

## SIR ORFEO

ca. 1300

*Sir Orfeo* is a reworking of the classical myth of the great musician Orpheus and his wife Eurydice. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Eurydice died of a snake-bite at her wedding and went to Hades, the place of the dead. Orpheus undertook to follow her there, and having come before Pluto and Proserpina, the king and queen of Hades, he so pleased them with his music that they granted Eurydice's release—on the condition, however, that she should follow behind Orpheus as they left Hades and that he should not look back at her. But Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice disappeared into Hades. Ovid's stories were told and retold during the Middle Ages, and frequently the teller altered the plot to suit his own purposes—in her tale the Wife of Bath (lines 958ff.) substitutes Midas's wife for his barber as the discoverer of his asses' ears. The poet of *Sir Orfeo* has given the story a happy ending and has replaced its alien classical elements with familiar elements of medieval folklore. Hades has become the land of *Fairy*, the medieval otherworld, inhabited by supernatural creatures who seem human in most respects but who exist under laws incomprehensible to ordinary human beings. There is no rational explanation of why the king of Fairy should seize Dame Heurodis (Eurydice), except that by going to sleep under an *impe-tree* (a grafted fruit-tree), she unwittingly violated a taboo and put herself in his power. In folklore, trees are, of course, often given sinister properties: in lines 885 ff. of her tale the Wife of Bath comments that incubi once resided under trees, and in *The Faerie Queene* I.ii.30 the Redcross Knight has a frightening experience with a tree he is sitting under. In the Otherworld Dame Heurodis continues to sleep under a tree—apparently a replica of the one in her own garden.

That the poem was the product of a minstrel seems certain because of the emphasis laid upon the value of music. Orfeo is an excellent harper who welcomes all good harpers to his court. When he becomes a hermit, he keeps his harp near him and plays on it to solace himself. The animals and birds crowd around him in delight—as they did with Orpheus—and like the original Orpheus he frees his wife by his music. When he returns to his own kingdom it is by his harp and his harping that he is identified. Even Orfeo's steward appreciates music: in most medieval romances stewards are pictured as wicked, for they were the court officers responsible for offering or withholding hospitality for minstrels, and apparently they often withheld it. With unusual tact, the poet depicts a good steward who, partly because of his courtesies to harpers, becomes king after Orfeo's death.

The poem was probably translated from a French romance of the kind called a Breton lay. As the name implies, this genre of romance had its origin in Brittany, a place noted for its minstrelsy. Other surviving lays share with *Sir Orfeo* a plot involving the supernatural, wedded or romantic love, and a rash promise; they also share the poem's stylistic simplicity, brevity, and a generally optimistic spirit. Chaucer's Franklin's Tale imitates the form, and it is probable that his model was *Sir Orfeo*, whose opening lines the Franklin seems to be echoing in his own story. The English translation was probably made before 1300, but it has survived in only three manuscripts of later date. Some scholars believe that the best of these, the Auchinleck manuscript, may once have been read by Chaucer. Only the Auchinleck manuscript makes the interesting identification of *Traciens* (Thrace) with Winchester: some English minstrel poet obviously adapted the poem to a performance at Winchester, which had, indeed, in Old English times been the seat of a kingdom. (It was probably the same poet who, fractionally learned, names King Pluto and King Juno among Orfeo's ancestors.)

The text presented here is based on the Auchinleck manuscript, though the spelling has been normalized and readings from the other manuscripts adopted where they seem better than Auchinleck's. In view of the large amount of evident corruption in all three manuscripts, the editor has made a number of conjectural emendations. The original metrical form was probably octosyllabic couplets with alternating stress, but what has come down to us are loose four-stressed couplets. As in Chaucer, there are many "headless" lines, where the stress falls on the first syllable of the line, even though the syllable is not a rhetorically important one; and also as in Chaucer, while final *e* is frequently used to achieve an unstressed syllable, it is equally often ignored.

## Sir Orfeo

We reden ofte and finden ywrite—  
 As thise clerkes doon° us wite°— *cause / to learn*  
 The layes that been of harping<sup>1</sup>  
 Been yfounde° of freely° thing. *composed / pleasant*  
 5 Some been of werre° and some of wo, *war*  
 And some of joye and mirthe also,  
 And some of trecherye and of gile;  
 And some of happes° that fellen° while,° *events / occurred / once*  
 And some of bourdes° and ribaudye,° *jokes / ribaldry*  
 10 And manye been of fairye.<sup>2</sup>  
 Of alle thing that men may see,  
 Most of love forsoothe they be.  
 In Britain° thise layes been wrought, *Brittany*  
 First yfounde° and forth ybrought. *composed*  
 15 Of adventures that felle° by dayes<sup>3</sup> *occurred*  
 The Britons° therof maden layes:  
 When they mighte owher° yheere° *anywhere / hear*  
 Of any merveiles that ther were,  
 They tooken hem hir harpes with game,° *pleasure*  
 20 Maden layes and yaf° hem name. *gave*  
 Of adventures that han bifalle  
 I can some telle, but nought alle.  
 Herkneht, lordinges° that been trewe, *gentlemen*  
 I wol you telle of Sir Orfewe. *noble*  
 25 Orfeo was a riche° king, *noble*  
 In Engelond an heigh lording,  
 A stalworth° man and hardy bo,° *valiant / both*  
 Large° and curteis° he was also. *generous / courteous*  
 His fader was come of King Pluto,  
 30 And his moder of King Juno,  
 That somtime were as goddes yholde° *considered*  
 For adventures that they dide and tolde.  
 This king sojourned in Traciens° *Thrace*  
 That is a citee of noble defens° *fortification*  
 35 (For Winchester was cleped° tho° *called / then*  
 Traciens withouten no°). *denial*  
 Orfeo most of any thing

1. I.e., composed to be sung to the harp.

2. Fairyland, and, more commonly, the other-

world and its supernatural inhabitants.

3. Once.

- Loved the glee° of harping:  
 Siker° was every good harpour  
 40 Of him to have muche honour.  
 Himself he lerned for to harpe,  
 And laide° theron his wittes sharpe;° *applied / keenly*  
 He lerned so ther nothing was  
 A better harpour in no plas.° *place*  
 45 In al the world was no man bore° *born*  
 That ones° Orfeo sat bifore, *once*  
 And° he mighte of his harping heere,  
 But he sholde thinke that he were *if*  
 In oon of the joyes of Paradis,  
 50 Swich melodye in his harping is.  
 Orfeo hadde a queene of pris° *excellence*  
 That was ycleped° Dame Heurodis,  
 The fairest lady for the° nones° *named*  
 That mighte goon° on body and bones, *that / matter*  
 55 Ful of love and of goodnesse— *walk*  
 But no man may telle hir fairnesse.  
 Bifel so, the comsing° of May, *beginning*  
 When merye and hot is the day,  
 And away been winter showres,  
 60 And every feeld is ful of flowres,  
 And blosme breme° on every bough *glorious*  
 Overall° wexeth° merye ynough, *everywhere / grows*  
 This eeche° queene Dame Heurodis *same*  
 Took with hire two maides of pris° *excellence*  
 65 And wente in the undertide° *forenoon*  
 To playe in an orchard-side,  
 To see the flowres sprede° and-springe *open*  
 And to heere the fowles singe.  
 They setten hem down alle three  
 70 Faire° under an impe-tree;° *fairly / grafted fruit tree*  
 And wel soone this faire queene  
 Fel on sleepe upon the greene.  
 The maidens durste hire not awake,  
 But lete hire lie and reste take.  
 75 So she slepte til afternoon  
 That undertide was al ydoon.° *passed*  
 But as soone as she gan wake  
 She cried and loothly bere° gan make: *outcry*  
 She frotte° hir hondes and hir feet *tore at*  
 80 And cracched° hir visage—it bledde weet;° *scratched / wet*  
 Hir riche robe she al torit,° *tears apart*  
 And was ravised° out of her wit. *ravished*  
 The two maidenenes hire beside  
 Ne durste with hire no leng° abide, *longer*  
 85 But runne to the palais right  
 And tolde bothe squier and knight  
 That hir queene awede° wolde, *go mad*  
 And bad hem go and hire atholde.° *restrain*  
 Knightes runne and ladies also,  
 90 Damiseles sixty and mo,° *more*

	In th' orchard to the queene they come, And hire up in armes nome, <sup>o</sup>	<i>took</i>
	And broughte hire to bed at laste, And heelde hire there fine <sup>o</sup> faste.	<i>very</i>
95	But evere she heeld <sup>o</sup> in oo <sup>o</sup> cry, And wolde uppe <sup>o</sup> and awy. <sup>o</sup>	<i>continued / one get up / go away</i>
	Whan the king herde that tiding Nevere him nas worse for no thing: Orfeo cam with knightes tene <sup>o</sup>	<i>ten</i>
100	To chambre right bifore the queene, And looked and saide with greet <sup>o</sup> pitee, "O leve <sup>o</sup> lif, what aileth thee?— That evere yit hast been so stille, And now thou gredest <sup>o</sup> wonder shille. <sup>o</sup>	<i>great dear</i>
105	Thy body that was so whit ycore <sup>o</sup> With thine nailes is all totore. <sup>o</sup> Allas, thy rode <sup>o</sup> that was so reed <sup>o</sup> Is as wan as thou were deed. <sup>o</sup>	<i>cry out / shrilly excellent torn complexion / red dead</i>
110	And also thy fingres smale Been al bloody and al pale. Allas, thy lovesome yën two Looketh so <sup>o</sup> man dooth on his fo.	<i>as</i>
	A, dame, ich <sup>o</sup> biseeche mercy— Lete been al this reweful <sup>o</sup> cry, 115 And tel me what <sup>o</sup> thee is and how, And what thing may thee helpe now."	<i>I pitiful what the matter with</i>
	Tho <sup>o</sup> lay she stille at the laste, And gan to weepe swithe <sup>o</sup> faste, <sup>o</sup> And saide thus the king unto:	<i>then very / hard</i>
120	"Allas, my lord Sir Orfeo, Sittthen <sup>o</sup> we first togider were Ones wrothe <sup>o</sup> nevere we nere, But evere ich have yloved thee As my lif, and so thou me.	<i>since angry</i>
125	But now we mote <sup>o</sup> deele <sup>o</sup> atwo— Do thy best, for I moot <sup>o</sup> go."	<i>must / separate must</i>
	"Allas," quath he, "forlorn ich am! Whider wilt thou go and to wham? <sup>o</sup> Whider thou goost ich wil with thee, 130 And whider I go thou shalt with me." "Nay, nay, sire, that nought nis. <sup>4</sup> Ich wil thee telle al how it is: As ich lay this undertide <sup>o</sup>	<i>whom forenoon</i>
135	And slepte under oure orchard-side, Ther come to me two faire knightes, Wel y-armed al to rightes, And bad me comen on hying <sup>o</sup>	<i>in haste</i>
	And speke with hir lord the king; And ich answerede at <sup>o</sup> wordes bolde	<i>in</i>
140	That I ne durste nought ne I nolde. <sup>o</sup> They prikked again as they mighte drive. <sup>5</sup> Tho <sup>o</sup> cam hir king also blive <sup>o</sup>	<i>would not then / straightway</i>

4. I.e., that's no use.

5. I.e., they rode as fast as they could.

With an hundred knightes and mo,  
 And damiseles an hundred also,  
 145 Alle on snow-white steedes;  
 As white as milk were hir weedes:° *clothes*  
 I ne seigh° nevere yit bifore *saw*  
 So faire creatures ycore.° *splendid*  
 The king hadde a crown on his heed:° *head*  
 150 It nas of silver n'of gold reed,° *red*  
 But it was of a precious stoon;  
 As bryghte as the sonne it shoon.  
 And as soone as he to me cam,  
 Wolde ich, nolde ich, he me nam° *took*  
 155 And made me with him to ride  
 Upon a palfrey him biside,  
 And broughte me to his palais  
 Wel attired° in eech a ways,° *equipped / way*  
 And shewed me castels and towrs,  
 160 Riveres, foreestes, frith° with flowres, *meadow*  
 And his riche steedes eechoon,  
 And sitthen° broughte me again hoom *afterwards*  
 Into oure owene orche-yard,° *orchard*  
 And saide to me thus afterward,  
 165 'Looke tomorwe that thou be  
 Right here under this impe-tree,  
 And thanne thou shalt with us go,  
 And live with us everemo.° *evermore*  
 And if thou makest us ylet,° *resistance*  
 170 Where° thou be, thou worst° yfet.° *wherever / shall be / fetched*  
 And al totore° thy limes al *torn apart*  
 That no thing thee helpe shal.  
 And though thou beest so totorn,  
 Yit thou worst° with us yborn.'° *shall be / carried off*  
 175 When king Orfeo herde this cas,° *circumstance*  
 "O, weel"° quath he, "allas, allas!  
 Lever me were to lete° my lif *woe*  
 Than thus to lese° the queene my wif." *leave*  
 He asked conseil at° eech a man, *lose*  
 180 But no man him helpe can. *from*  
 Amorwe° the undertide is come, *next day*  
 And Orfeo hath his armes ynome,° *taken*  
 And wel ten hundred knightes with him,  
 Eech y-armed, stout and grim.  
 185 And with the queene wenten he° *they*  
 Right unto that impe-tree.  
 They made sheltrom° in eech a side, *military formation*  
 And saide they wolde ther abide  
 And die there everichoon,  
 190 Er the queene sholde from hem goon.  
 And yit amiddes hem full right  
 The queene was away ytwight,° *snatched*  
 With° faïrye forth ynome:° *by / taken*  
 Men wiste nevere wher she was bicomē.<sup>6</sup>

6. No one knew what had become of her.

195	Tho° was ther crying, weep and wo;	<i>then</i>
	The king into his chambre is go	
	And ofte swooned upon the stoon,°	<i>floor</i>
	And made swich dool and swich moon <sup>7</sup>	
	That nye° his lif was yspent°—	<i>nearly / finished</i>
200	Ther was noon amendement.°	<i>remedy</i>
	He clepte° togider his barouns,	<i>called</i>
	Eerles, lordes of renouns,°	<i>great names</i>
	And whan they alle ycomen were,	
	“Lordinges,” he saide, “bifor you here	
205	Ich ordaine myn heigh steward	
	To wite° my kingdom afterward;	<i>keep</i>
	In my stede been he shal	
	To keepe my londes overal.°	<i>everywhere</i>
	For now I have my queene ylore,°	<i>lost</i>
210	The faireste lady that evere was bore,°	<i>born</i>
	Nevere eft° I nil° no womman see;	<i>again / will not</i>
	In wilderness now wil ich tee°	<i>go</i>
	And live ther for everemore,	
	With wilde beestes in holtes° hore.°	<i>woods / gray</i>
215	And whan ye wite° that I be spent,°	<i>learn / dead</i>
	Make you than a parlement	
	And chese° you° a newe king:	<i>choose / for yourselves</i>
	Now dooth youre best with al my thing.”	
	Tho° was ther weeping in the halle,	<i>then</i>
220	And greet° cry among hem alle;	<i>great</i>
	Unnethe° mighte olde or yong	<i>scarcely</i>
	For weeping speke a word with tonge.	
	They kneeled alle adown in fere°	<i>together</i>
	And prayede him if his wille were,	
225	That he ne sholde from hem go.	
	“Do way,” quath he, “it shal be so.”	
	Al his kingdom he forsook;	
	But° a sclavin° on him he took:	<i>only / pilgrim's cloak</i>
	He hadde no kirtel° ne noon hood,	<i>short coat</i>
230	Shert ne yit noon other good.	
	But his harp he took algate,°	<i>at any rate</i>
	And dide him barefoot out at yate:°	<i>gate</i>
	No man moste° with him go.	<i>must</i>
	O way,° what° ther was weep and wo,	<i>alas / how</i>
235	Whan he that hadde been king with crown	
	Wente so poorelich out of town.	
	Thruh the wode° and over heeth	<i>wood</i>
	Into the wilderness he geeth.°	<i>goes</i>
	Nothing he fint° that him is aise,°	<i>finds / easy</i>
240	But evere he liveth in greet malaise.	
	He that hadde wered° the fowe and gris, <sup>8</sup>	<i>worn</i>
	And on bed the purper° bis,°	<i>purple / linen</i>
	Now on harde heeth he lith,°	<i>lies</i>
	With leves and grasse he him writh.°	<i>covers</i>

7. And made such lamentation and such complaint.

8. White and gray fur; i.e., royal ermine.

- 245 He that hadde had castels and towres,  
 Rivere forest, frith<sup>o</sup> with flowres, *meadow*  
 Now though it ginne snowe and freese,  
 This king moot<sup>o</sup> make his bed in meese.<sup>o</sup> *must / moss*  
 He that hadde had knightes of pris,<sup>o</sup> *renown*  
 250 Bifore him kneeling and ladis,  
 Now seeth he nothing that him liketh,<sup>o</sup> *pleases*  
 But wilde wormes<sup>o</sup> by him striketh.<sup>o</sup> *snakes / glide*  
 He that hadde yhad plentee  
 Of mete and drinke, of eech daintee,  
 255 Now may he alday<sup>o</sup> digge and wrote<sup>o</sup> *constantly / scrounge*  
 Er he finde his fille of roote.  
 In somer he liveth by wilde fruit  
 And berien<sup>o</sup> but goode lite;<sup>9</sup> *berries*  
 In winter may he nothing finde  
 260 But roote, grasses, and the rinde.<sup>o</sup> *bark*  
 Al his body away was dwined<sup>o</sup> *wasted*  
 For misaise, and al toched.<sup>o</sup> *scarred*  
 Lord, who may telle of the sore  
 This king suffered ten yeer and more?  
 265 His heer of his beard, blak and rowe,<sup>o</sup> *rugged*  
 To his girdel-stede<sup>o</sup> was growe. *waist*  
 His harp wheron was al his glee  
 He hidde in an holwe tree,  
 And whan the weder was cleer and bright,  
 270 He took his harp to him wel right,  
 And harped at his owene wille.<sup>o</sup> *pleasure*  
 In al the woode the soun gan shille,<sup>o</sup> *resound*  
 That wilde beestes that ther beeth  
 For joy abouten him they teeth;<sup>o</sup> *draw*  
 275 And alle the fowles that ther were  
 Come and sete on eech a brere<sup>o</sup> *briar*  
 To here his harping afine,<sup>o</sup> *to the end*  
 So mucche melodye was therine.  
 When he his harping lete<sup>o</sup> wolde, *leave off*  
 280 No beest by him abide nolde.  
 Ofte he mighte see him bisides  
 In the hote undertides<sup>o</sup> *mornings*  
 The king of fairy with his route<sup>o</sup> *company*  
 Come to hunte him al aboute  
 285 With dinne, cry, and with blowing,  
 And houndes also with him berking.  
 But no beeste they ne nome<sup>o</sup> *took*  
 Ne nevere he niste wher they bicom.<sup>1</sup>  
 And otherwhile he mighte see,  
 290 As a greet oost<sup>o</sup> by him tee,<sup>o</sup> *host / passed*  
 Wel atourned<sup>o</sup> ten hundred knightes, *equipped*  
 Eech y-armed to his rightes,<sup>o</sup> *fittingly*  
 Of countenance stout and fiers,<sup>o</sup> *fierce*  
 With manye displayed<sup>o</sup> baners, *unfurled*  
 295 And eech his swerd ydrawe holde,

9. Little good.

1. Nor did he ever learn what happened to them.

	But nevere he niste° wher they wolde,	<i>knew not</i>
	And somwhile he seigh° other thing:	<i>saw</i>
	Knights and ladies come dauncing,	
	In quainte° atir, degisely,°	<i>elegant / wonderfully</i>
300	Quainte pas° and softly.	<i>step</i>
	Tabours° and trumpes yede° him by,	<i>drums / went</i>
	And al manere minstracy.°	<i>minstrelsy</i>
	And on a day he seigh° biside	<i>saw</i>
	Sixty ladies on horse ride,	
305	Gentil and jolif° as brid° on ris°—	<i>pretty / bird / bough</i>
	Nought oo man amonges hem nis.	
	And eech a faucon on hond beer,°	<i>bore</i>
	And riden on hawking by river.	
	Of game they founde wel good haunt,°	<i>plenty</i>
310	Maulardes,° hairoun,° and cormeraunt.	<i>mallards / herons</i>
	The fowles of° the water ariseth;	<i>from</i>
	The faucons hem wel deviseth:°	<i>descry</i>
	Eech faucon his preye slough.°	<i>slew</i>
	That seigh° Orfeo and lough:°	<i>saw / laughed</i>
315	“Parfay!”° quath he, “ther is fair game!	<i>by faith</i>
	Thider ich wil,° by Goddes name.	<i>will go</i>
	Ich was ywon° swich° werk to see.”	<i>accustomed / such</i>
	He aroos and thider gan tee.°	<i>draw</i>
	To a lady he was ycome,	
320	Biheeld, and hath wel undernome,°	<i>understood</i>
	And seeth by al thing that it is	
	His owene queene Dame Heurodis,	
	Yerne° biheeld hire and she him eke,°	<i>eagerly / also</i>
	But neither to other a word ne speke.	
325	For misaise that she on him seigh°	<i>saw</i>
	That hadde been so riche and heigh,	
	The teres felle out of hir yë.	
	The othere ladies this ysye°	<i>saw</i>
	And makd hire away to ride:	
330	She moste° with him no lenger° abide.	<i>must / longer</i>
	“Allas,” quath he, “now me is wo.	
	Why nil° deeth now me nought slo?°	<i>will not / slay</i>
	Allas, wrecche,° that I ne mighte	<i>wretched one</i>
	Die now after this sighte.	
335	Allas, too longe last° my lif	<i>lasts</i>
	Whan I ne dar nought to my wif—	
	Ne she to me—oo word ne speke.	
	Allas, why nil myn herte breke?	
	Parfay,”° quath he, “tide what bitide,	<i>by faith</i>
340	Whider so this ladies ride	
	The selve° waye ich wil strecche:°	<i>same / go</i>
	Of lif ne deeth me nothing recche.”°	<i>care</i>
	His sclavin° he dide on also spak°	<i>cloak / at once</i>
	And heeng° his harp upon his bak,	<i>hung</i>
345	And hadde wel good wil to goon:	
	He ne spared neither stub ne stoon. <sup>2</sup>	

2. I.e., neither stump nor stone prevented him.

- In at a roche<sup>o</sup> the ladies rideth *rock, cave*  
 And he after and nought abideth.  
 Whan he was in the roche ago  
 350 Wel three mile other<sup>o</sup> mo, *or*  
 He cam into a fair countrey,  
 As bright so<sup>o</sup> sonne on somers day, *as*  
 Smoothe and plain<sup>o</sup> and alle greene: *flat*  
 Hil ne dale nas ther noon seene.  
 355 Amidde the lond a castel he seigh,<sup>o</sup> *saw*  
 Riche and real<sup>o</sup> and wonder heigh.  
 Al the utemoste<sup>o</sup> wal *royal*  
 Was cleer<sup>o</sup> and shined as crystal. *outmost*  
 An hundred towres ther were aboute, *bright*  
 360 Degiseliche,<sup>o</sup> and batailed<sup>3</sup> stoute. *wonderful*  
 The butres<sup>o</sup> cam out of the diche *buttress*  
 Of reed gold y-arched riche.<sup>4</sup>  
 The vousour<sup>o</sup> was anourned<sup>o</sup> al *vaulting / adorned*  
 Of eech manere divers aumal.<sup>o</sup> *enamel*  
 365 Within ther were wide wones,<sup>o</sup> *halls*  
 And alle were fulle of precious stones.  
 The worste pilar on to biholde  
 Al it was of burnist golde.  
 Al that lond was evere light,  
 370 For when it sholde be therk<sup>o</sup> and night *dark*  
 The riche stones lighte gonne<sup>5</sup>  
 As brighte as dooth at noon the sonne.  
 No man may telle ne thinke in thought  
 The riche werk that ther was wrought.  
 375 By alle thing him thinkth it is  
 The proude court of Paradis.  
 In this castel the ladies alighte:  
 He wolde in after, if he mighte.  
 Orfeo knokketh at the yate:<sup>o</sup> *gate*  
 380 The porter was redy therate  
 And asked what he wolde have ydo.<sup>o</sup> *done*  
 “Parfay,<sup>o</sup> ich am a minstrel, lo,  
 To solace<sup>o</sup> thy lord with my glee *by faith*  
 If<sup>6</sup> his sweete wille be.” *delight*  
 385 The porter undide the gate anoon  
 And lete him into the castel goon.  
 Than he gan looke aboute al  
 And seigh,<sup>o</sup> lying within the wal, *saw*  
 Of folk that ther were thider ybrought,  
 390 And thoughte<sup>o</sup> dede,<sup>o</sup> and nere nought:<sup>7</sup> *seemed / dead*  
 Some stode withouten hade,<sup>o</sup> *head*  
 And some none armes hade,  
 And some thurgh the body hadde wounde,  
 And some laye woode<sup>o</sup> ybounde; *mad*  
 395 And some armed on horse sete,

3. I.e., furnished with battlements.

4. I.e., made of red gold that arched splendidly:  
gold was commonly described as red in Middle  
English.

5. Did light it.

6. If it.

7. Were not.

And some astrangled as they ete,  
 And some were in watre adreint,<sup>o</sup> *drowned*  
 And some with fire al forshreint,<sup>o</sup> *shriveled*  
 Wives ther laye on child-bedde,  
 400 Some dede and some awedde.<sup>o</sup> *driven mad*  
 And wonder fele<sup>o</sup> ther laye bisides *many*  
 Right as they slepte hir undertides.<sup>o</sup> *forenoons*  
 Each was thus in this world ynome,<sup>o</sup> *taken*  
 With<sup>o</sup> faïrre thider ycome. *by force of*  
 405 Ther he seigh his owene wif,  
 Dame Heurodis, his leve<sup>o</sup> lif, *dear*  
 Sleepe under an impe-tree:  
 By hir clothes he knew it was she.  
 Whan he hadde seen thise mervailles alle  
 410 He wente into the kinges halle.  
 Than seigh he ther a seemly sighte:  
 A tabernacle<sup>s</sup> wel ydight<sup>o</sup>— *arrayed*  
 Hir maister king therinne sete,  
 And hir queene fair and sweete.  
 415 Hir crownes, hir clothes shoon so brighte  
 That unnethe<sup>o</sup> he biholde hem mighte. *with difficulty*  
 Whan he hadde seen al this thing,  
 He kneeled adoun bifer the king:  
 “O lord,” he saide, “if thy wil were,  
 420 My minstracye thou sholdest yheere.”<sup>o</sup> *hear*  
 The king answerede, “What man art thou  
 That art hider ycomen now?  
 Ich, ne noon that is with me,  
 Ne sente never after thee.  
 425 Sith<sup>o</sup> that ich here regne<sup>o</sup> gan *since / reign*  
 I ne foond<sup>o</sup> nevere so hardy man *found*  
 That hider to us durste wende  
 But<sup>o</sup> that ich him wolde ofsende.”<sup>o</sup> *unless / send for*  
 “Lord,” quath he, “ye trowe<sup>o</sup> wel *may believe*  
 430 I nam but a poore minstrel,  
 And, sire, it is the maner of us  
 To seeche many a lordes hous.  
 And theigh<sup>o</sup> we not welcome be, *though*  
 Yit we mote<sup>o</sup> profere forth oure glee.”<sup>o</sup> *must / music*  
 435 Bifer the king he sat adown  
 And took his harp so merye of soun,  
 And tempreth<sup>o</sup> it as he wel can. *tunes*  
 And blisful notes he ther gan  
 That alle that in the palais were  
 440 Come to him for to heere,  
 And lieth adown to his feete,  
 Hem thinkth his melodye so sweete.  
 The king herkneth and sit<sup>o</sup> ful stille: *sits*  
 To heere his glee he hath good wille.  
 445 Good bourde<sup>o</sup> he hadde of his glee: *entertainment*  
 The riche queene also hadde she.

8. I.e., an alcove.

Whan he hadde stint<sup>o</sup> of his harping, *ceased*  
 Then saide to him the riche king,  
 "Minstrel, me liketh wel thy glee.  
 450 Now aske of me what it may be—  
 Largeliche<sup>o</sup> ich wil thee paye *generously*  
 Now speke and thou might it assaye."  
 "Sire," he saide, "ich praye thee  
 That thou woldest yive me  
 455 The eeche<sup>o</sup> lady, bright on blee,<sup>o</sup> *very / of hue*  
 That sleepeth under the impe-tree."  
 "Nay," quath the king, "that nought nere:<sup>9</sup>  
 A sory couple of you it were;  
 For thou art lene,<sup>o</sup> rowe,<sup>o</sup> and blak, *lean / rough*  
 460 And she is lovesom, withoute lak.<sup>o</sup> *blemish*  
 A loothly tiling it were forthy<sup>o</sup> *therefore*  
 To seen hire in thy compaigny."  
 "O sire," he saide, "gentil king,  
 Yit were it a wel fouler thing  
 465 To heere a lesing<sup>o</sup> of thy mouthe. *lie*  
 So, sire, as ye saide nouthe<sup>o</sup> *now*  
 What ich wolde aske, have I wolde,  
 A kinges word moot<sup>o</sup> needes be holde." *must*  
 "Thou sayest sooth," the king saide than,  
 470 "And sith<sup>o</sup> I am a trewe man, *since*  
 I wol wel that it be so:  
 Taak hire by the hond and go.  
 Of hire ich wol that thou be blithe."  
 He kneeled adown and thanked him swithe;<sup>o</sup> *quickly*  
 475 His wif he took by the hond  
 And dide him swithe out of that lond,  
 And wente<sup>o</sup> him out of that thede:<sup>o</sup> *turned / country*  
 Right as he cam the way he yede.<sup>o</sup> *went*  
 So longe he hath the way ynome<sup>o</sup> *taken*  
 480 To Winchester he is ycome,  
 That sometime was his owene citee,  
 But no man knew that it was he.  
 No forther than the townes ende  
 For knoweleche<sup>1</sup> he durste wende.  
 485 But in a beggeres bild<sup>o</sup> ful narwe<sup>o</sup> *house / small*  
 Ther he hath take his herbarwe<sup>o</sup> *lodging*  
 (To him and to his owene wife),  
 As a minstrel of poore lif,  
 And asked tidinges of that lond,  
 490 And who the kingdom heeld in hond.  
 The poore begger in his cote<sup>o</sup> *hovel*  
 Tolde him everich<sup>o</sup> a grote<sup>o</sup>— *every / bit*  
 How hir queene was stole awy,<sup>o</sup> *away*  
 Ten yeer goon, with<sup>o</sup> faïry. *by*  
 495 And now hir king in exile yede<sup>o</sup> *went*  
 But no man wiste<sup>o</sup> in which thede;<sup>o</sup> *knew / country*  
 And how the steward the lond gan holde,

9. I.e. that wouldn't do.

1. I.e., for fear of being recognized.

And othere many things him tolde.  
 Amorwe ayain the noon-tide<sup>2</sup>  
 500 He maked his wif ther abide,  
 And beggeres clothes he borwed anoon,<sup>o</sup> *straightaway*  
 And heeng<sup>o</sup> his harp his rigge<sup>o</sup> upon, *hung / back*  
 And wente him into that citee,  
 That men mighte him biholde and see.  
 505 Bothe eerles and barouns bolde,  
 Burgeis<sup>o</sup> and ladies him gan biholde: *burgesses*  
 "Lord," they saide, "swich<sup>o</sup> a man!  
 How longe the heer<sup>o</sup> him hangeth upon!  
 Lo, how his beerd hangeth to his kneel!  
 510 He is yclungen<sup>o</sup> also<sup>o</sup> a tree!" *withered / as*  
 And as he yede<sup>o</sup> in the streete, *walked*  
 With his steward he gan meete.  
 And loude he sette him on a cry,  
 "Sir steward," he saide, "grant mercy!  
 515 Ich am an harpour of hethenesse:<sup>o</sup> *heathen country*  
 Help me now in this distresse."  
 The steward saide, "Com with me, com:  
 Of that I have thou shalt have som.  
 Eech harpour is welcome me to  
 520 For my lordes love, Sir Orfeo."  
 Anoon they wente into the halle,  
 The steward and the lordes alle.  
 The steward wessh<sup>o</sup> and wente to mete, *washed*  
 And manye lordes by him sete.  
 525 Ther were trumpours<sup>o</sup> and tabourers,<sup>o</sup> *trumpeters / drummers*  
 Harpours fele,<sup>o</sup> and crouders:<sup>o</sup> *many / fiddlers*  
 Muche melodye they maked alle.  
 And Orfeo sat stille in halle.  
 And herkneth; whan they been al stille,  
 530 He took his harp and tempered<sup>o</sup> shille<sup>o</sup>— *played / loudly*  
 The blisfullest notes he harped there  
 That evere man yherde with ere.  
 Eech man liked wel his glee.  
 The steward looked and gan ysee,  
 535 And the harp knew also blive.<sup>o</sup> *right away*  
 "Minstrel," he saide, "so mote<sup>o</sup> thou thrive, *may*  
 Where haddest thou this harp and how?  
 I praye that thou me telle now."  
 "Lord," quath he, "in uncouthe<sup>o</sup> thede,<sup>o</sup> *strange / country*  
 540 Thurgh a forest as I yede,<sup>o</sup> *walked*  
 I foond<sup>o</sup> lying in a dale *found*  
 A man with<sup>o</sup> lions totorn<sup>o</sup> smale, *by / torn to bits*  
 And wolves him frette<sup>o</sup> with teeth so sharp. *bit*  
 By him I foond this eeche<sup>o</sup> harp *very*  
 545 Wel ten yeer it is ago."  
 "O," quath the steward, "now me is wo!  
 That was my lord Sir Orfeo.  
 Allas, wrecche, what shal I do

2. In the morning toward noontime.

	That have swich° a lord ylore?°	<i>such / lost</i>
550	A, way,° that evere ich was ybore°	<i>woe / born</i>
	That him was so harde grace y-yarked,°	<i>ordained</i>
	And so vile deeth ymarked.”°	<i>appointed</i>
	Adown he fel aswoone to grounde.	
	His barouns him tooke up that stounde°	<i>time</i>
555	And telleth him how that it geeth:°	<i>goes</i>
	It is no boote° of mannes deeth.	<i>remedy</i>
	King Orfeo knew wel by than°	<i>that</i>
	His steward was a trewe man	
	And loved him as him oughte to do,	
560	And stondest up and saith thus, “Lo,	
	Steward, herkne now this thing:	
	If ich were Orfeo the king	
	And hadde ysuffered ful yore°	<i>long</i>
	In wildernesse muche sore,	
565	And hadde ywonne my queene awy°	<i>away</i>
	Out of the lond of faïry,	
	And hadde ybrought the lady hende°	<i>gracious</i>
	Right here to the townes ende,	
	And with a begger hir in° ynome,°	<i>lodging / taken</i>
570	And were myselve hider ycome	
	Poorelich to thee thus stille,°	<i>secretly</i>
	For to assaye° thy goode wille,	<i>test</i>
	And° ich founde thee thus trewe,	<i>if</i>
	Thou ne sholdest it nevere rewe:°	<i>regret</i>
575	Sikerliche,° for love or ay,°	<i>surely / dread</i>
	Thou sholdest be king after my day.	
	If thou of my deeth haddest been blithe,	
	Thou sholdest have voided° also swithe.”	<i>been dismissed</i>
	Tho° alle tho° that therinne sete	<i>then / those</i>
580	That is was Orfeo underyete,°	<i>understood</i>
	And the steward wel him knew:	
	Over and over the boord° he threw	<i>table</i>
	And fel adown to his feete.	
	So dide eech lord that ther sete,	
585	And alle they saide at oo° crying,	<i>one</i>
	“Ye beeth oure lord, sire, and oure king.”	
	Glade they were of his live:	
	To chambre they ladde him as blive,°	<i>at once</i>
	And bathed him and shaved his beard,	
590	And tired° him as a king apert.°	<i>dressed / openly</i>
	And sith° with greet processiou	<i>after</i>
	They broughte the queene into the town,	
	With alle manere minstracye.	
	Lord, ther was greet melodye:	
595	For joye they wepte with hir yē	
	That hem so sound° ycomen sye.°	<i>healthy / saw</i>
	Now Orfeo newe corouned° is,	<i>crowned</i>
	And his queene Dame Heurodis,	
	And lived longe afterward,	
600	And sitthen° king was the steward.	<i>afterward</i>
	Harpours in Britain after than°	<i>that</i>

Herde how this merveile bigan  
And made a lay of good liking,<sup>o</sup>  
And nempned<sup>o</sup> it after the king.  
605 That lay is "Orfeo" yhote:<sup>o</sup>  
Good is the lay, sweete is the note.  
Thus cam Sir Orfeo out of his care:  
God grante us alle wel to fare.

*well-pleasing*  
*named*  
*called*