks an thy lord would hearken me
I would solace his hours with minstrely."

With that the porter made no ado,
But gladly he let Sir Orfeo through.
The king looked round him, to left, to right,
And in sooth he beheld a fearsome sight;
For here lay folk whom men mourned as dead,
Who were hither brought when their lives were sped;

E'en as they passed so he saw them stand,
Headless, and limbless, on either hand.
There were bodies pierced by a javelin cast,
There were raving madmen fettered fast,
One sat erect on his warhorse good,
Another lay choked, as he ate his food.
Some floated, drowned, in the water's flow,
Shrivelled were some in the flame's fierce glow;
There were those who in childbed had lost their life,
Some as leman, and some as wife;
Men and women on every side
Lay as they sleep at slumbertide,
Each in such fashion as he might see
Had been carried from earth to Faerie.

And her, whom he loved beyond his life,
Dame Heurodis, his own sweet wife,
He saw, asleep 'neath an elder tree,
And knew by her raiment that it was she.

He looked his fill on these marvels all
And went his way to a kingly hall,
And he saw therein a goodly sight;
Beneath a canopy, rich and bright,
The king of the Fairies had his seat
With his queen beside him, fair and sweet,
Their crowns, their vesture, agleam with gold,
His eyes might scarcely the sight behold I
Sir Orfeo gazed for a little space,
Then he kneeled on his knees before the dais:
"O king," he said: "an it were thy will,
As minstrel I gladly would shew my skill,"

And the king he quoth: "Who mayest thou be
Who thus, unbidden, hast come to me?
I called thee not unto this my court,
No man of mine hath thee hither brought,
For never, I ween, since my reign began
Have I found so foolish and fey a man
Who found his way unto this my home,
Save that I bade him hither come!"

"Lord," quoth Sir Orfeo: " know for sure
That I am naught but a minstrel poor,
And e'en as the minstrel's manner is
I seek out castles and palaces;
Though never a welcome our portion be,

Yet needs must we proffer our minstrelsy!"

Then he took his harp, so sweet of tone,
And he sat him down before the throne,
And he tuned the strings, as well he knew,
And so sweet were the sounds that he from them drew,
That no man within the palace bound
But sped swift-foot as he heard the sound,
And down they lie around his feet,
The melody seemeth to them so sweet.
The king he hearkens, and holds him still,
Hearing the music of right good will,
And the gentle queen she was glad and gay,
Such comfort was their's from the minstrel's lay.
When he had finished his minstrelsy
Out spake the monarch of Faerie;
"Harper, right well hast thou played, I trow,
Whatever thou wilt thou may'st ask me now,
I am minded in royal wise to pay,
So what is thy will? Now harper say!"

Quoth Sir Orfeo: "Sire, I would pray of thee
One thing alone, that thou give to me
That lady fair, who is sleeping now
Beneath the shade of the elder bough!"

"Nay," quoth the king, "'t were an ill matched pair
Did I send thee forth with that dame so fair,
For never a charm doth the lady lack,
And thou art withered, and lean, and black,
'T were a loathly thing, it seemeth me,
To send her forth in such company."

"Sire," quoth Sir Orfeo: "gentle king,
To my mind it seemeth a fouler thing
To belie a word, and forswear an oath
Sire, thou didst promise, nothing loth,
That that which I asked I should have of thee,
And that promise thou need'st must keep to me!"

Then spake the king: "Since the thing be so
Take that lady fair by her hand, and go,
And may bliss and blessing with ye dwell!"

Then he kneeled adown, and thanked him well.
Sir Orfeo took his wife by the hand,
And he gat him swift from the Fairy land,

Out of the palace he took his way
By the selfsame road he had come that day;
And never he stayed tfll again he stood
Before the walls of that city good
Where aforetime as king he ware, the crown --
But no man knew him in all that town.

But a little way from the gate they go
Ere they come to a dwelling poor and low,
And Sir Orfeo deemed they would harbour there,
For more would he know ere he'ld further fare.
So he prayed, as a minstrel wan and worn,
They would shelter him and his wife till morn.
Then he asked his host who was ruler there?
And who was king of that country fair
And the beggar answered him word for word,
And told him the tale as ye e'en have heard;
How ten years agone, in the month of May,
Their queen was by Fairies stolen away,
And, an exile, their king had wandered forth,
But none knew whither, or south, or north,
And the steward since then the land did hold
And many another tale he told.

When the morrow came, and 't was high noontide,
The king bade his wife in the hut abide,
And he clad himself in the beggar's gown,
And, harp in hand, he sought the town,
And he gat him into that city good
That all men might see him an they would.
Earl, and baron, and lady bright,
Stared agape at the wondrous sight,
"Was ever," they cried, "such marvel known?
The man is by hair, as by moss, o'ergrown.
Look how his beard hangeth to his knee!
'T is e'en as he were a walking tree!"

Then as to the palace his way was set
In the city street the steward he met,
And he cried aloud: "Sir Steward, I pray
That thou have mercy on me this day;
I am a harper of heathennesse,
Help me in this my sore distress!"

And the steward he quoth: "Now come with me,
All that I have will I share with thee,
Every good harper is welcome here

For Sir Orfeo's sake, my lord most dear."

The steward he sat him down at the board,
With many a noble knight and lord,
All kinds of music had they, I trow,
Of trumpet and tabour, and harp enow,
In the hall was no lack of melody --
Sir Orfeo hearkened silently
And till all had done he held him still
Then he took and tempered his harp with skill
And I think me no tongue of man may say
How sweet was the music he made that day.
To hearken and hear was each one fain,
But the steward he gazed on the harp again,
And it seemed to him that he knew it well --
"Minstrel," he quoth: "I beseech thee tell
Whence had'st thou that harp, and who gave it thee?
I pray that thou truly answer me!"

"Lord," be quoth: "afar from here,
As I took my way through a desert drear.
I found, in a valley dark and grim,
A man by lions torn limb from limb,
Wolves gnawed his bones with teeth so sharp,
And beside the body I found this harp.
Full ten years ago it needs must be."

"Alas!" cried the steward: " now woe is me!"
'T was the corse of my lord Sir Orfeo!
Ah! wretched me, what shall I do?
Of so good a lord am I left forlorn,
Methinks 't were best I had ne'er been born!
Ah woe, that for him such lot was cast,
And so foul a death he must die at last!"

With that, the steward, he swooning fell,
But the lords they comforted him right well,
For no man so sad who draweth breath
But findeth healing at last in death.
By all these tokens Sir Orfeo knew
A loyal man was his steward and true,
One who loved his lord, nor his pledge would break --
Then up he stood, and on this wise spake:
"Hearken, I pray thee, steward, my word,
Put case I were Orfeo now, thy lord,
Say I had suffered torments sore
In the wilderness full ten years and more,

That at last I had won my queen away
From the land where the Fairy king holds sway,
And that we had safely come, we twain,
Back to this city and burg again,
And my wife abode with a beggar poor
While I came again to my palace door,
In lowly guise, thus to test thee still,
And see if thou bore me right good will;
I wot, an I found thee so leal and true,
My coming again thou should'st never rue,
Verily, and indeed, without yea or nay,
The throne should be thine when I passed away!
But if news of my death had been joy to thee
Thou hadst passed from this house right speedily."

Then never a man at the castle board
But knew that this was indeed their lord,
The steward right well his master knew,
Over and over the board he threw,
And low at Sir Orfeo's feet would fall --
And so do the lordings, one and all,
And they cry with one voice till the rafters ring:
"Thou art our lord, Sire, and our king!"

Blithe of his coming they were and gay,
To his chamber they led the king straightway,
And they bathed him well, and trimmed his hair,
And clad him in royal raiment fair.
And then with solemn and stately train
They brought the queen to her burg again,
With all manner of music and minstrelsy;
I' faith there was joyous melody,
And the tears of joy they fell like rain
When the folk saw their king and queen again.

Now is Orfeo crowned once more, I wis,
With his lady and queen, Dame Heurodis,
And many a year they lived those two,
And after them ruled the steward so true.
Harpers in Britain, as I was told,
Heard how this marvel had chanced of old,
And thereof they made a lay so sweet,
And gave it the king's name, as was meet.
'Sir Orfeo," thus the title stood,
Good are the words, the music good --
Thus came Sir Orfeo out of his care,
God grant to us all as well to fare!

Translated by Jessie L. Weston, in *The Chief Middle Englih Poets*, Cambridge, Mass., 1914, pp. 133-141.

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