

*Sir Orfeo:*  
A Middle English Version By J.R.R. Tolkien

Edited, with introduction and notes by

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**Introduction**

In 1944, the Academic Copying Office in Oxford published an unknown (but presumably small) number of copies of an anonymous, twenty-page booklet titled *Sir Orfeo*. The first sixteen pages of this booklet comprise a version of the Middle English poem that, while based for the most part on the text of the fourteenth-century Auchinleck Manuscript, has been altered and emended throughout in accordance with the grammar of the earlier South-Eastern dialect of Middle English. The result is a Middle English version of the poem that is not only, as the booklet's author observes, "much more metrical" than that of Auchinleck, but that—if the author's theory that the poem was composed in Essex in the thirteenth century is accurate—is closer to what must have been the original form of the poem than are any of the three surviving manuscripts, which have been "infected . . . with the forms of later language and different dialect."

Although the booklet itself does not bear its author's name, it has been identified as a work by J.R.R. Tolkien. In their *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography*, Wayne G. Hammond and Douglas A. Anderson note of this booklet that one of the five known copies, held by the English Faculty library at Oxford, "contains a note, reported to be in Tolkien's hand, which states that this edition of 'Sir Orfeo' was prepared for the naval cadets' course in English, which Tolkien organized in January 1943 and directed until the end of March 1944" (209). Hammond and Anderson further report the existence of three other copies of the booklet in which the lines of the poem have been numbered in pencil, by tens, in what appears to be Tolkien's hand. Two of these copies have in addition a few textual emendations in pencil, again apparently in Tolkien's hand. It is upon one of these two emended copies that the present edition is based.

### J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle English version and Modern English translation

The attribution to Tolkien of this Middle English version of *Sir Orfeo* and its brief accompanying note is further supported by certain similarities with Tolkien's Modern English verse translation of *Sir Orfeo* and its brief accompanying note, published posthumously in the book *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (23, 123–37).<sup>1</sup> Both notes locate the composition of the poem in “the South-East of England,”<sup>2</sup> and both notes use precisely the same phrase in describing the transmission of the poem as having been subject to “the corruptions of error and forgetfulness.”

Comparison of the poems themselves reveals, in addition to striking correspondences of formatting and punctuation,<sup>3</sup> a number of instances in which Tolkien's translation departs from the texts of the surviving manuscripts in precisely the same manner that the Middle English version does:

(In the following comparisons, V = the Middle English version of the booklet, T = Tolkien's translation, A = Auchinleck MS, H = MS Harley 3810. Both V and T use A as the source for all lines except 1–24 and 33–46, which are supplied by H.)

l. 4:— H has *frely þing* where V has *ferly thing*. In his note on this line Sisam glosses *frely* as “goodly,” and remarks that the *Lai le Freine* (a poem of the Auchinleck MS that has essentially the same opening lines as the H version of *Sir Orfeo*) has here *ferly*, which he glosses as “wondrous” (209). In his companion *Vocabulary*, Tolkien glosses *frely* in Sisam's text as “pleasant” (deriving it from Old English *frēolic* of the same meaning) and *ferly* in Sisam's note as “wonderful” (< OE *fēr-lice* “suddenly”), corresponding to a noun of the same form that he glosses as “marvel.” T has “marvellous thing,” suggesting that the ME form underlying the translation is *ferly*, and hence agreeing with V against the MS.

l. 82:— A has *out of hir witt* “out of her wit” where V (correcting a defective rhyme) has *out of mende* “out of mind.” T has “out of mind.”

ll. 241, 245, 249:— A has *He þat hadde ywerd* “He that had worn,” *He þat hadde had castels* “He that had had castles,” and *He þat had yhad kniȝtes* “He that had had knights,” respectively, each a relative construction employing the pronoun *þat*. V has *He hadde ywered* “He had worn,” *He hadde had castels* “He had had castles,” and *He hadde yhad kniȝtes* “He had had knights,” respectively, in each case dropping the relative pronoun (presumably to improve the meter). T has “He once had . . . worn,” “He once had castles,” and “He once had many a . . . knight,” respectively, like V omitting the relative “that.”

## Tolkien's Middle English *Sir Orfeo*

l. 265:— A has *His here of his berd, blac* “His hair of his beard, black” where V has *His her and berd, all blake* “His hair and beard, all black.” T has “His hair and beard all black.”

l. 368:— A has *was all of burnist gold* “was all of burnished gold,” while V has *was maked al of burnissed golde* “was made all of burnished gold.” T has “was builded all of burnished gold.”

l. 381:— A has *what he wold haue ydo* “what he would have done,” while V (correcting a defective rhyme) has *what his wille were* “what his will were.” T has “what might be his will.”

l. 392:— A has *non armes nade* “no arms had,” while V has *no fet no armes nadde* “no feet nor arms had.” T has “[had] no arms, nor feet.”

Other examples could be cited, but these are the most striking. It should be noted that there are instances where the translation agrees with the MS against the Middle English version (e.g., in l. 419, A has “‘O lord,’ he seyð, ‘þif it þi wille were’” where V has “and seide: ‘O lord, if thi wille were’”; while T has “‘O lord,’ said he, ‘if it be thy will’”), and it must be allowed that a verse translation necessarily makes concessions to language and meter that may obscure or falsely emphasize details of the relationship between the source(s) and the translation. Nonetheless, these examples strongly suggest that Tolkien’s translation of *Sir Orfeo* was based at least in part on the booklet’s emended Middle English version.

The date of Tolkien’s Modern English translation of *Sir Orfeo* does not appear to have been established with much precision. Christopher Tolkien wrote, in his Preface to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* only that it was, like the c. 1944 *Pearl* and the c. 1950 *Sir Gawain*, “also made many years ago” (7). Concerning Basil Blackwell’s ultimately unrealized plans of c. 1942-44 to publish Tolkien’s translation of *Pearl*, see Hammond and Anderson’s *Bibliography* (321-23). The Bodleian Library catalogue of its Tolkien manuscript holdings has the following entry: “A33/1 Typescript and manuscript transcripts and translations of *Sir Orfeo* [fols. 1-47], with . . . various drafts of the translation of *Pearl*, with . . . letters from (Sir) Basil Blackwell about the translation, 1942-4”; but while it may be more than mere archival accident that Tolkien’s “transcripts and translations of *Sir Orfeo*” are located with letters of 1942-44 concerning his work on another Middle English poem, this evidence is circumstantial at best. Humphrey Carpenter’s statement that “Tolkien had originally translated [*Sir Orfeo*] for a wartime cadets’ course at Oxford” (141) would, if accurate, seem to demonstrate that Tolkien produced both his Middle English version and his translation of *Sir Orfeo* for the naval cadets’ course, i.e., c. 1943-44. But it may be that Carpenter has simply confused Tolkien’s translation with the present Middle English version.

However, that Tolkien's translation appears to be based at least in part on his Middle English version of 1944 strongly suggests that it was made in or after 1944. There is in addition one piece of evidence internal to the translation that suggests very strongly that it was made before 1945: lines 363–64 of the translation (“The vault was carven and adorned / with beasts and birds and figures horned”) show that when he translated them Tolkien still read *animal* “animal” in l. 364 for a form that was corrected to *aumal* “enamel” in a 1945 revision to his *Middle English Vocabulary* (see the Appendix below for details). If the translation was in fact based on his 1944 Middle English version of the poem, it is then very likely that the translation was likewise made in, or not long before, 1944.

### Tolkien's version and Sisam's edition

In 1922, Tolkien published *A Middle English Vocabulary*, his first book, which comprised a complete glossary of the Middle English poems included by his colleague and former tutor Kenneth Sisam in his *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, which was first published the previous year. (Tolkien's *Vocabulary* was intended to be published together with Sisam's collection as a single volume, but delays in the *Vocabulary*'s preparation resulted in their separate initial publications.) Among the poems in Sisam's collection is an edition of *Sir Orfeo*. Tolkien's version follows Sisam's edition very closely, not only in formatting and punctuation, but also in sharing certain readings that, according to Bliss, are original to Sisam's edition, as well as in adopting most of Sisam's editorial revisions and suggestions.

(In the following comparisons, V = Tolkien's Middle English version of the booklet, S = Sisam's edition, A = Auchinleck MS, H = MS Harley 3810. Both S and V use A as the source for all lines except 1–24 and 33–46, which are supplied by H.)

Sisam notes that the “original text preserved final *-e* better than the extant MSS” (208), and provides the following examples of “restored” readings:

- l. 119:— *And seyð<ë> þus þe king<ë> to*
- l. 172:— *Þat nobing help<ë> þe no schal*
- l. 357:— *Al þe vt<ë>mast<ë> wal*
- l. 466:— *So, siȝ, as ȝe seyð<ë> nouþe*

Tolkien's version of these lines agrees with Sisam's restoration of final *-e* precisely. It seems possible to suppose that Tolkien's impetus to produce an emended version of *Sir Orfeo* originated in this note.

## Tolkien's Middle English *Sir Orfeo*

l. 4:— H, S have *frely* “goodly,” but Sisam notes that “*Lai le Freine* has *ferly* ‘wondrous’” (208). V has *ferly*.

l. 12:— H has *moost to lowe*, which S emends to *moost o loue* based on the corresponding line of the *Lai le Freine* (208). V has *moost of loue*.

l. 20:— H, S have *Maden layes and ʒaf it name*. Sisam remarks that the “curious use of *it* after the plural *layes* is perhaps not original” (209). V has sg. *lay*.

l. 46:— H, S have *Suche ioy and melody in his harpyng is*. Sisam remarks that “*ioy and* overload the verse, and are probably an unskilful addition to the text” (209). V has *such melodie*. . . .

l. 82:— S has *reuey*<*se*>*d* but Sisam suggests that “some such form of *ravished* is probably right” (209). V has *rauissed*.

ll. 157–8: A, S have the rhymes *palays: weys*. Sisam suggests that the original rhyme was “perhaps *palys: wys* ‘wise.’” V has *palise: wise*.

l. 247:— A, S have *comensi*. Of this line, Sisam notes that “the metre points to a disyllabic form . . . *comsi*” (209 n. 57). V has *cömsi*.

l. 285:— S, V have *dim*. Bliss notes that Sisam was the first to print *dim*, where earlier editors had written *dun* (53).

l. 333:— A has *wroche*, which S emends to *wreche* (and was apparently the first to do so, judging by Bliss’s note [53] in which he takes Sisam to task for emending what he notes is a genuine form). V has *wreche*.

l. 363:— A has *anowwed*, which S emends to *anow*<*rn*>*ed*, a reading adopted by Tolkien as V’s *anoured*.

l. 419:— A, S have “*O lord, he seyð, ʒif it þi wille were.*” Sisam remarks that this line is too long metrically, and suggests that it may once have been: “*And seyð ‘Lord, ʒif þi wille were.’*” (210 n. 382). V has “*and seide: ‘O lord, ʒif thi wille were.’*”

l. 483:— A has “*Bot wiþ a begger ybilt ful narwe,*” which S emends to “*Bot wiþ a begger y<n> bilt ful narwe.*” Sisam explains that “*ybilt* of the MS. and editors cannot well be a pp. meaning ‘housed.’ I prefer to take *bilt* as sb. = *bild, build* “a building”; and to suppose that *y* has been miswritten for *ý*, the contraction for *yn*” (211). V has “*but with a begger in bilt ful narwe.*”

Taken together, these comparisons indicate that Tolkien’s Middle English version of *Sir Orfeo* was based on Kenneth Sisam’s edition, while his Modern English translation was based on his own Middle English version; and further that the translation was, like the version, made in 1944.

## Sir Orfeo

We reden ofte and finde ywrite,  
as clerkes don us to wite,  
the layes that ben of harping  
ben yfounde of ferly thing.  
Sum ben of wele, and sum of wo,  
and sum of ioye and merthe also;  
sum of trecherie, and sum of gile,  
and sum of happes that fallen by while;  
10 sum of bourdes, and sum of ribaudrie,  
and sum ther ben of the fairie.  
Of alle thing that men may se,  
moost of loue forsothe they be.

In Britain thise layes arn ywrite,  
first yfounde and forth ygete,  
of adventures that fillen by dayes,  
wherof Britouns made her layes.  
When they owher mighte yheren  
of adventures that ther weren,  
they toke her harpes tho with game,  
20 maden lay and 3af it name.

Of adventures that han befall  
I can sum telle but nou3t alle.  
Herkne, lordinges that ben trewe,  
and I wol 3ou telle of Sir Orphewe.

Orfeo was yore a king,  
in Ingelond a heij lording,  
a stalworth man and hardi bo,  
large and curteis he was also.  
30 His fader was cōmen of King Pluto,  
and his moder com of King Iuno,  
that sum time were as godes holde  
for auentures that thai dede and tolde.  
[Orpheo most of onything  
loued the gle of harping;  
siker was euery god harpour  
of him to haue moche honour.  
Himselue loued for to harpe  
and laide theron his wittes scharpe.

- 40 He lerned so, ther nothing was  
a better harpour in no plas;  
in the world was neuer man yborn  
that euer Orpheo sat beforne,  
and he miȝte of his harping here,  
he schulde thinke that he were  
in one of the ioyes of Paradis,  
suche melodie in his harping is.]  
This king soiourned in Traciens,  
that was a citee of noble defens;  
for Winchester was cleped tho  
50 Traciens withouten no.  
He hadde with him a quen of pris,  
that was ycleped Dame Heurodis,  
the fairest leuedi for the nones  
that miȝte gon on bodi and bones,  
ful of loue and godenesse;  
ac no man may telle hir fairnesse.  
Bifel in the cōmessing of May,  
when miri and hot is the day,  
and oway beth winter-schoures,  
60 and eueri feld is ful of floures,  
and blosme breme on eueri bou;  
oueral wexeth miri anouȝ,  
this iche quen, Dame Heurodis,  
tok to hir maidenen two of pris  
and wente hir in an vndrentide  
to playe bi an orchard-side,  
to se the floures sprede and springe,  
and to yhere the foules singe.  
Thai sette hem doune alle thre  
70 vnder a fair ympe-tre,  
and wel sone this faire quene  
fel on slepe opon the grene.  
The maidnes durste hir nouȝt awake,  
but lete hir ligge and reste take.  
So sche slepe til afternon,  
that vndertide was al ydon.  
Ac as sone as sche gan awake,  
sche cride and lothli bere gan make,  
sche froded hir honden and hir fet,  
80 and crached hir visage, it bledde wet;  
hir riche robe hye al torende,

and was rauissed out of mende.  
The two maidnes hir biside  
no durste with hir leng abide,  
but ourne to the palais riȝt  
and tolde bothe squier and kniȝt  
that her quen awede wolde,  
and bade hem go and hir atholde.

90 Kniȝtes and leuedis ourne tho  
sexti damiseles and mo;  
in the orchard to the quen hye come,  
and her vp in her armes nome,  
to bed hye brouȝte hir atte laste,  
and helde hir there fine faste;  
ac euer sche held in one cri,  
and wolde vp and wende owy.

When Orfeo herde that tiding,  
neuer him nas wers for no thing.

100 He com with kniȝtes tene  
to chaumbre riȝt biforn the quene,  
and biheld, and seide with grete pitee:

“O leue lif, what is tee,  
that euer ȝet hast ben so stille,  
and now gredest wonder schille?  
Thi bodi, that was so whit ycore,  
with thine nailes is al totore.  
Allas! thi röde, that was so red,  
is now al wan as thou were ded;

110 and also thine fingres smale  
beth al blodi and al pale.  
Allas! thi louesome eyzen two  
loketh so man doth on his fo.  
A! dame, ich biseche merci.  
Let ben al this rewful cri,  
and tel me what the is, and hou,  
and what thing may the helpe now”.

Tho lay sche stille atte laste,  
and gan to wepe swithe faste,  
and seide thus the kinge to:

120 “Allas! mi lord, Sir Orfeo,  
seththen we first togider were,  
ones wrothe neuer we nere,  
but euer ich haue ylöued the  
as mi lif, and so thou me.

Ac now we mote dele atwo;  
do thi beste, for I mot go”.

“Allas!” quath he, “forlorn icham.

Whider wiltow go, and to wham?

130 Whider thou gost, ichil with the,  
and whider I go, thou schalt with me”.

“Nay, nay, sir, that nouȝt nis.

Ichil the telle al hou it is:

as ich lay in this vnder tide,

and slepe vnder our orchard-side,

ther come to me two faire kniȝtes

wel y-armed al to riȝtes,

and bade me cōmen an hijing

and speke with her lord the king.

And ich answerde at wordes bolde,

140 I durste nouȝt, no I nolde.

Thai priked oȝain as thai miȝte driue;

tho com her king also bliue,

with an hundred kniȝtes and mo,

and damiseles an hundred also,

alle on snow-white stedes;

as white as milk were her wedes:

I no seiȝ neuer ȝet bifore

so faire creatures ycore.

The king a croune hadde on his molde,

150 it nas of siluer, no of rede golde,

ac it was al on precious ston,

as briȝte so the sōnne it schon.

And as sone as he to me cam,

wolde ich, nolde ich, he me nam,

and made me with him ride

opon a palfray bi his side,

and brouȝte me to his palise

wel aȝired in iche wise,

and schewed me castels and tours,

160 riuere, forest, frith with flours,

and his riche stedes ichon;

and seththen me brouȝte oȝain hom

into our owen orchard,

and seide to me thus afterward:

“Loke, dame, that tow be

to-morwe her vnder this ympe-tre,

and than thou schalt with ous go,

- and liue with ous euermo;  
and 3if thou makest ous ylet,  
170 whar thou be, thou worst yfet,  
and totore thine limes al,  
that nothing helpe the no schal;  
and thei3 thou best so totorn,  
3et thou worst with ous yborn’.”
- When King Orfeo herde this cas,  
“O we!” quath he, “allas! allas!  
Leuer me were to lete mi lif  
than thus to lese the quen mi wif!”  
He asked conseil at iche man,  
180 ac no man helpe him no can.
- Amorwe the vndertide is cōme,  
and Orfeo hath his armes nōme,  
and wel ten hundred kni3t with him,  
ich y-armed stout and grim;  
and with the quene wenten he  
ri3t vnto that vmpe-tre.  
Thai made scheltrōm in iche side,  
and saide thai wolde ther abide,  
and die there euerichon,  
190 er the quen schulde fram hem gon.
- Ac 3et amiddes hem ful ri3t  
the quene was oway ytwi3t,  
with faierie was forth ynōme;  
men niste wher sche was bicōme.
- Tho was ther crying, wep and wo.  
The king into his chaumbre is go,  
and ofte swoned opon the ston,  
and made swiche diol and swiche mon  
that nei3 his lif was al yspent:  
200 ther was non amendement.
- He cleped togider his barouns,  
erles, lordes of renouns;  
and when thai alle ycōmen were,  
“Lordinges”, he saide, “biforn 3ou here  
ich ordainy min hei3e steward  
to wite mi kingdom afterward;  
in mi stede ben he schal,  
to kepe mi londes oueral.  
For now ichaue mi quen ylore,  
210 the fairest leuedi that euer was bore,

neuer eft I nil no woman se.  
Into wildernesse ichil te,  
and liue ther euermore  
with wilde bestes in holtes hore.  
And when 3e vnderstonde that I be spent,  
make 3ou than a parlement,  
and chese 3ou a newe king.  
Now doth 3our best with al mi thing.

220 Tho was ther weping in the halle  
and gret cri among hem alle;  
vnnethe mi3ten olde or 3onge  
for weping speke a word with tonge.  
Thai kneled adoune alle yfere,  
and praide him, 3if his wille were,  
that he no schulde fram hem go.  
“Do way!” quath he, “it schal be so”.

Al his kingdom he forsok;  
but a sclauine on him he tok;  
230 he nadde no kirtel, no no hod,  
scherte, no non other god.  
But his harpe he took algate,  
and dede him barfot out of 3ate;  
no man moste with him go.

O way! what ther was wep and wo,  
when he that er was king with croune  
wente so pouerlich out of toune!  
Thurgh wode and ouer heth  
into the wildernesse he geth.  
240 Nothing he fint that him is aise,  
but euer he liueth in gret malaise.  
He hadde ywered fow and gris,  
and on bedde purple bis;  
now on harde hethe he lith,  
with leues and with gresse him writh.  
He hadde yhad castels and tours,  
riuere, forest, frith with flours;  
now thei3 it cõmsi snewe and frese,  
this king mot make his bed in mese.  
250 He hadde yhad kni3tes of pris  
bifore him knelande, and leuedis;  
now seth he nothing that him liketh,  
but wilde wormes bi him striketh.  
He that hadde yhad plentee

of mete and drink, of ich deintee,  
now may he al day digge and wrote  
er he finde his fille of rote.  
In sömer he liueth bi wilde frute  
and berien but gode lite;  
in winter may he nothing finde  
260 but rote, grasses, and the rinde.  
Al his bodi was oway ydwine  
for misaise, and al to-chine.  
Lord! who may tellen al the sore  
this king suffred ten 3er and more?  
His her and berd, al blake and rowe,  
to his girdelstede were growe.  
His harpe, whereon was al his gle,  
he hidde in an holwe tre;  
270 and when the weder was cler and bri3t,  
he took his harpe to him wel ri3t,  
and harped at his owen wille.  
Into alle the wode the soun gan schille,  
that alle the wilde [bestes] that ther beth  
for ioie abouten him thai teth;  
and alle the foules that ther were  
come and sete on ich a brere  
to here his harping a-fine,  
so miche melodie was therine;  
and when he his harping lete wolde,  
280 no best bi him abide nolde.  
    He mi3te se him bisides  
oft in hote vndertides  
the king o Faierie with his route  
cömen hunten him al aboute,  
with dim cri and blowinge,  
and houndes also berkinge;  
ac no best thai neuer nome,  
no neuer he niste whider thai bcome.  
And other while he mi3te him se  
290 as a gret ost bi him te  
wel atourned ten hundred kni3tes,  
ich y-armed to his ri3tes,  
of cuntenaunce stout and fers,  
with manie displayed baners,  
and ich his swerd ydrawen holde;  
ac neuer he niste whider thai wolde.

And other while he seiȝ other thing:  
kniȝtes and leuedis come dauncing  
in queinte atire, gisely,  
300 queinte pas and softly:  
tabours and trumpes ȝede hem bi  
and al manere menstraci.  
And on a day he seiȝ him biside  
sexti leuedis on horse ride,  
gentil and iolif as brid on ris:  
nouȝt o man amonges hem nis.  
And ich a faucoun on honde bere,  
and riden on hauking bi o riure.  
310 Of game thai founde wel god haunt:  
maulard, hairoun, and cormeraunt.  
The foules of the water ariseth,  
the faucouns hem wel deuiseth;  
ich faucoun his praye slouȝ,  
That seiȝ Orfeo and louȝ:  
“Parfay!” quath he, “ther is fair game,  
thider ichil, bi Godes name!  
Ich was ywōne swiche werk to se”.  
He aros and thider gan te.  
320 To a leuedi he was ycōme,  
biheld, and hath wel vndernōme,  
and seth bi al thing that it is  
his owen quen, Dame Heurodis.  
Ȝerne he biheld hir, and sche him ek,  
ac noither to other a word no spek.  
For misaise that sche on him seiȝ,  
that hadde ben so riche and heiȝ,  
the teres felle out of hir eȝen.  
The other leuedis this yseiȝen,  
and maked hir oway to ride,  
330 sche most with him no leng abide.  
“Allas!” quath he, “now me is wo.  
Whi nil deth now me slo?  
Allas! wreche, that I no miȝte  
die now after thisse siȝte!  
Allas! to longe last mi lif,  
when I no dar nouȝt with mi wif,  
no hye to me, o word speke.  
Allas! whi nil min herte breke!  
Parfay!” quath he, “tide what bitide,

- 340 whider so thise leuedis ride,  
the selue way ichille strecche;  
of lif no deth me no recche”.
- His sclauine he dede on also spac,  
and heng his harpe opon his bac,  
and hadde wel god wil to gon:  
he no spared noither stub no ston.  
In at a roche the leuedis rideth,  
and he after, and nouzt abideth.
- 350 When he was in the roche ygo  
wel thre milen other mo,  
he com into a fair cuntraye,  
as brizt so sönne on sömeres daye,  
smothe and plain and al grene,  
hille no dale nas non ysene.  
Amidde the londe a castel he sei3,  
riche and real and wönder hei3.  
Al the vtemaste wal  
was cler and schene as cristal;  
an hundred tours ther were aboute,
- 360 degiseliche, and batailed stoute;  
the butras com out of the diche,  
of rede golde y-arched riche;  
the vousour was anourned al  
of ich manere diuers animal.  
Withinne ther were wide wones  
alle of precieuse stones.  
The werste piler on to biholde  
was maked al of burnissed golde.  
Al that lond was euer lizt,
- 370 for when it was the therke nizt,  
the riche stones lizte gönne,  
as brizt as doth at none sönne.  
No man may telle, no thenche in thouzt,  
the riche werk that ther was wrouzt;  
bi alle thing him thinkth it is  
the proude court of Paradis.
- In this castel the leuedis lizte;  
he wolde in after, 3if he mi3te.  
Orfeo knokketh atte gate,  
380 the porter redi was therate,  
and asked what his wille were.  
“Parfay!” quath he, “icham harpere,

thi lord to solace with mi gle,  
ȝif his swete wille be”.

The porter vndede the ȝate anon,  
and let him in the castel gon.

Than gan he biholde abouten al,  
and seiȝ ther liggeand within the wal  
390 folk that thider were ybrouȝt,  
and thouȝte dede and nere nouȝt.

Sum ther stode withouten hadde,  
and sum no fet no armes nadde,  
and sum thurȝ bodi hadde wounde,  
and sum ther laye wode, ybounde,  
and sum y-armed on horse sete,  
and sum astrangled as thai ete,  
and sum in water were adreinte,  
and sum with fire were forschreinte.

Wiues ther laye on childbedde,  
400 sum were dede and sum awedde;  
and wönder fele ther laye bisides,  
riȝt as thai slepe her vnderides.  
Eche was thus in this world ynöme  
and thider with fairie ycöme.

Ther he seiȝ his owen wif,  
Dame Heurodis, his leue lif,  
slepen vnder an ympe-tre:  
bi hir wede he knew that it was he.

When he biheld these meruailes alle,  
410 he wente into the kinges halle.  
Than seiȝ he ther a semly siȝt,  
a tabernacle blissful, briȝt;  
therinne her maister king him sete,  
and her quene, fair and swete.

Her crounes, her clothes, schine so briȝte  
that vnnethe biholden hem he miȝte.

When he hadde biholden al that thing,  
he kneled adoune biforn the king,  
and seide: “O lord, ȝif thi wille were,  
420 mi menstraci thou schulde yhere”.

The king answerde: “What man artow  
that art hider ycömen now?”

Ich, no non that is with me,  
no sente neuer after the;  
seththen that ich her regni gan,

I no fond neuer so hardi man  
that hider to ous durste wende,  
but that ichim walde ofsende”.  
“Lord”, quath he, “trowe ful wel,  
430 I nam but a pouer menestrel;  
and, sir, it is the manere of ous  
to seche mani a lordes hous;  
thei; we nouzt welcōme be,  
zet we mot proferi forth our gle”.  
Biforn the king he sat adoune,  
and tok his harpe miri of soune,  
and tempreth it as he wel can,  
and blissfule notes he ther gan,  
440 that alle that in the palais were  
come to him for to here,  
and liggeth adoune to his fete,  
hem thenketh his melodie so swete.  
The king herkneth and sitt ful stille,  
to here his gle he hath god wille;  
god bourde he hadde of his gle,  
the riche quen also hadde he.  
When he hadde stint harping,  
seide to him than the king:  
“Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.  
450 Now aske of me what it be,  
largeliche ichil the paye.  
Now speke, and tow mi;zt assaye”.  
“Sir”, he seide, “ich biseche the  
thattow woldest ziue me  
that iche leuedi bri;zt on ble  
that slepeth vnder the ympe-tre”.  
“Nay”, quath the king, “that nouzt nere!  
A sori couple of ;jou it were,  
for thou art lene, row, and blac,  
460 and sche is louesum withouten lac;  
a lothlich thing it were forthi  
to sen hir in thi cōmpaini”.  
“O sir”, he seide, “gentil king,  
zet were it a wel fouler thing  
to here a lesing of thi mouthe,  
so, sir, as ;ze seide nouthe,  
what ich wolde aski, haue I scholde,  
and nedes thi word thou most holde”.

470 The king seide: "Seththen it is so,  
take hir bi the hond and go;  
of hir ichil thattow be blithe".  
He kneled adoune, and thonked him swithe;  
his wif he tok bi the honde,  
and dede him swithe out of that londe,  
and wente him oute of that thede:  
riȝt as he com the way he ȝede.

So long he hath the way ynōme,  
to Winchester he is ycōme,  
that was his owen citee;  
480 ac no man knew that it was he.  
No forther than the tounes ende  
for knoweleche no durste he wende,  
but with a begger in bilt ful narwe  
ther he tok his herbarwe  
to him and to his owen wif,  
as menestrel of pouer lif,  
and asked tidinges of that londe  
and who the kingdom held in honde.  
The pouer begger in his cot  
490 tolde him euerich a grot:  
hou her quen was stole owy  
ten ȝer ygon with faiery;  
and hou her king en exile ȝede,  
but no man wiste in whiche thede;  
and hou the steward the lond gan holde;  
and other mani thing him tolde.

Amorwe, oȝain the none-tide,  
he maked his wif ther abide;  
the beggeres clothes he borwed anon,  
500 and heng his harpe his rigge opon,  
and wente him into that citee,  
that men miȝte him biholde and se.  
Erles and barounes bolde,  
buriais and leuedis gunne him biholde.  
"Lo!" thai seide, "swiche a man!  
Hou long the her hongth him opan!  
Lo, hou his berd hongth to his kne!  
He is yclōnge also a tre!"

And as he ȝede bi the strete,  
510 with his steward he gan mete,  
and loude he sette on him a cri:

“Sir steward”, he seide, “merci!  
Icham an harpou of hethenesse;  
help me now in this destresse!”  
The steward seide: “Cöm with me, cöm!  
Of that ichaue thou schalt haue söm.  
Euerich harpou is welcöme me to  
for mi lordes loue Sir Orfeo”.

520 In castel the steward sat atte mete,  
and mani lording was bi him sete.  
Ther were trömpours and tabourers,  
harpours fele and crouders.  
Miche melodie thai maked alle,  
and Orfeo sat stille in halle,  
and herkneth. When thai ben al stille,  
he tok his harpe and tempred schille,  
the blisfulest notes he harped there  
that euer man yherde with ere;  
ich man liked wel his gle.

530 The steward biheld and gan y-se,  
and knew the harpe also bliue.  
“Menstrel”, he seide, “so mote thou thriue,  
wher haddestow this harpe and hou?  
I praye thattow me telle now”.  
“Lord”, quath he, “in vncouthe thede,  
thurz a wildernesse as I zede,  
ther I founde in a dale  
with liouns a man totore smale,  
and wolues him frete with tethe scharpe.  
540 Bi him I find this iche harpe;  
wel ten zer it is ygo”.

“O”, quath the steward, “now me is wo!  
That was mi lord Sir Orfeo.  
Allas! wreche, what schal I do,  
that haue swiche a lord ylore?  
A way! that euer ich was ybore!  
that him was so harde grace yzarked,  
and so vile deth ymarked!”  
Adoune he fel aswon to grounde.  
550 His barouns him tok vp in that stounde  
and telleth him hou it geth ...  
it is no bot of mannes deth.

King Orfeo knew wel bi than  
his steward was a trewe man

and loued him as he auȝte do,  
and stont vp and seith thus: "Lo,  
Steward, herkne now this thing:  
ȝif ich were Orfeo the king,  
560 and hadde ysuffred ful ȝore  
in wildernesse miche sore,  
and hadde ywōnne mi quen owy  
out of the londe of faiery,  
and hadde ybrouȝt the leuedi hende  
riȝt here to the tounes ende,  
and with a begger her in ynōme,  
and were miselue hider ycōme  
pouerliche to the, thus stille,  
for to assaye thi gode wille,  
570 and ȝif ich founde the thus trewe,  
no schulde thow it neuer rewe:  
sikerliche, for loue or aye,  
thou schulde be king after mi daye.  
And ȝif of mi deth thou hadde ben blithe,  
thou schulde haue voided also swithe."

Tho alle that therinne sete  
that it was King Orfeo vnderȝete,  
and the steward him wel yknew;  
ouer and ouer the bord he threw,  
and fel adoune to his fete;  
580 so dede euerich lord that there sete,  
and alle seide at o crying:  
"Ȝe beth our lord, sir, and our king!"  
Glade thai weren of his liue.  
To chaumbre thai ladde him also bliue,  
and bathed him and schof his berd,  
and tired him as king apert.  
And seththen with gret processiou  
thai brouȝte the quen into the toun  
with al manere menstracie.  
590 O lord! ther was gret melodie!  
For ioie thai wepe with her eȝen  
that hem so sounde ycōmen seȝen.

Now Orfeo newe corouned is,  
and eke his quen Dame Heurodis,  
and longe liued afterward,  
and seththen king was the steward.

Harpours in Bretaine after than  
herde hou this meruaile bigan,  
and made herof a lay of god liking  
600 and nempned it after the king:  
that lay is "Orfeo" yhote,  
god is the lay, swete is the note.  
Thus com Sir Orfeo out of care.  
God graunte ous alle wel to fare.

### [Tolkien's editorial note]

There are three MSS. of this poem: A (Auchinleck, before 1350); H (Harley, fifteenth century); B (Bodleian, Ashmole, fifteenth century). The introduction, lines 1–24, and also lines 33–46, are from H. The rest of this version is based on A, though the spelling has in a few points been altered, and final *-e* has been restored or omitted in accordance with the grammar of earlier Southern English. In a few cases the lines have been emended by small changes, especially of word-order. The result is a much more metrical version than that offered even by MS. A, though several lines (as e.g. 96) remain obviously defective and corrupt. The defective rhymes of the MSS. in lines 81–2 (*torett ... witt*); 149–50 (*on hed ... gold red*); 157–8 (*palays ... ways*); 381–2 (*he wolde haue ydo ... a minstrel, la!*) have been remodelled in accordance with evidence supplied by other poems of the same MS. (A) or of similar date and origin. Some rhymes, however, remain defective, as for instance 413 *sete* (for the sg. *sat*) with 414 *swete*.

*Sir Orfeo* appears to be a translation or adaptation made from a now lost Old French original in the thirteenth century in the South-East of England (that is probably in Essex); but it passed through several hands of copyists, or the mouths of reciters, between the author and the oldest surviving MS., and these, in addition to the corruptions of error and forgetfulness, have infected it with the forms of later language and different dialect: the influence of Northern and (probably) South-Western dialect can be detected in MS. A. The original appears to have used the old native form *hye* or *he* for *sche* and *they* (*thai*), though these are the forms used in the MS. in all but a few cases (note the rhyme in 185–6). MS. A uses *þ* throughout for the *th* that is here substituted. *ȝ* is used for *gh* in the middle or ends of words; at the beginning of words it is the equivalent of modern *y*, as also in compounds: as *vnderȝete* = *underyete*, 576.

### Comparison of readings

With the exception of Tolkien's substitution of *th* for *þ* throughout, his indications of short *ǒ*, and differences of single vs. double quote, all

differences of orthography, form, word-order, and punctuation between Tolkien's version and Sisam's edition (imprint of 1928) are indicated, as of course are all additions by Tolkien. These notes, therefore, when used in conjunction with Tolkien's *Middle English Vocabulary*, provide a key to Tolkien's own gloss for nearly all forms. In the few cases where Sisam's edition differs in a significant manner from Bliss's edition (1954), this is also indicated. In these indications citations from Tolkien's version are given in bold before a square bracket; those from the editions follow in italics. Readings from Bliss's edition are preceded by an abbreviation indicating the source MS: A = Auchinleck; B = Ashmole 61 (Bodleian 6922); H = Harley 3810; L = *Lay le Freyne* (Auchinleck f.261a ff.).

Lines 1–24:— These lines, and ll. 33–46, corrupt in A, are provided by H. Sisam also gives these lines from H.

1. **reden**] *redyn*. **finde ywrite**] *fynde ywryte*.
2. **us**] H *vs.* **wite**] *wyte*.
3. **harping**] *harpyng*.
4. **ferly**] *frely*. Cf. Sisam's note: "*Lai le Freine* has *ferly* 'wondrous'" (208).
6. **ioye**] H *joy*; L *ioie*.

Lines 7–8:— These lines follow ll. 9–10 in H. Sisam likewise transposes these lines. This ordering agrees with that of the corresponding lines of L:

*"Sum bepe of wer and sum of wo,  
and sum of ioie and mirpe al-so,  
and sum of trecherie and of gile,  
of old auentours þat fel while."*

7. **trecherie**] *trechery*. **gile**] *gyle*.
8. **while**] *whyle*.
9. **bourdes**] *bourdys*. **ribaudrie**] *rybaudry*; H *rybaudy*.
10. **fairie**] *feyré*.
12. **of loue**] *o loue*; H *to lowe*; L *o loue*.
13. **Britain thise**] *Brytayn þis*. **arn**] *arne*. **ywrite**] *ywryte*; H *y-wrytt*.
14. **first**] *first*. **forth**] *forþe*.
15. **fillen**] H *fallen*.
16. **Britouns**] *Brytouns*.
17. **owher mighte yheren**] *myght owher heryn*; H *myzt owher heryn*.
18. **weren**] *weryn*.
19. **harpes tho with**] *harphys wiþ*.
20. **lay**] *layes*. Cf. Sisam's note: "The curious use of *it* after the plural

*layes* is perhaps not original. *Lai le Freine* has: *And maked a lay and yaf it name*" (209).

22. **I**] *Y. telle*] *telle*, . **alle**] *all*.

23. **Herkne, lordinges**] *Herken, lordyngys*.

24. **I**] *y. Sir*] *H Syr*.

25. **was yore a king**] *was a king; A was a kinge*.

26. **Ingelond a heij**] *Ingland an heize*.

28. **curteis**] *curteys*.

30. **moder com of**] *moder of*.

31. **holde**] *yhold*, .

32. **auentures**] *auentours*. **tolde**] *told*.

Lines 33–46:— These lines, corrupt in A, are provided by H. Sisam also gives these lines from H.

33. **onything**] *ony þing*.

34. **loued**] *louede; H lovede*. **harping**] *harpyng*.

35. **siker**] *syker*. **god**] *gode*. **harpour**] *harpoure; H harpore*.

36. **him**] *hym*. **honour**] *honoure; H honour*.

37. **Himselfue**] *Hymself*. **harpe**] *harpe*, .

38. **laide**] *layde*.

39. **lerned**] *lernyd; H lerned*.

40. **harpour**] *harper*.

41. **yborn**] *born*.

42. **euer**] *H onus*. Bliss notes that "All editors except Ritson [*Ancient English Metrical Romancees*, 1802] have printed *euer* for the *onus* of the manuscript" (55). **beforn**] *byforn*.

43. **mijte**] *myzt*. **harpyng**] *harping*. **here**] *H her*.

44. **were**] *H wer*.

45. **ioyes**] *ioys*. **Paradis**] *Paradys*.

46. **harping**] *harpyng*. **suche melodie**] *suche ioy and melody*. Cf. Sisam's note: "*ioy* and overload the verse, and are probably an unskilful addition to the text" (209).

47. **soiourned**] *soiournd*.

48. **citee**] *cité*.

51. **He hadde with him**] *þe king hadde*. **pris**] *pris*. With Tolkien's metrically improved version cp. the corresponding lines of H: "*He haþ a quene, ful feyre of pris*"; and of B: "*And with hym hys quen off price*."

52. **Heurodis**] *Herodis; A Hewrodis*.

53. **leuedi for the nones**] *leuedi, for þe nones*, .

54. **mizte**] *mizt*.
55. **and godenesse**] *and of godenisse*.
56. **fairnesse**] *fairnise*.
57. **Bifel in**] *Bifel so in*.
59. **schoures**] *schours*.
60. **floures**] *flours*.
63. **iche**] *ich*.
64. **tok to hir maidenen two of pris**] *Tok to maidens of pris*, . With Tolkien's metrically improved version cp. the corresponding line of H: "Toke with hur ii. maydenes of pris."
65. **wente hir in**] *went in*.
66. **playe**] *play*. **orhcard-side**] *orchard side*.
67. **springe**] *spring*.
68. **yhere**] *here*. **singe**] *sing*.
69. **sette**] *sett*. **doune alle**] *doun al*.
71. **faire**] *fair*.
72. **maidnes durste**] *maidens durst*.
74. **but**] *bot*. **reste**] *rest*.
75. **afternon**] *afternone*.
76. **ydon**] *ydone*.
78. **cride**] *crid*.
80. **bledde wet**] *bled wete*.
81. **torende**] *torett*.
82. **rauissed**] *reuey*<*se*>*d*; A *reueyd*. Cf. Sisam's note: "reuey<*se*>*d* or some such form of *ravished* is probably right" (209); and cp. B *razysed*.  
**out of mende**] *out of hir witt*.
83. **two**] *two*. **maidnes**] *maidens*.
84. **durste**] *durst*. **hir leng**] *hir no leng*.
85. **but ourne**] *bot ourn*. **palais rizt**] *palays ful rizt*.
86. **tolde**] *told*.
87. **wolde**] *wold*.
88. **bade**] *bad*. **atholde**] *athold*.
89. **Kniztes and leuedis ourne tho**] *Kniztes vrn, and leuedis also*, .
90. **sexti damiseles**] *damisels sexti*. **mo**; ] *mo*, .
91. **quen**] A *quene*.
93. **to bed hye brouzte hir**] *and brouzt hir to bed*. **laste**] *last*.
94. **helde**] *held*. **faste**] *fast*.

95. **one**] *o*.  
96. **wolde**] *wold*. **and wende owy**] *and owy*.  
97. **herde**] *herd*.  
99. **com**] *come*.  
100. **chaumbre**] *chaumber*. **biforn**] *bifor*.  
101. **seide**] *seyd*. **pitee**] *pité*.  
102. **leue lif**] *lef liif*. Cf. Sisam's note concerning this line: "O lef liif (where the metre indicates leuè for the original)" (287). **tee**] *te*.  
103. **zet**] *zete*.  
105. **whit**] *white*.  
108. **is now al**] *is al*.  
111. **louesome**] *louesom*. **two**] *to*.  
114. **Let**] *Lete*. **rewful**] *reweful*.  
116. **helpe**] *help*.  
117. **laste**] *last*.  
118. **faste**] *fast*.  
119. **seide**] *seyd*. **kinge**] *king*.  
122. **wrothe**] *wroþ*.  
123. **but**] *bot*.  
124. **lif**] *liif*.  
125. **mote**] *mot*. **dele atwo**] *delen ato*.  
126. **beste**] *best*. **I**] *y*.  
130. **I**] *y*.  
131. **nis**. ] *nis*; .  
133. **lay in this**] *lay þis*.  
135. **two faire**] *to fair*.  
136. **wel**] *wele*.  
137. **bade**] *bad*. **hijing**] *heizing*.  
138. **king**] *A kinge*.  
139. **answerde**] *answerd*. **bolde**] *bold*.  
140. **I durste**] *Y durst*; *A Y no durst*. **I nolde**] *y nold*.  
141. **mijte**] *mizt*.  
144. **damiseles**] *damisels*.  
145. **alle**] *al*. **snow**] *snowe*.  
146. **milk**] *milke*.  
147. **I**] *Y*. **sei3**] *seize*. **zet**] *zete*.  
148. **faire creatures**] *fair creatours*.

149. **a croune hadde on his molde**] *hadde a crown on hed.*  
 150. **rede golde**] *gold red.*  
 151. **al on**] *of a.*  
 152. **briȝte so**] *briȝt as.*  
 153. **sone**] *son.*  
 154. **wolde nolde**] *wold. nold.*  
 156. **palfray**] *palfray.*  
 157. **brouȝte palise**] *brouȝt. palays.*  
 158. **wel atired in iche wise**] *wel atird in ich ways.* With ll. 157–58  
 cf. Sisam's note: "The original rime was perhaps *palys: wys* 'wise'"  
 (209); and cp. H *palys: y-wys.*  
 160. **riuere, forest**] *riuers, forestes.* Cf. l. 246.  
 162. **brouȝte**] *brouȝt.*  
 163. **owen**] *owhen.*  
 164. **seide**] *said.*  
 165. **dame, that tow**] *dame, to-morwe þatow.* Cf. Sisam's note to l. 102:  
 "assimilation of unlike sounds, as *þatow* 165 for *þat þow*" (209).  
 166. **to-morwe her**] *riȝt here.* With Tolkien's metrically improved  
 version of ll. 165–66 cp. the corresponding lines of B: "*And seyð,  
 'Madam, loke þat thou be / to-morow here, vnder þys tre.'*"  
 172. **helpe**] *help.*  
 173. **theiȝ**] *þei.*  
 174. **ȝet**] *ȝete.*  
 175. **herde**] *herd.*  
 177. **lif**] *liif.*  
 178. **wif**] *wiif.*  
 179. **conseil**] *conseyl. iche*] *ich.*  
 180. **helpe him**] *him help.* With Tolkien's metrically improved version  
 cp. the corresponding line of B: "*Bot no man helpe hym ne canne.*"  
 182. **nōme**] *ynome.* Cp. H *name*, B *nam.*  
 183. **wel**] *wel.* **kniȝt**] *kniȝtes.* **him,**] *him.*  
 185. **quene**] *quen.*  
 187. **iche**] *ich a.*  
 188. **saide**] *sayd.* **wolde ther**] *wold þere.*  
 189. **die there**] *dye þer.*  
 190. **schulde**] *schuld.* Cf. l. 225.  
 191. **ȝet**] *ȝete.*  
 192. **quene**] *quen.* **ytwiȝt**] *ytwiȝt; A y-twiȝt.*

193. **faierie was forth**] *fairi forþ*.  
194. **niste wher**] *wist neuer wher*. With Tolkien's metrically improved version cp. the corresponding line of B: "*The ne weyst wer sche was com.*"  
195. **crying**] *criing*. **wep**] *wefe*.  
196. **chaumbre**] *chamber*.  
197. **ofte**] *oft*.  
199. **neiz**] *neize*. **lif**] *lüf*. **was al yspent**] *was yspent*.  
202. **erles**] *erls*.  
203. **alle**] *al*.  
204. **saide**] *said*. **biforn**] *bifor*.  
208. **oueral**] *ouer al*.  
209. **For**] *For* .  
211. **I**] *y*.  
212. **wildernesse**] *wildernes*.  
215. **vnderstonde**] *vnderstond*. **I**] *y*.  
218. **thing**. A *þinge*.  
219. **weping**] *weping*. **halle**] *halle* , .  
220. **gret**] *grete*.  
221. **mizten olde or zonge**] *mizt old or zong*.  
222. **weping**] *weping*. **töng**] *tong*.  
223. **adoune alle**] *adoun al*.  
224. **praide**] *praid*.  
225. **schulde fram**] *schuld nouzt fram*. Cf. I. 190.  
227. **forsok**] *forsoke*.  
228. **but**] *bot*. **sclauine**] *sclauin*. **tok**] *toke*.  
229. **nadde no kirtel, no no hod**] *no hadde kirtel no hode*.  
230. **scherte, no non other god**] *schert, <no> no noþer gode*.  
231. **But**] *Bot*. **harpe**] *harp*. **took**] *tok*.  
232. **of**] *atte*.  
233. **moste**] *most*.  
234. **wep**] *wefe*.  
235. **he that er was king**] *he, þat hadde ben king*. **croune**] *crown* , .  
236. **wente**] *went*. **toune**] *toun*.  
237. **Thurgh**] *Þurch*; A *Þurth*.  
238. **wildernesse**] *wildernes*.  
239. **aise**] *ays*.

240. **but**] *bot. malaise*] *malais*.
241. **He hadde ywered fow and gris**] *He þat hadde ywerd þe fowe and griis*.
242. **bedde purple bis**; ] *bed þe purple biis*, .
243. **harde**] *hard*.
244. **and with gresse him**] *and gresse he him*.
245. **He hadde yhad**] *he þat hadde had*.
246. **riuere**] *riuier*. Cf. l. 160.
247. **now theiȝ**] *now, þei. cōmsi snewe*] *comenci to snewe*. Cf. Sisam's note to l. 57: "The metre points to . . . *comsi* in l. 247" (209).
249. **He hadde yhad**] *He þat had yhad. pris*] *priis*.
250. **bifore**] *bifor. knelande*] *kneland. leuedis; ] *leuedis*, .*
252. **but**] *bot*.
253. **hadde**] *had. plentee*] *plenté*.
254. **deintee**] *deynté*.
257. **wilde frute**] *wild frut*.
258. **but**] *bot*.
260. **but**] *bot. grasses*] *grases*.
261. **ydwine**] *duine*.
262. **misaise**] *missays. to-chine*] *tochine*.
263. **tellen al the**] *telle þe*.
264. **suffred**] *sufferd. ȝer*] *ȝere*.
265. **her and berd, al blake**] *here of his berd, blac*.
266. **were**] *was*.
267. **harpe**] *harp*.
269. **and when**] *and, when. cler*] *clere*.
270. **took**] *toke. harpe*] *harp*.
271. **owen**] *owhen*.
273. It is unclear why Tolkien has bracketed "[bestes]." It appears in A, and has no brackets in Sisam.
276. **brere**] *brere*, .
277. **a-fine**] *afine*.
278. **melodie**] *melody. therine*] *þerin*.
279. **wolde**] *wold*.
280.  **nolde**] *nold*.
281. **miȝte**] *miȝt*.
282. **hote**] *hot*.

283. **Faierie**] *fairy*. **route**] *rout*.  
284. **cōmen hunten**] *com to hunt*. **aboute**] *about*.  
285. **blowinge**] *bloweing*.  
286. **berkinge**] *wiþ him berking*.  
287. **neuer**] *no*.  
288. **niste**] *nist*.  
289. **mijte**] *mizt*.  
291. **wel**] *wele*.  
294. **manie displayed**] *mani desplaid*.  
295. **ydrawen holde**; ] *ydrawe hold*, .  
296. **niste**] *nist*. **wolde**] *wold*.  
297. **seiȝ**] *seize*.  
298. **come dauncing**] *com daunceing*.  
299. **queinte**] *queynt*.  
300. **queinte**] *queynt*. **softely**: ] *softly*; .  
301. **trumpes**] *trunpes*. **bi** ] *bi*, .  
302. **manere**] *maner*.  
303. **seiȝ**] *seize*.  
304. **horse**] *hors*.  
305. **ris**: ] *ris*, — .  
306. **nis**] *þer nis*.  
307. **honde**] *hond*.  
308. **hauking**] *haukin*.  
309. **god**] *gode*. **haunt**: ] *haunt*, .  
310. **maulard, hairoun**] *maulardes, hayroun*. **cormeraunt**. ]  
*cormeraunt*; .  
311. **The**] *þe*.  
312. **wel**] *wele*.  
313. **praye**] *pray*.  
314. **seiȝ**] *seize*. **Orfeo** ] *Orfeo*, .  
317. **ywōne**] *ywon*.  
318. **aros** ] *aros*, .  
320. **wel**] *wele*.  
322. **owen**] *owhen*. **Dame**] *Dam*.  
323. **Ȝerne**] *Ȝern*. **ek**] *eke*.  
324. **spek**] *speke*.  
325. **misaise**] *messais*. **seiȝ**] *seize*.

326. **hadde**] *had*. **heiȝ**] *so heiȝe*.  
 327. **felle**] *fel*. **hir eiȝen**] *her eiȝe*.  
 328. **yseiȝen**] *yseiȝe*.  
 330. **leng**] *lenger*.  
 333. **wreche**] *A wroche*. **I] y. miȝte**] *miȝt*.  
 334. **die**] *dye*. **thisse siȝte**] *þis siȝt*.  
 335. **longe**] *long*. **lif**] *liȝf*.  
 336. **I] y. wif**] *wiȝf*.  
 338. **herte breke!**] *hert breke?*  
 339. **what**] *wat*.  
 340. **thise**] *þis*.  
 341. **ichille strecche**] *ichil streche*.  
 342. **lif**] *liȝf*. **recche**] *reche*.  
 343. **sclauine**] *sclauain*.  
 344. **heng**] *henge*. **harpe**] *harp*.  
 345. **hadde**] *had*. **god**] *gode*. **gon:**] *gon,—*.  
 346. **spared**] *spard*.  
 350. **wel**] *wele*. **milen**] *mile*.  
 351. **cuntraye**] *cuntray*.  
 352. **sōmeres daye**] *somers day*.  
 354. **nas non**] *nas þer non*.  
 355. **londe**] *lond*. **seiȝ**] *siȝe*.  
 356. **real and**] *real, and*. **heiȝ**] *heiȝe*.  
 357. **vtemaste**] *vtmast*.  
 358. **cler**] *clere*. **schene**] *schine* (cf. the entry **Schene** in Tolkien's *Vocabulary*).  
 359. **aboute**] *about*.  
 360. **degiseliche**] *degiselich*. **batailed stoute**] *bataild stout*.  
 362. **golde**] *gold*.  
 363. **anoured**] *anow<rn>ed*. *A auowed*. Cf. Bliss's note that "Sisam's emendation to *anow[rn]ed* fails to carry conviction" (54).  
 364. **manere**] *maner*. **animal**] *A aumal*; see the Appendix.  
 365. **Withinne**] *Wiȝin*. **were**] *wer*.  
 366. **alle**] *al*. **precious**] *precious*.  
 367. **werste**] *werst*.  
 368. **maked al**] *al*. **burnissed golde**] *burnist gold*.  
 370. **was the therke**] *schuld be þerk and*.

371. **liȝte**] *liȝt*.
372. **none sōnne**] *none þe sonne*.
375. **alle**] *al. thinkth*] *þink þat*.
377. **liȝte**] *alȝt*.
378. **wolde**] *wold. miȝte*] *miȝt*.
380. **redi was**] *was redi*.
381. **his wille were**] *he wold haue ydo*.
382. **harpere,**] *a minstrel, lo!* Cf. Sisam's note to this line): "The line is too long" (210).
383. **thi lord to solace**] *To solas þi lord*.
386. **let**] *lete. in*] *into*.
387. **gan he**] *he gan. biholde*] *bihold. abouten*] *about*.
388. **seiȝ ther**] *seize ffulȝ*. Sisam indicates with daggers that *ful* in this line is a corruption; he suggests that perhaps "*ful* should be deleted as a scribe's anticipation of *folk* in the next line" (210-11).
389. **folk**] *of folk* (see previous note). **thider were**] *were þider*.
390. **thouȝte dede**] *þouȝt dede, . nere*] *nare*.
391. **ther stode**] *stode. hadde*] *hade*.
392. **no fet no armes nadde**] *non armes nade*.
393. **thurȝ purch;** A *þurth. bodi*] *þe bodi*.
394. **ther laye**] *lay*.
395. **y-armed**] *armed. horse*] *hors*.
397. **in water were adreinte**] *were in water adreynt*.
398. **were forschreinte**] *al forschreynt*.
399. **laye**] *lay*.
400. **were dede**] *ded, .*
401. **laye**] *lay*.
404. **and thider with fairie**] *wiȝ fairi þider*.
405. **seiȝ**] *seize. owen wif*] *owen wiȝf*.
406. **leue liif**] *lef liif*.
407. **slepen**] *slepe*.
408. **hir wede**] *her cloþes. knew*] *knewe*.
409. **When he biheld these meruailes**] *And when he hadde bihold þis meruails*.
410. **wente**] *went*.
411. **seiȝ**] *seize*.
412. **blissful, briȝt;**] *blisseful and briȝt*..

413. **therinne**] *þerin*. **him sete**] *sete*.
414. **quene**, ] *quen*.
415. **brizte**] *brizt*, .
416. **biholden hem he miȝte**] *bihold he hem miȝt*.
418. **adoune biforn**] *adoun bifor*. **king**, ] *king* .
419. **and seide: "O lord, ȝif thi wille were]** "O lord," he seyde, "ȝif it þi wille were." Cf. Sisam's note to l. 382: "l. 419 may once have been: *And seyde 'Lord, ȝif þi wille were.'*" (210); also note B: "*And seyde: 'Lord, and þi wyll were.'*"
420. **schulde**] *schust*.
421. **answerde**] *answerd*. **artow**] *artow*.
424. **sente**] *sent*.
425. **her**] *here*.
426. **I]** *Ț*. **hardi**] *folehardi*.
427. **durste**] *durst*.
428. **but**] *bot*. **walde**] *wald*.
430. **I]** *Ț*. **but**] *bot*. **menestrel**] *menstrel*.
431. **manere**] *maner*.
433. **theiȝ]** *þei*. **welcōme**] *welcom no*.
434. **ȝet**] *ȝete*.
435. **Biforn]** *Bifor*. **adoune**] *adoun*.
436. **harpe miri]** *harp so miri*. **soune**] *soun*.
437. **it**] *his harp*, . **wel**] *wele*.
438. **blissfule**] *blisseful*.
439. **alle**] *al*. **palais]** *palays*.
440. **come**] *com*.
441. **adoune**] *adoun*.
442. **melodie**] *melody*.
444. **god]** *gode*.
445. **god]** *gode*.
447. **stint harping]** *stint his harping*.
448. **seide to him than]** *þan seyde to him*.
449. **wel]** *wele*; A *wel*.
451. **largeliche]** *largelich*. **paye]** *pay*.
452. **assaye]** *asay*.
453. **seide]** *seyd*.
454. **thattow]** *þatow*.

455. **iche leuedi** ] *ich leuedi*, . **ble** ] *ble*, .  
459. **row**] *rowe*.  
460. **louesum** ] *louesome*, .  
462. **cōmpaini**] *compaini*.  
463. **seide**] *seyd*.  
464. **ʒet**] *zete*. **wel**] *wele*.  
466. **seide**] *seyd*.  
467. **wolde**] *wold*. **I scholde**] *y schold*.  
468. **thi word thou most holde**] *pou most þi word hold*.  
469. **seide**] *seyd*.  
470. **hond** ] *hond*, .  
471. **thattow**] *patow*.  
472. **adoune**] *adoun*. Sisam begins a new paragraph with this line.  
473. **wif**] *wiif*. **honde**] *hond*.  
474. **londe**] *lond*.  
475. **wente**] *went*. **oute**] *out*. **thede:** ] *þede*, — .  
476. **com**] *come*.  
479. **owen citee**] *owhen cité*.  
480. **knew**] *knewe*.  
482. **no durste he**] *<he> no durst*.  
483. **but**] *bot*. **in bilt**] *y<n> bilt*; A *y-bilt*. **narwe** ] *narwe*, .  
484. **herbarwe** ] *herbarwe*, .  
485. **owen wif**] *owhen wiif*.  
486. **menestrel**] *a minstrel*. **lif**] *liif*.  
487. **londe** ] *lond*, .  
488. **honde**] *hond*.  
489. **cot**] *cote*.  
490. **tolde**] *told*.  
492. **ygon**] *gon*. **faierȳ**] *fairy*.  
494. **but**] *bot*. **wiste**] *nist*.  
495. **holde**] *hold*.  
496. **thing**] *þinges*. **tolde**] *told*.  
497. **oʒain the none-tide**] *oʒain nonetide*.  
498. **wif**] *wiif*.  
499. **beggeres**] *beggers*.  
500. **harpe**] *harp*.  
501. **wente**] *went*. **citee**] *cité*.

502. **mijte**] *mizt*. **biholde**] *bihold*.  
 503. **Erlēs**] *Erls*. **barounes bolde**] *barouns bold*.  
 504. **buriais**] *buriais*. **gunne him biholde**] *him gun bihold*.  
 505. **Lo!**] *Lo*, . **seide**] *seyd*.  
 506. **her hongth**] *here hongþ*.  
 507. **hongth**] *hongþ*.  
 508. **yclōnge**] *yclongen*.  
 509. **bi**] *in*. H has *by*.  
 511. **sette**] *sett*. **cri**] *crie*.  
 512. **seide**] *seyd*.  
 513. **hethenese**] *heþenisse*.  
 515. **seide**] *seyd*. **cōm!**] *come*; .  
 516. **sōm**] *some*.  
 517. **Euerich harpour**] *Euerich gode harpour*. **welcōme**] *welcom*. **to**] *to*, .  
 519. **In castel**] *In þe castel*.  
 521. **trōmpours**] *trompour*<*s*>.  
 522. **fele**] *fēle*, .  
 523. **melodie**] *melody*.  
 524. **in halle**] *in þe halle*.  
 526. **tok**] *toke*. **harpe**] *harp*.  
 527. **blisfulest**] *bli*<*sse*>*fulest*.  
 528. **euer man yherde**] *euer ani man yherd*.  
 529. **wel**] *wēle*.  
 530. **y-se**] *yse*.  
 531. **knew**] *knewe*. **harpe**] *harp*. **also**] *als*.  
 532. **seide**] *seyd*. **mote**] *mot*.  
 533. **wher haddestow**] *where hadestow*. **harpe**] *harp*, .  
 534. **I praye thattow**] *Ț pray þat þou*.  
 536. **thurȝ**] *þurch*; A *þurth*. **wildernesse**] *wildernes*. **I**] *y*.  
 537. **I**] *y*.  
 538. **liouns**] *lyouns*. **tortore**] *totorn*.  
 539. **tethe scharpe**] *teþ so scharp*.  
 540. **I find**] *y fond*. **iche harpe**] *ich harp*.  
 541. **wel**] *wēle*. **ȝer**] *ȝere*.  
 544. **I**] *y*.  
 546. **that euer ich**] *that ich*.  
 547. **harde**] *hard*.

549. **Adoune**] *Adoun.*  
550. **stounde** ] *stounde, .*  
551. **geth ...** ] *geb— .*  
552. **is**] *nis. mannes*] *manes; A mannes.*  
553. **knew wel**] *knewe wele.*  
555. **auzte do**] *auzt to do.*  
556. **seith**] *seyt.*  
560. **wildernesse**] *wildernisse.*  
561. **ywönne**] *ywon.*  
562. **londe**] *lond. fairy*] *fairy.*  
566. **miselue**] *miself.*  
567. **pouerliche**] *pouerlich.*  
568. **assaye**] *asay.*  
569. **and zif ich**] *and ich.*  
570. **no schulde thow**] *pou no schust.*  
571. **sikerliche**] *sikerlich. aye*] *ay.*  
572. **schulde**] *schust. daye*] *day.*  
573. **of mi deth thou hadde**] *pou of mi dep hadest.*  
574. **schulde**] *schust.*  
575. **alle**] *al þo. therinne*] *þerin.*  
577. **wel yknew**] *wele knewe.*  
578. **threw**] *þrewe.*  
579. **adoune**] *adoun. fete*] *fet.*  
580. **there**] *þer.*  
581. **alle seide**] *al þai seyd. crying*] *criing.*  
583. **Glade**] *Glad. weren*] *were.*  
584. **chaumbre**] *chaumber. also bliue*] *als biliue.*  
585. **him** ] *him, . schof*] *schaued.*  
586. **as king**] *as a king.*  
588. **brouzte**] *brouzt. toun* ] *toun, .*  
589. **manere menstracie**] *maner menstraci.*  
590. **O lord!**] *Lord! gret melodie*] *grete melody.*  
591. **eizen**] *eize.*  
592. **seizen**] *seize.*  
593. **Now Orfeo**] *Now King Orfeo. corouned*] *coround.*  
594. **and eke his**] *and his.*  
595. **longe liued afterward,** ] *liued long afterward; .*

596. **king was**] *was king*.  
598. **herde**] *herd*.  
599. **god liking**] *gode likeing*. .  
600. **king:**] *king*: .  
601. **is "Orfeo"**] *"Orfeo" is*.  
602. **god**] *gode*.  
603. **out of care**] *out of his care*.  
604. **graunte**] *graunt*. **wel**] *wele*.

### Revisions to the printed text of 1944

#### Tolkien's pencilled revisions (incorporated into text)

- l. 75: afternone > afternon  
l. 76: ydone > ydon  
l. 96: and owy > and wende owy  
l. 281: Hi > He  
l. 309: haunt > haunt:  
l. 600: nemoned > nempned
- l. 11: se > se,  
l. 70: Vnder > vnder  
l. 192: ytwiȝt > ytwiȝt,  
l. 323: ȝerne > Ȝerne  
l. 381: were > were.  
l. 391: sum > Sum  
l. 452: assaye." > assaye".  
l. 453: "Sir," > "Sir",
- l. 456: ympe-tre." > ympe-tre".  
l. 457: "Nay," > "Nay",  
l. 521: tabourers > tabourers,  
l. 533: Wher > wher  
l. 568: wille > wille,  
l. 582: ȝe > Ȝe  
l. 587: and > And  
Note: Auchinlech > Auchinleck

## Editorial changes

### Appendix: Revisions to Sisam's Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose due to Tolkien

The first edition (1922) of Tolkien's *Middle English Vocabulary* contains the following *corrigenda* to Sisam's text:

- p. xlv, l. 7: *for* carat *read* caret
- p. xlvii: *for* Jessop *read* Jessopp
- p. 21, l. 259: *for* be *read* he
- p. 28, l. 493: *for* enn *read* en
- p. 43, footnote to l. 69: *omit* "for:"
- p. 62, l. 100: *for* tyste *read* t<r>yste (*Morris*); *and adjust note at p. 225.*
- p. 103, l. 254: *for* largeand *read* large and
- p. 175, l. 1: *for* Daib. *read* Diab. [sic; l. 1 of the page, but l. 99 of the poem —CFH]
- p. 214, note to *a*: *for* "The best . . . are" *read* "This poem is largely a translation of sentences excerpted from Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*, cc. xl–xli (Miss Allen in *Mod. Lang. Review* for 1919, p. 320). Useful commentaries are"
- p. 226, note to l. 153: in l. 8 *for* *t̃p* *read* *t̃p̃*
- p. 243, n. to ll. 5–6: *for* "external covering" *read* "covering over it"
- p. 291, table, last column, 1 sg.: *for* "-e or (e)s" *read* "(e) or (e)s"

Sisam's text was corrected in exact accordance with these *corrigenda* when it was reprinted in 1923.

In 1945 (according to Bliss, see below; the earliest example I have seen is in the 1946 impression), the entry **Animal** (*Sir Orfeo* l. 364) in the *Vocabulary* was altered from:

**Animal**, *n.* animal, ii 364. [OFr. *animal*.]

in the first edition (1922) to:

**Animal**, *n.* ii 364, a misreading for aumal *q.v.*

at the same time adding this entry:

**Aumal**, *n.* enamel, ii 364. [OFr. *aumail*.]

Line 364 of Sisam's text of *Sir Orfeo* was corrected accordingly by 1967 (but not as of 1950). Presumably at the same time *animal* was emended to *aumal*, the following was added to Sisam's notes on *Sir Orfeo* (Sisam 1967 210):

364. *aumal*, “enamel.” Holthausen’s correction for *animal* (*Anglia*, vol. xlii, p. 427) is confirmed by the MS.

The reference is to the following in Holthausen’s 1918 article, “Zum mittlenglischen Romanzen” (“On the Middle English Romances”):

*Animal* ist sinnlos, O bietet *amell*, H *metalle*. Ersteres wird richtig sein, vgl. das NED. unter *amel* “email.” Natürlich wäre hier *emal* zu schreiben.

*Animal* is senseless, [MS Ashmole 51] offers *amell*, [MS Harley 3810] *metalle*. The first would be correct, compare the *OED* under *amel* “enamel.” It would be natural to write *emal* here.

Holthausen’s misgivings about *animal* are apparently motivated solely by a judgment that it yields an inappropriate sense. There is no indication in his article that he based his preferred reading, *emal*, on an examination of the Auchinleck MS itself.

By contrast, Bliss, in his first edition of *Sir Orfeo* (1954), reading directly from the MS, gives the form as *aumal* (32), noting:

364. All editors have printed *animal* for *aumal*, although there are only five minims in the manuscript, and although the noun *animal* is not recorded until the end of the sixteenth century (*OED* s.v.). The correct reading was pointed out by Professor J. R. R. Tolkien (*A Middle English Vocabulary*, impression of 1945, s.v. *animal*) (54).

However, in the second edition (1966), Bliss revised this note to read:

364. All editors have printed *animal* for *aumal*, although there are only five minims in the manuscript, and although the noun *animal* is not recorded until the end of the sixteenth century (*OED* s.v.). The correct reading was first published by Professor C. L. Wrenn, *TPS* [*Transactions of the Philological Society*] (1943), 33. See *RES* [*Review of English Studies*] N.S. viii (1957), 58 footnote 4 (54).

(The citation in Wrenn reads: “Auchinlek’s *annal*, then, may well be an error for *aumal* (*u* and *n* scribal confusion), which is a quite plausible form of *amal*,” that of *RES* is to Tolkien’s student and protégé S.R.T.O. d’Ardenne’s review of the first edition of Bliss’s *Sir Orfeo*, to which the *RES* editor supplied this footnote: “The reading *aumal* seems to have been published first by Professor C. L. Wrenn in ‘The Value of Spelling as Evidence,’ *Trans. Phil. Soc.*, 1943, p. 33; but the manuscript had been so read by Miss S. I. Tucker in 1938.”)

Hence, although Sisam's note correctly refers to Holthausen as first noticing the difficulty with the reading *animal*, it was not he but Wrenn who first published the correct MS reading *aumal*. It appears that Wrenn, not Tolkien, was ultimately responsible for the change in the *Vocabulary*—that Tolkien's Middle English version of *Sir Orfeo*, printed in 1944, has the reading *animal* suggests that he did not himself arrive at the correct reading *aumal* before 1944, and thus after Wrenn—but it may be presumed that it was Tolkien who was proximately responsible for it. It is interesting to note that Tolkien's English translation of l. 364 (Tolkien 1975 131), "with beasts and birds and figures horned," shows that he still read *animal* when he made the translation, suggesting that he made his translation before 1945.

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#### NOTES

- 1 In his preface to *Sir Gawain*, Christopher Tolkien notes that at that time (1975) he was "not able to discover any writing by my father on the subject of *Sir Orfeo*" other than the "very brief factual note on the text" that is given in the introduction (8). He was unaware at that time of the existence of his father's Middle English version (private correspondence). (Tolkien did in fact leave some writings on the poem, not seen by this editor, now held by the Bodleian Library.)
- 2 A judgment notably not shared by Sisam, who describes its dialect as South-Western (cf. 13, 207).
- 3 This despite the restructuring of sentences sometimes required by verse translation. It should be noted, however, that it will be argued below that the formatting and punctuation of the Middle English version is due to that of Sisam's edition; hence that of Tolkien's translation may also be due to Sisam, directly or indirectly.

*Tolkien's Middle English Sir Orfeo*

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