

SIR ORFEO

c. 1325

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

Although the Auchinleck manuscript was likely designed with a specific customer in mind, little is known of its ownership until the early 1740s when it came into the hands of Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck (1706–82), father to James Boswell (1740–95), the famed biographer of Samuel Johnson (1709–84). Boswell passed it on to the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, which in turn donated it to the National Library of Scotland in 1925. *Sir Orfeo* has long been acknowledged as one of the gems of Auchinleck's impressive collection of 18 Middle English romances; among the eight unique to the manuscript are *Lay le Freyne* and the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*. Since A. J. Bliss's edition of 1954 (repr. 1966), which reproduced all three extant versions of the poem, *Sir Orfeo* has garnered increasing critical attention. Many scholars have commented on the charm of the poem and the way in which the poet veils interpretive wealth with an enchanting fairytale lightness.

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

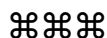
The medieval alterations to the Orpheus myth have led some scholars to propose a lost source for *Sir Orfeo*. Several French romances of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries mention a *lai*

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

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

NOTE ON THE TEXT

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



*Sir Orfeo*¹

We redeth oft and findeth y-write,[°] *written*
 And this clerkes[°] wele it wite,[°] *educated men / know*
 Layes that ben in harping[°] *are played on the harp*
 Ben y-founde of ferli thing:[°] *devised of strange matters*
 5 Sum bethe of wer[°] and sum of wo,[°] *some of war / woe*
 And sum of joie and mirthe also,
 And sum of trecherie and of gile,[°] *deceit*
 Of old aventours[°] that fel *adventures*
 while;[°] *happened long ago*
 And sum of bourdes[°] and ribaudy,[°] *bawdy jests / ribaldry*
 10 And mani ther beth[°] of fairy. *many there are*
 Of al thinges that men seth,[°] *tell*
 Mest o[°] love, forsothe, they beth. *Mostly of*
 In Breteyne[°] this layes were wrought,² *Brittany*
 First y-founde[°] and forth y-brought,[°] *created / brought forth*
 15 Of aventours that fel bi dayes,[°] *happened in bygone days*
 Wherof Bretouns[°] maked *Bretons (men of Brittany)*
 her[°] layes. *their*
 When kinges might our y-here[°] *anywhere hear*
 Of ani mervailles[°] that ther were, *wonders*
 Thai token[°] an harp in gle and *took*
 game[°] *musical entertainment and revelry*
 20 And maked a lay and gaf[°] it name. *gave*
 Now of this aventours that weren y-falle[°] *happened*
 Y[°] can tel sum, ac[°] nought alle. *I / but*
 Ac herkneht,[°] lordinges that ben trewe, *But listen*
 Ichil[°] you telle of Sir Orfewe. *I will*
 25 Orfeo mest[°] of ani thing *most*
 Lovede the gle[°] of harping. *music*
 Siker[°] was everi gode harpouir *Certain*
 Of him to have miche[°] honour. *much*
 Himself he lerned forto harp,[°] *He taught himself to harp*
 30 And leyd theron his wittes scharp;
 He lerned so ther nothing was[°] *in no way*

A better harpouir in no plas.^{°3} *place*
 In al the world was no man bore[°] *born*
 That ones[°] Orfeo sat bifore— *once*
 35 And[°] he might of his harping here[°] — *If / hear*
 Bot he schuld thenche[°] that he were *think*
 In on[°] of the joies of Paradis, *one*
 Swiche[°] melody in his harping is. *such*
 Orfeo was a king,⁴
 40 In Ingland an heighe[°] lording,⁵ *high*
 A stalworth man and hardi bo;[°] *A man both strong and brave*
 Large and curteys[°] he was also. *Generous and courteous*
 His fader was comen[°] of King Pluto, *descended from*
 And his moder of King Juno,⁶
 45 That sum time were as godes yhold[°] *held as gods*
 For aventours that thai dede[°] and told. *did*
 This king sojourn[°] in Traciens, *lived*
 That was a cité of noble defens—
 For Winchester was cleped tho[°] *called then*
 50 Traciens, withouten no.[°] *doubt*
 The king hadde a quen of priis[°] *a queen of worth*
 That was y-cleped[°] Dame Heurodis, *called*
 The fairest levedi, for the nones,[°] *lady of the time*
 That might gon on[°] bodi and bones, *walk in*
 55 Ful of love and godenisse—[°] *virtue*
 Ac[°] no man may telle hir fairnise.[°] *But / beauty*
 Bifel so in the comessing of May⁷

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When miri° and hot is the day, *delightful*
 And oway° beth winter schours,° *away / showers*
 60 And everi feld° is ful of flours,° *field / flowers*
 And blosme breme° on everi bough *blossom bright*
 Over al wexeth° miri anough,° *grows / enough*
 This ich° quen, Dame Heurodis *same*
 Tok to maidens of priis,° *two worthy maidens*
 65 And went in an undrentide¹
 To play bi an orchardside,²
 To se the floures sprede and spring
 And to here the foules° sing. *birds*
 Thai sett hem doun° al thre *sat themselves down*
 70 Under a fair ympe-tre,³
 And wel sone this fair quene
 Fel on slepe opon° the grene. *upon*
 The maidens durst hir nought awake,
 Bot lete hir ligge° and rest take. *But let her lie*
 75 So sche slepe til after none,° *noon*
 That undertide was al y-done.⁴
 Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,° *awoke*
 Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;⁵
 Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,⁶
 80 And crached hir visage—it bled wete.⁷
 Hir riche robe hye al to-rett° *she tore all to pieces*
 And was reveysed out of hir wit.⁸
 The two maidens hir biside
 No durst with hir no leng° abide, *longer*
 85 Bot oun° to the palays ful right° *ran / straight*
 And told bothe squier and knight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That her° quen awede wold,° *their / would go mad*
 And bad hem go and hir at-hold.⁹
 Knightes urn° and levedis° also, *ran / ladies*
 90 Damisels sexti and mo.° *sixty and more*
 In the orchard to the quen hye° come, *they*
 And her up in her armes nome,° *caught her up in their arms*
 And brought hir to bed atte last,
 And held hir there fine fast.° *very firmly*
 95 Ac ever she held in o° cri *one*
 And wold up° and owy.° *wanted to get up / away*
 When Orfeo herd that tiding
 Never him nas wers for nothing.¹⁰
 He come with knightes tene° *ten*
 100 To chaumber, right bifor the quene,
 And bi-held, and seyde with grete pité,
 “O lef liif, what is te,
 That ever yete hast ben so stille
 And now greddest wonder schille?¹¹
 105 Thy bodi, that was so white y-core,° *matchlessly*
 With thine nailes is all to-tore.° *torn up*
 Allas! thy rode,° that was so red, *face*
 Is al wan,° as thou were ded; *ashen pale*
 And also thine fingres smale° *elegantly shaped*
 110 Beth al blodi and al pale.
 Allas! thy lovesum eyen to° *two beautiful eyes*
 Loketh so° man doth on his fo! *as*
 A, dame, ich biseche,° merci! *I beg*
 Lete ben° al this reweful° cri, *Let be / pitiful*
 115 And tel me what the is, and hou,¹²
 And what thing may the help now.”
 Tho° lay sche stille atte last *Then*
 And gan to wepe swithe fast,° *very hard*
 And seyde thus the King to:
 120 “Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
 Sethen° we first togider were, *Since*
 Ones wroth never we nere;¹³
 Bot ever ich have yloved the
 As mi liif and so thou me;
 125 Ac now we mot delen ato;° *we must be separated*

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

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

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

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

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

- Do thi best, for y mot° go.” *I must*
 “Allas!” quath he, “forlorn icham!° *I am*
 Whider wiltow go, and to wham?¹
 Whider thou gost, ichil with the,
 130 And whider y go, thou schalt with me.”²
 “Nay, nay, Sir, that nought nis!° *cannot be*
 Ichil° the telle al hou it is: *I will*
 As ich lay this undertide
 And slepe under our orchardside,
 135 Ther come to me to° fair knightes, *two*
 Wele y-armed al to rightes,° *at all points*
 And bad me comen an heighing° *quickly*
 And speke with her° lord the king. *their*
 And ich answerd at° wordes bold, *with*
 140 Y durst nought, no y nold.° *I dared not, nor would I*
 Thai priked oyain as thai might drive;³
 Tho° com her king, also blive,° *Then / as hastily*
 With an hundred knightes and mo,
 And damisels an hundred also,
 145 Al on snowe-white stedes;
 As white as milke were her wedes.° *their clothes*
 Y no seighe° never yete bfore *saw*
 So fair creatours y-core.° *peerless*
 The king hadde a croun on hed;
 150 It nas° of silver, no° of gold red, *was not / nor*
 Ac it was of a precious ston—
 As bright as the sonne it schon.° *shone*
 And as son as he to me cam,
 Wold ich, nold ich, he me nam,⁴
 155 And made me with him ride
 Opon a palfray bi his side⁵
- And brought me to his palays,
 Wele atird° in ich ways,° *decorated / every way*
 And schewed me castels and tours,° *towers*
 160 Rivers, forestes, frith with flours,° *meadowland with flowers*
 And his riche stedes ichon;° *each one*
 And sethen° me brought oyain hom° *then / home again*
 Into our owen° orchard, *own*
 And said to me thus afterward,
 165 “Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow° be *that you*
 Right here under this ympe-tre,
 And than thou schalt with ous° go *us*
 And live with ous evermo.
 And yif thou makest ous y-let,° *if you try to prevent us*
 170 Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,⁶
 And totore° thine limes° al *torn to pieces / limbs*
 That nothing help the no schal;
 And thei thou best° so totorn, *even though you are*
 Yete thou worst with ous y-born.”⁷
 175 When King Orfeo herd this cas,° *set of circumstances*
 “O we!”° quath he, “Allas, allas! *woe*
 Lever me were to lete° mi liif *I would rather lose*
 Than thus to lese° the quen, mi wiif!” *lose*
 He asked conseyl at ich man,° *advice from every man*
 180 Ac no man him help no can.⁸
 Amorwe° the undertide is come *On the morrow*
 And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,° *seized*
 And wele ten hundred knightes with him,⁹
 Ich y-armed, stout and grim;
 185 And with the quen wenten he
 Right unto that ympe-tre.

¹ *Whider ... to wham?* Where will you go and to whom?

² *whider y go ... with me* “Wherever you go I will (go) with you / Wherever I go you will (go) with me.” Critics have noted that this line echoes Ruth 1.16: “for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (King James Version). Although addressed by Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi, in the Middle Ages, these words were associated with the marriage vow and offer further evidence of the deep bond of love between Orfeo and Heurodis.

³ *Thai priked ... might drive* They rode back again, hurrying as fast as they could.

⁴ *Wold ich ... he me nam* “Whether I would or not, he took me.” Compare Heurodis’s first effort at resistance above, line 140.

⁵ *palfray* Palfrey horse. A small saddle horse often used by women in the Middle Ages. Heurodis’s palfrey contrasts with the “snowe-white stedes” ridden by the fairy company. Steeds were powerful

horses that could be used for tournaments or battle.

⁶ *Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet* “Wherever you are, you will be taken.” The fairy king’s threat to tear Heurodis to pieces if she does not come with him contrasts with Orfeo’s loving promise at lines 129–30 to go wherever she goes.

⁷ *Yete ... y-born* Yet you will be brought with us.

⁸ *He asked ... help no can* In romance and in real life, the medieval king was expected to seek the advice of his nobles. The failure of counsel in Orfeo’s case indicates that human means are inadequate to respond to the threat the fairies present.

⁹ *ten hundred knightes with him* As with the other numbers in the poem (sixty maidens at line 90, a hundred knights at lines 143–44) the poet simply means to indicate a large number. Ten hundred suggests an infinite force; Orfeo exerts all the military might available to him in his effort to protect his queen.

- Thai made scheltrom¹ in ich a side
 And sayd thai wold there abide
 And dye° ther everichon, *die*
 Er° the quen schuld fram hem gon. *Before*
 190 Ac yete amiddes hem ful right²
 The quen was oway y-twight,° *snatched*
 With fairi forth y-nome.° *taken*
 Men wist never wher sche was bicomē.³
 195 Tho° was ther criing, wepe and wo! *Then*
 The king into his chaumber is go,
 And oft swoned° opou the ston,° *swooned / stone*
 And made swiche diol° and *such sorrow*
 swiche mon° *such lamentation*
 That neighe his liif was y-spent—° *That he nearly died*
 200 Ther was non amendement.
 He cleped° togider his barouns, *called*
 Erls, lordes of renouns,° *good reputations*
 And when thai al y-comen were,
 “Lordinges,” he said, “bifor you here
 205 Ich ordainy° min heighe steward⁴ *appoint*
 To wite° mi kingdom afterward; *rule*
 In mi stede° ben he schal *place*
 To kepe mi londes overal.
 For now ichave° mi quen y-lore,° *I have / lost*
 210 The fairest levedi° that ever was bore, *lady*
 Never eft y nil no woman se.⁵
 Into wildernes ichil te° *I will go*
 And live ther evermore
 With wilde bestes in holtes hore;° *dreary woods*
 215 And when ye understond that y be spent,° *dead*
 Make you than a parlement,⁶
- And chese° you a newe king. *choose*
 Now doth your best with al mi thing.”
 Tho° was ther wepeing in the halle *Then*
 220 And grete cri among hem alle;
 Unnethe° might old or yong° *Barely / young*
 For wepeing speke a word with tong.° *tongue*
 Thai kneled adoun al y-fere° *together*
 And praid° him, yif his wille were, *begged*
 225 That he no schuld nought fram° hem go. *from*
 “Do way!” quath he, “It schal be so!”
 Al his kingdom he forsoke;
 Bot° a sclavin° on him he toke. *Only / pilgrim’s cloak*
 He no hadde kirtel no hode,° *coat nor hood*
 230 Schert, ne scho, no nother gode,⁷
 Bot his harp he tok algate° *at any rate*
 And dede him barfot° out atte gate; *barefoot*
 No man most° with him go.⁸ *might*
 O way!° What ther was wepe and wo, *Alas*
 235 When he that hadde ben king with croun
 Went so poverlich° out of toun! *wretchedly*
 Thurth wode° and over heth° *Through wood / heath*
 Into the wildernes he geth.° *goes*
 Nothing he fint that him is ays,° *finds that is comfortable for him*
 240 Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.° *hardship*
 He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,⁹
 And on bed the purper biis,° *fine purple linen*
 Now on hard hethe he lith,° *lies*
 With leves and gresse he him writh.¹⁰
 245 He that hadde had castels and tours,° *towers*
 River, forest, frith with flours,° *meadowland with flowers*
 Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,¹¹
 This king mot° make his bed in mese.° *must / moss*
 He that had y-had knightes of priis° *great worth*
 250 Bifor him kneland, and levedis,° *ladies*
 Now seth° he nothing that him liketh, *sees*
 Bot wilde wormes° bi him striketh.° *serpents / glide*

¹ *scheltrom* Close-formed ranks of armed men or a compact body of troops. The term derives from the Old English *scyld-truma*, shield-wall or shield-troop, a standard Anglo-Saxon battle formation in which warriors used their shields to form a defensive phalanx.

² *Ac yete amiddes hem ful right* And yet from their very midst.

³ *Men wist ... was bicomē* “Men never knew where she had gone.” Similar phrases are used of the fairies themselves and of Orfeo and Heurodis; see lines 288, 296, and 494.

⁴ *min heighe steward* The office of the steward of the realm in medieval England was usually entrusted to a high-born noble.

⁵ *Never eft y nil no woman se* I will never again see any woman.

⁶ *Make you than a parlement* Critics have connected the parliament mentioned here with the events of January 1327, when Edward II was deposed by a hostile parliament and his son Edward III chosen as king.

⁷ *Schert, ne scho ... gode* Shirt, nor shoe, nor other goods.

⁸ *No man most with him go* Orfeo’s self-imposed exile indicates not only his grief at the loss of his wife, but also that he cannot rule his kingdom without her.

⁹ *hadde y-werd the fowe and griis* Worn the variegated fur and the grey fur. Luxury furs like these were a sign of wealth and status.

¹⁰ *With leves and gresse he him writh* Covers himself with leaves and grass.

¹¹ *thei it comenci to snewe and frese* Although it starts to snow and freeze.

- He that had y-had plenté
 Of mete and drink, of ich deynté,^o *delicacy*
 255 Now may he al day digge and wrote^o *dig and grub*
 Er he finde his fille of rote.^o *roots*
 In somer he liveth bi wild frut,^o *fruit*
 And berien bot gode lite;^o *berries though (they are of) little good*
 In winter may he nothing finde
 260 Bot rote,^o grases, and the rinde.^o *roots / husks*
 Al his bodi was oway dwine^o *wasted away*
 For missays,^o and al to-chine.^o *From want / chapped*
 Lord! who may telle the sore^o *trouble*
 This king sufferd ten yere and more?
 265 His here^o of his berd, blac and rowe,^o *hair / unkempt*
 To his girdelstede^o was growe. *waist*
 His harp, whereon was al his gle,^o *joy*
 He hidde in an holwe^o tre; *hollow*
 And when the weder^o was clere and bright, *weather*
 270 He toke his harp to him wel right
 And harped at his owhen^o wille. *own*
 Into alle the wode the
 soun gan schille,^o *the sound resounded*
 That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth^o *were*
 For joie abouten him thai teth,^o *approach*
 275 And alle the foules^o that ther were *birds*
 Come and sete^o on ich a brere^o *perched / briar*
 To here^o his harping afine^o— *hear / better*
 So miche^o melody was therin; *much*
 And when he his harping lete wold,^o *would stop*
 280 No best^o bi him abide nold.^o *beast / would stay*
 He might se him bisides,
 Oft in hot undertides,¹
 The king o^o fairy with his rout^o *of / company*
 Com to hunt him al about
 285 With dim^o cri and bloweing,^o *faint / blowing (horns)*
 And houndes also with him berking;^o *barking*
 Ac no best thai no nome,
 No never he nist whider they bcome.²
 And other while^o he might him se *at other times*
 290 As a gret ost^o bi him te,^o *host / went*
 Wele atourned,^o ten hundred knightes, *equipped*
 Ich y-armed to his rightes,^o *armed to every point*
 Of cuntenaunce^o stout and fers,^o *countenance / fierce*
- With mani desplaid baners,^o *unfurled banners*
 295 And ich his swerd y-drawe hold—^o *held his drawn sword*
 Ac never he nist whider thai wold.³
 And otherwile he seighe^o other thing: *saw*
 Knightes and levedis^o com daunceing *ladies*
 In queynt atire, gisely,^o *elegant clothing, skillfully*
 300 Queynt pas and softly;^o *Graceful steps and gently*
 Tabours and trunpes yede^o hem bi, *Drums and trumpets went*
 And al maner menstraci.^o *all manner of minstrelsy*
 And on a day he seighe^o him biside *saw*
 Sexti levedis^o on hors ride, *sixty ladies*
 305 Gentil and jolif as brid on ris;
 Nought o man amonges hem ther nis;⁴
 And ich a faucoun^o on hond bere, *falcon*
 And riden on haukin^o bi o rivere. *hawking*
 Of game thai founde wel gode haunt—^o *plenty*
 310 Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt;⁵
 The foules of the water ariseth,
 The faucouns hem wele deviseth;^o *aim*
 Ich^o faucoun his pray slough.^o *Each / slew*
 That seigh^o Orfeo, and lough.^{o6} *saw / laughed*
 315 “Parfay!”^o quath he, “ther is fair game;
 Thider ichil,^o bi Godes name; *Indeed*
 Ich was y-won^o swiche werk to se!” *I will go there*
 He aros, and thider gan te.^o *accustomed*
 To a levedi^o he was y-come, *went that way*
 320 Biheld, and hath wele undernome,^o *lady*
 And seth^o bi al thing that it is *recognized*
 His owhen^o quen, Dam Heurodis. *sees*
 Yern^o he biheld hir, and sche him eke,^o *own*
 Ac noither^o to other a word no speke; *Eagerly / also*
 325 For messais^o that sche on him seighe,^o *But neither*
 That^o had ben so riche and so heighe, *suffering / saw*
 The teres fel out of her eighe.^o *Who*
 The other levedis this y-seighe^o *eyes*
 And maked hir oway^o to ride— *saw*
 330 Sche most^o with him no lenger abide. *away*
 “Allas!” quath he, “now me is wo!” *could*

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

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

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

⁴ *Gentil and jolif ... ther nis* Charming and merry as a bird on a bough; / There is not one man among them.

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

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

Whi nil° deth now me slo?° *Why will not / kill*
 Allas, wroche,° that y no might *wretch*
 Dye now after this sight!
 335 Allas! to° long last mi liif, *too*
 When y no dar nought with mi wiif,
 No hye° to me, o° word speke. *Nor she / one*
 Allas! Whi nil° min hert breke! *why will not*
 Parfay!"° quath he, "tide wat bitide," *Indeed / happen what may*
 340 Whiderso° this levedis ride, *wherever*
 The selve° way ichil streche—° *same / I will proceed*
 Of liif no deth me no reche."° *care*
 His sclavain he dede on also spac¹
 And henge° his harp opon his bac,° *hung / upon his back*
 345 And had wel gode wil to gon—
 He no spard° noither stub° no ston. *did not spare / stump*
 In at a roche° the levedis rideth, *rock*
 And he after, and nought abideth.
 When he was in the roche y-go,
 350 Wele thre mile other mo,
 He com into a fair cuntray° *country*
 As bright so sonne° on somers° day, *as sun / summer's*
 Smothe and plain° and al grene—° *even / green*
 Hille no dale nas ther non y-sene.° *was there not seen*
 355 Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,° *saw*
 Riche and real° and wonder heighe.° *royal / amazingly high*
 Al the utmast wal° *All the outermost wall*
 Was clere and schine° as cristal; *bright*
 An hundred tours° ther were about, *towers*
 360 Degiselich and bataild stout.²
 The butras° com out of the diche° *buttresses / moat*
 Of rede gold y-arched° riche. *arched*
 The vousour was avowed al° *The vaulting was all colored*
 Of ich maner divers aumal.³
 365 Within ther wer wide wones,° *spacious dwelling-places*
 Al of precious stones;
 The werst° piler on to biholde *worst*
 Was al of burnist° gold.⁴ *burnished*

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

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

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

⁴ *Within ther wer ... of burnist gold* The architectural details the poet includes here make the fairy castle not only a palace of romance but also a realistic royal residence. The flying buttress, for example, was a French innovation, introduced to England in the

Al that lond was ever light,
 370 For when it schuld be ther° and night, *dark*
 The riche stoness light gonne° *began to shine*
 As bright as doth at none° the sonne. *noon*
 No man may telle, no thenche° in thought, *imagine*
 The riche werk that ther was wrought.° *created*
 375 Bi al thing him think° that it is *it seems to him*
 The proude court of Paradis.
 In this castel the levedis alight;
 He wold in° after, yif° he might. *wished to come in / if*
 Orfeo knokketh atte gate;
 380 The porter was redi therate° *at it*
 And asked what he wold hav y-do.° *wished to do*
 "Parfay!" quath he, "icham° a minstrel, lo! *I am*
 To solas° thi lord with mi gle,° *entertain / music*
 Yif his swete° wille be." *sweet*
 385 The porter undede° the gate anon *unlocked*
 And lete° him into the castel gon. *let*
 Than he gan bihold° about al, *began to look*
 And seighe liggeand° within the wal *saw lying*
 Of folk that were thider y-brought
 390 And thought dede,° and nare nought.° *dead / were not*
 Sum stode withouten hade,° *head*
 And sum non armes nade,° *had no arms*
 And sum thurth° the bodi hadde wounde, *through*
 And sum lay wode,° y-bounde, *mad*
 395 And sum armed on hors sete,° *sat*
 And sum astrangled as thai ete;° ⁵ *choked as they ate*
 And sum were in water adreynt,° *drowned*
 And sum with fire al forschreynt.° *shriveled*
 Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
 400 Sum ded and sum awedde,° *gone mad*
 And wonder fele° ther lay bisides *very many*
 Right as thai slepe her undertides;⁶
 Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,° *seized*

late thirteenth century, and represents the latest in architectural advances. Details such as the burnished pillars and crenellated walls indicate that the palace is both beautiful and built to withstand attack.

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

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

- With fairi thider y-come.¹
- 405 Ther he seighe his owen wiif,
 Dame Heurodis, his lef^o liif, *dear*
 Slepe under an ympe-tre—
 Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he.^o *she*
 And when he hadde bihold this
 mervails^o alle, *these marvels*
- 410 He went into the kinges halle.
 Than seighe he ther a semly^o sight, *attractive*
 A tabernacle² blisseful^o and bright, *delightful*
 Therin her^o maister king sete *their*
 And her quen, fair and swete.
- 415 Her^o crounes, her clothes schine so bright *Their*
 That unnethe bihold he him might.³
 When he hadde biholden al that thing,
 He kneled adoun bifor the king:
 “O lord,” he seyde, “yif it thi wille were,
 420 Mi menstraci thou schust y-here.”^o *should hear*
 The king answered, “What man artow,^o *are you*
 That art hider y-comen now?
 Ich, no non^o that is with me, *I, nor no one*
 No sent never after the.
- 425 Sethen^o that ich here regni gan,^o *Since / began to reign*
 Y no fond never so folehardi^o man *foolhardy*
 That hider to ous durst wende
 Bot that ic him wald ofsende.”⁴
 “Lord,” quath he, “trowe^o ful wel, *believe*
 430 Y nam bot a pover menstrel;^o *I am only a poor minstrel*
 And, sir, it is the maner of ous^o *our way*
 To seche mani^o a lordes hous— *visit many*
 Thei^o we nought welcom no be, *Though*
 Yete we mot proferi^o forth our gle.” *must offer*
- 435 Bifor the king he sat adoun
 And tok his harp so miri^o of soun, *merry, pleasing*
 And tempreth^o his harp, as he wele can, *tunes*
 And blisseful notes he ther gan,^o *began*
 That al that in the palays were
- 440 Com to him forto here,^o *hear*
 And liggeth adoun to his fete—^o *lie down at his feet*
 Hem thenketh^o his melody so swete. *They think*
 The king herkneth^o and sitt ful stille; *listens*
 To here his gle he hath gode wille.⁵
- 445 Gode bourde^o he hadde of his gle; *Great enjoyment*
 The riche quen also hadde he.^o *she*
 When he hadde stint^o his harping, *stopped*
 Than seyde to him the king,
 “Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.
- 450 Now aske of me what it be,
 Largelich ichil the pay;^o *Generously I will pay you*
 Now speke, and tow might asay.^o *and you might try*
 “Sir,” he seyde, “ich biseche the^o *I implore you*
 Thatow^o woldest give me *That you*
 455 That ich^o levedi, bright on ble,^o *same / face*
 That slepeth under the ympe-tree.”
 “Nay!” quath the king, “that nought nere!^o *that could not be*
 A sori couple of you it were,⁶
 For thou art lene, rowe and blac,^o *lean, unkempt, and swarthy*
 460 And sche is lovesum,^o withouten lac; *beautiful*
 A lothlich^o thing it were, forthi,^o *repulsive / therefore*
 To sen hir^o in thi compayni.”⁷ *see her*
 “O sir!” he seyde, “gentil king,
 Yete were it a wele fouler^o thing *much more grievous*
 465 To here a lesing^o of thi mouthe! *hear a falsehood*
 So, sir, as ye seyde nouthe,^o *now*
 What ich wold aski,^o have y schold, *I wished to request*
 And nedes thou most^o thi word hold.”⁸ *you needs must*
 The king seyde, “Sethen^o it is so, *Since*
 470 Take hir bi the hond^o and go; *hand*
 Of hir ichil thatow^o be blithe.” *I wish that you*
 He kneled adoun and thonked him swithe.^o *very much*
 His wiif he tok bi the hond,
 And dede him swithe^o out of that lond, *went quickly*
 475 And went him out of that thede—^o *country*

¹ *Offolk that ... thider y-come* The catalogue of the dead and the taken indicates that sinister darkness lies within the glistening fairy palace. The author may have drawn on Hades, the classical land of the dead, as well as Celtic traditions of the fairy Otherworld.

² *tabernacle* Raised platform or dais covered with a canopy.

³ *That unnethe bihold he him might* He could scarcely look (at them).

⁴ *That hider ... ofsende* That he dared come here to us unless I wished to send for him.

⁵ *To here his ... gode wille* To hear his (Orfeo's) music, he (the king) had good will.

⁶ *A sori couple of you it were* You would make a wretched couple.

⁷ *“Nay!” quath the king ... compayni* The fairy king appears not to recognize Orfeo here but refuses his request on the grounds that the couple would be aesthetically ill-matched. His concern for outward appearance is also noticeable in the emphasis on surface beauty in the castle.

⁸ *Yete were it ... thi word hold* The rash promise is a feature of romance and folklore. The poet also draws here on the importance of “trouthe,” keeping one's word, in medieval English culture.

Right as he come, the way he yede.^o *went*
 So long he hath the way y-nome
 To Winchester he is y-come,¹
 That was his owen cité;
 480 Ac no man knewe that it was he.
 No forther than the tounes^o ende *town's*
 For knoweleche he no durst wende,²
 Bot with a begger, y-bilt ful narwe,^o *lodged very humbly*
 Ther he tok his herbarwe^o *shelter*
 485 To him and to^o his owen wiif *for himself and for*
 As a minstrel of pover liif,
 And asked tidinges of that lond,
 And who the kingdom held in hond.
 The pover begger in his cote^o *cottage*
 490 Told him everich a grot:^o *every detail*
 Hou her^o quen was stole owy,^o *their / stolen away*
 Ten yer gon,^o with fairy, *years ago*
 And hou her^o king en exile yede,^o *how their / went*
 But no man nist in wiche thede;^o *knew in which country*
 495 And how the steward the lond gan hold,
 And other mani thinges him told.
 Amorwe, oyain nonetide,^o *towards noon*
 He makid his wiif ther abide;
 The beggers clothes he borwed^o anon³ *borrowed*
 500 And heng his harp his rigge^o opon, *back*
 And went him into that cité
 That men might him bihold and se.
 Erls and barouns bold,
 Buriays^o and levedis him gun *Burgesses (citizens)*
 bihold.^o *began to see*
 505 "Lo!"^o thai seyde, "swiche a man!
 Hou long the here^o hongeth him opan!"^o *hair / upon*
 Also thai seyde, everychon,
 How the mosse grew hym upon:
 "Lo! Hou his berd^o hongeth to his kne!
 510 He is y-clongen also^o a tre!" *beard*
 And, as he yede^o in the strete, *withered as*
 With his steward he gan mete,^o *walked*
met

¹ *So long ... y-come* He stayed on the path so long that he arrived at Winchester.

² *For ... no durst wende* In case of recognition, he dared go no further. Orfeo maintains his disguise in his own city as he has in the Otherworld.

³ *The beggers ... anon* Since Orfeo is already in disguise as a minstrel, his borrowing of the beggar's clothes is puzzling. A possible explanation is that he fears the pilgrim's cloak he took when he left will be recognized at court.

And loude he sett on him a crie:
 "Sir steward!" he seyde, "merci!
 515 Icham^o an harpoure of hethenisse;^o *I am / foreign parts*
 Help me now in this destresse!"
 The steward seyde, "Com with me, come;
 Of that ichave,^o thou schalt have some. *I have*
 Everich gode harpoure is welcom me to
 520 For mi lordes love, Sir Orfeo."
 In the castel the steward sat atte mete,^o *meat (i.e. a meal)*
 And mani lording was bi him sete;
 Ther were trompours and
 tabourers,^o *trumpet-players and drummers*
 Harpours fele,^o and crouders—⁴ *many*
 525 Miche melody thai makid alle.
 And Orfeo sat stille in the halle
 And herkneth; when thai ben al stille,
 He toke his harp and tempred schille;^o *tuned loudly*
 The blissefulest^o notes he harped there *most delightful*
 530 That ever ani man y-herd with ere—^o *ear*
 Ich man liked wele his gle.^o *music*
 The steward biheld and gan y-se,
 And knewe the harp als blive.^o *immediately*
 "Menstrel!" he seyde, "so mot thou thrive,^o *as you live*
 535 Where hadestow^o this harp, and hou?^o *did you get / how*
 Y pray that thou me telle now."
 "Lord," quath he, "in uncouth
 thede^o *unknown country*
 Thurth^o a wildernes as y yede,^o *Through / I wandered*
 Ther y founde in a dale
 540 With lyouns^o a man totorn *By lions*
 smale,^o *ripped to small pieces*
 And wolves him frete^o with teth so scharp. *gnawed*
 Bi him y fond this ich^o harp; *same*
 Wele ten yere it is y-go."
 "O!" quath the steward, "now me is wo!
 545 That was mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
 Allas, wreche,^o what schal y do, *wretch*
 That have swiche a lord y-lore?^o *lost*
 A, way^o that ich was y-bore^o *woe / born*
 That him was so hard grace y-yarked,⁵

⁴ *crouders* String-players. Possibly from Welsh "crwth," a stringed instrument like a violin. An alternative definition comes from the MED where this line from *Sir Orfeo* is used as an example for *crouder*, meaning "one who plays the crowd."

⁵ *That him was so hard grace y-yarked* To him was such adverse fate ordained.

- 550 And so vile deth y-marked!"^o *destined*
 Adoun he fel aswon^o to ground; *in a swoon*
 His barouns him tok up in that stounde^o *moment*
 And telleth him how it
 geth—^o *this is how it goes (i.e., how the world is)*
 "It nis no bot of mannes deth!"¹
- 555 King Orfeo knewe wele bi than
 His steward was a trewe man
 And loved him as he aught to do,
 And stont up, and seyt thus, "Lo,
 Steward, herkne now this thing:
 560 Yif ich were Orfeo the king,²
 And hadde y-suffred ful yore^o *a very long time*
 In wildernisse miche sore,^o *much sorrow*
 And hadde ywon^o mi quen o-wy^o *won / away*
 Out of the lond of fairy,
 565 And hadde y-brought the levedi hende^o *courteous*
 Right here to the tounes ende,
 And with a begger her in y-nome,^o *taken her in*
 And were mi-self hider y-come
 Poverlich to the,^o thus stille, *In poverty to you*
 570 For to asay^o thi gode wille, *test*
 And ich founde the thus trewe,
 Thou no schust it never rewe.^o *should never regret it*
 Sikerlich,^o for love or ay,^o *Certainly / fear*
 Thou schust be king after mi day;
 575 And yif thou of mi deth hadest ben blithe,^o *pleased*
 Thou schust have voided, also
 swithe."^o *been banished at once*
 Tho^o all tho^o that therin sete *Then / those*
 That it was King Orfeo underyete,^o *realized*
 And the steward him wele knewe—
 580 Over and over the bord^o he threwe, *table*
- And fel adoun to his^o fet; *(Orfeo's)*
 So dede everich lord that ther sete,
 And all thai seyde at o^o criing: *one*
 "Ye beth our lord, sir, and our king!"
 585 Glad thai were of his live;^o *life*
 To chaumber thai ladde^o him als blive *led / quickly*
 And bathed him and schaved his berd,
 And tired^o him as a king apert;^o *dressed / openly*
 And sethen,^o with gret processoun, *afterwards*
 590 Thai brought the quen into the toun
 With al maner menstraci—
 Lord! ther was grete melody!
 For joie thai wepe with her eighe^o *their eyes*
 That hem so sounde y-comen seighe.³
 595 Now King Orfeo newe coround^o is, *crowned*
 And his quen, Dame Heurodis,
 And lived long afterward,
 And sethen^o was king the steward.⁴ *afterwards*
 Harpours in Bretaine after than
 600 Herd hou^o this mervaille^o bigan, *Heard how / marvel*
 And made herof a lay of gode likeing,^o *great delight*
 And nempned^o it after the king. *named*
 That lay "Orfeo" is y-hote;^o *called*
 Gode is the lay, swete is the note.
 Thus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
 God graunt ous^o alle wele to fare! Amen. *us*
- Explicit
 —C. 1331–40

¹ *It nis no bot of mannes deth* There is no remedy for a man's death.

² *Yif ich were Orfeo the king* Orfeo's "if" here lends a curiously conditional note to his speech.

³ *That hem ... y-comen seighe* Who saw them (Orfeo and Heurodis) come back safely.

⁴ *And sethen ... steward* Although the poet does not mention whether or not Orfeo and Heurodis have children, the succession of the steward implies that they do not.

 IN CONTEXT

 Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*

In his translation of Boethius, King Alfred makes some of the same changes to the Orpheus and Eurydice myth that the *Orfeo* poet does. Alfred introduces his hero in detail, highlighting his great skill as a harper and the peerless beauty of his wife. He expands on his source in describing the harpist's extraordinary ability to tame wild beasts, even Cerberus, the three-headed dog at the gates of hell. Most significantly, he adds the period of exile in which the grief-stricken Orpheus goes alone into the forest. A tantalizing connection between these alterations to the myth and Alfred's own life is offered by William of Malmesbury's chronicle in which King Alfred is said to have fooled an enemy by disguising himself as a minstrel when living in exile in the wilderness.

 from King Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*

Once on a time it came to pass that a harp-player lived in a country called Thracia, which was in the kingdom of the Crecas (Greeks). The harper was so good, it was quite unheard of. His name was Orfeus, and he had a wife without her equal named Eurudice. Now men came to say of the harper that he could play the harp so that the forest swayed, and the rocks quivered for the sweet sound, and wild beasts would run up and stand still as if they were tame, so still that men or hounds might come near them and they fled not. The harper's wife died, men say, and her soul was taken to hell. Then the harpman became so sad that he could not live in the midst of other men, but was off to the forest and sate upon the hills both day and night, weeping, and playing on his harp so that the woods trembled and the rivers stood still, and hart shunned not lion, nor hare hound, nor did any beast feel rage or fear towards any other for gladness of the music. And when it seemed to the harper that nothing in this world brought joy to him he thought he would seek out the gods of hell and essay to win them over with his harp, and pray them to give him back his wife. When he came thither, the hound of hell, men say, came towards him, whose name was Ceruerus (Cerberus) and who had three heads; and he began to welcome him with his tail and play with him on account of his harp-playing. There was likewise there a most dreadful gateward whose name was Caron; he had also three heads, and was very, very old. Then the harper fell to beseeching him that he would shield him while he was in that place, and bring him back again unharmed. And he promised him to do so, being overjoyed at the rare music. Then he went farther until he met the fell goddesses that men of the people call Parcae, saying that they know no respect for any man, but punish each according to his deeds; and they are said to rule each man's fate. And he began to implore their kindness; and they fell to weeping with him. Again he went on, and all the dwellers in hell ran to meet him and fetched him to their king; and all began to speak with him and join in his prayer. And the ever-moving wheel, that Ixion king of the Leuitas

(Lapithae) was bound to for his guilt stood still for his harping,¹ and King Tantalus, that was in this world greedy beyond measure, and whom that same sin of greed followed there, had rest,² and the vulture it is said, left off tearing the liver of King Ticcus (Tityus),³ whom he had thus been punishing. And all the dwellers in hell had rest from their tortures whilst he was harping before the king. Now when he had played a long, long time, the king of hell's folk cried out saying, "Let us give the good man his wife, for he hath won her with his harping." Then he bade him be sure never to look back once he was on his way thence; if he looked back, he said, he should forfeit his wife. But love may hardly, nay, cannot be denied! Alas and well-a-day! Orpheus led his wife along with him, until he came to the border of light and darkness, and his wife was close behind. He had but stepped into the light when he looked back towards his wife and immediately she was lost to him.

Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*

Fusing Celtic and classical aspects of the Orpheus story, this account has often been suggested as an influence on *Sir Orfeo*. The mention of "a knight of Lesser Britain" (Brittany) indicates that the story Walter Map knew may have been linked to the Breton lay tradition. Whereas in Alfred's version, the harpist's wife dies, here it is unclear whether the woman dies or is taken. The allusion to the desolate valley and the company of women implies that the fairies are involved in her disappearance. This version, however, differs markedly from *Sir Orfeo* in the fact that the restoration of the wife allows heirs to be born.

from Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, Distinctio IV, cap. 8

... **A** knight of Lesser Britain lost his wife and long after her death went on mourning for her. He found her at night in a great company of women, in a valley in a wide tract of desert. He marvelled and was afraid, and when he saw her whom he had buried, alive again, he could not trust his eyes and doubted what the fairies (fates) could be doing. He resolved to seize her, that, if he saw aright, he might have the real joy of the capture or else might be eluded by the phantom, and at least be taxed by none with cowardice for giving up the attempt. He accordingly seized her, and enjoyed a union with her for many years, as pleasant and as open to the day as the first had been, and had children by her, whose descendants are numerous at this day, and are called the sons of the dead mother. This would be an incredible and portentous breach of nature's laws, did not trustworthy evidence of its truth exist.

The Wooing of Étaín

¹ *Ixion ... his harping* Ixion, king of Lapithae, was bound to an endlessly revolving wheel as punishment for his various crimes.

² *King Tantalus ... had rest* For his crimes, Tantalus was condemned to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree, with both water and fruit eluding his grasp.

³ *the vulture ... (Tityus)* For attempting to rape Leto, the giant Tityus was condemned to have his liver eaten by two vultures every day, only to have it grow back each night.

Sir Orfeo may have drawn on a range of Celtic folk tales for its fairy motifs. *The Wooing of Étaín*, however, shares with *Sir Orfeo* the unusual detail of an appointed time being made for the abduction of the king's wife by a fairy and the effort at resistance. In this story, Eochaid Airem, king of Ireland, marries Étaín, the most beautiful woman of Ireland, who is also being courted by Midir, a fairy prince. Eochaid believes himself an accomplished chess player, and when Midir appears at his palace and challenges him to a game of chess, he eagerly agrees to bet on a game. After losing two games played to high stakes, Midir wins a final match in which the stake is whatever the winner demands. He asks for the right to put his arms around Étaín and Eochaid reluctantly agrees. At the beginning of this excerpt, Midir arrives on the appointed day to claim his prize.

from *The Wooing of Étaín*

Midir made an appointment for that day next month. Eochaid summoned the best warriors in Ireland so that they were in Tara, and the best of the *fianna*¹ of Ireland, ring surrounding ring around Tara, in the midst, outside, and inside, and the king and queen in the centre of the house, and the court closed and locked; for they knew that the man of great power would come. Étaín was pouring drink for the princes that night, for pouring drink was a special skill of hers.

Then as they were speaking they saw Midir coming towards them across the floor of the palace. He was always beautiful; that night he was more beautiful. The hosts who gazed upon him were amazed. They were all silent then, and the king wished him welcome.

"It is therefore that we have come," said Midir. "Let what was pledged to me be given to me," he said, "what is declared is owed. I have given you what was pledged."

"I have not thought about that until now," said Eochaid.

"Étaín herself promised," said Midir, "to leave you."

Étaín blushed at that.

"Do not blush, Étaín," said Midir. "You have not shamed your womanhood. For a year," he said, "I have been wooing you with the fairest gifts and treasures in Ireland; and I did not get you until I had Eochaid's permission. It is not through my *déas* (divinity) that I would obtain you."

"I told you," she said, "that I would not go to you until Eochaid sold me. For my own part, I will go with you if Eochaid sells me."

"I will not sell you, however," said Eochaid. "But let him put his arms around you as you are, in the middle of the house."

"It will be done," said Midir. He put his weapons in his left hand, and took the woman under his right arm, and carried her off through the skylight of the house. The hosts rose up around the king after this shame had been put upon them. They saw two swans circling Tara. They headed for Síd ar Femun, that is Síd Ban Find (the home of the fairies).

¹ *fianna* Warriors.

her cloþes þe knelweþ it what þe.
When þe hadde bihold þis miraclle
e went in to þe kinges halle.
þan ſete þe þer aſembly ſit.
a tabernacle bliſeful & bryt.
þer in þer maist king ſete.
þer quen fair & ſweete.
þer crouner þer cloþes ſhine ſo bryt.
þat vniueſe bihold þe þem muſt.
þen þe hadde biholden al þat þing.
þe kneled adown biſor þe king.
o lord þe ſeyd iſt it þi wille there.
uncomforta þou ſhynſt y here.
þe king anſwerd what man art thou.
þat art hider y to men noll.
ch no non þat iſt þy me.
uo ſent neuer after þe.
þopen þat ich here regnigam.
yno fond neuer ſo ſole hardi man.
þat hider to ouſ darſt wende.
þot þat ich in wald of ſende.
lord quap þe twiſe ful wel.
ynam bot aþoner mentiel.
þir it iſt þe maner of ouſ.
þo ſetþe man alordes þouſ.
þe we nougt welcom nolle.
þe we mot proferi forþ our gle

The Auchinleck Manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS. 19.2.1), fol. 302r, the last 26 lines of the first column (lines 408–34).