The Middle English Breton Lays

edited by
Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury

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The Middle English Breton Lays

Middle English Texts

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Edited by
Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury

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Contents

Preface vii

General Introduction 1

Select Bibliography 12

Sir Orfeo

Introduction 15
Select Bibliography 21
Text 26
Notes 42

Lay le Freine

Introduction 61
Select Bibliography 65
Text 68
Notes 79

Sir Degaré

Introduction 89
Select Bibliography 97
Text 101
Notes 130

Emaré

Introduction 145
Select Bibliography 151
Text 153
Notes 183

Sir Launfal

Introduction 201
Select Bibliography 206
Text 210
Notes 240

Sir Gowther

Introduction 263
Select Bibliography 272
Text 274
Notes 296

Erle of Tolous

Introduction 309
Select Bibliography 316
Text 319
Notes 354

Sir Cleges

Introduction 367
Select Bibliography 374
Text 377
Notes 394

Appendix A

Marie de France, *The Lay of the Ash Tree* 409

Appendix B

Marie de France, *The Lay of Sir Launfal* 415

Appendix C

Sir Landevale 423

Glossary 439

Preface

Middle English Breton Lays makes available to teachers and students for the first time in this form an important body of poetry worthy of attention for a variety of reasons. Seven of the eight narrative poems in this volume constitute a group of Middle English lays that have been distinguished by their identification in some way as Breton: *Sir Orfeo, Sir Degaré, Lay le Freine*, Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal, Sir Gowther, Emaré*, and the *Erle of Tolous*. The eighth poem, *Sir Cleges*, is not acknowledged by scholars to be a Breton lay, but rather is simply classified as a short romance. Our decision to place it within this particular group of poems is based upon common topoi that render it compatible with the Middle English Breton Lays. Although Chaucer's Franklin's Tale and Wife of Bath's Tale are recognized as part of the English Breton lay group, we have chosen to exclude them because they are edited so often elsewhere. Reference to Chaucer, however, occurs throughout the volume, and he remains an important touchstone for discussions of the genre as well as for any study of late medieval English culture.

With the exception of Thomas Rumble's *Breton Lays in Middle English*, these poems have usually been subsumed within the gargantuan corpus of romance. A number of collections, most notably French and Hale's *Middle English Metrical Romances*, Maldwyn Mills' *Six Middle English Romances*, Donald Sands' *Middle English Verse Romance*, A. C. Gibbs' *Middle English Romances,* and most recently Jennifer Fellows' *Of Love and Chivalry*, indicate this tendency. The scholarship on the lays is also frequently immersed in discussions of medieval romance, various other genres, and related subject matter. Needless to say, the study of the Middle English Breton Lays as a group is rendered somewhat daunting by these practices. But while it is our aim to create convenience where it has been absent, this volume is also intended to promote further study of various issues which present themselves clearly only when the poems are understood as a group.

The introductions and notes to each of the poems attempt to render this volume more inclusive than either Rumble's edition (a collection of the poems without notes) or Mortimer J. Donovan's *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (a critical study without the poems). For each poem, we point to a large body of secondary materials that explore the historical realities of the medieval past, a time not exclusively reserved for knights, ladies, and chivalric romance, but a time of dynamic social and political change. It is our hope that this edition will provide a means by which

these realities may be more fully addressed and the lack of current critical discourse on many of these important poems redressed.

The collaboration has been both rewarding and productive. We have divided the material evenly between us with each responsible for four poems including individual introductions and notes (Laskaya: *Sir Orfeo, Emaré, Sir Launfal*, and *Lay le Freine*; Salisbury: *Sir Degaré, Sir Gowther, Erle of Tolous, Sir Cleges*). We have also shared the production of prefatory material, the general introduction, the glossary, and the appendices. In this way we have been able to cope with and finally overcome a continental separation – Eugene, Oregon, to Rochester, New York – that even the use of e-mail and Federal Express could not completely eradicate. Admittedly, there are variations in the ways we have approached the texts, but we have resisted uniformity, preferring instead to encourage discussion by retaining our differences.

We are grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for assistance in the production of this volume. We would also like to thank the following: the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to use the Auchinleck MS in the preparation of *Sir Orfeo, Sir Degaré, Lai le Freine* as well as Advocates 19.3.1 for *Sir Gowther*; the British Library for permission to work from the Cotton Caligula MS in the preparation of *Emaré*; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for the use of Cambridge Ff. 2.38 in the preparation of *Erle of Tolous;* and the Bodleian Library at Oxford for permission to work from Bodleian 6922 for *Sir Cleges*. We would both especially like to thank Russell A. Peck for his meticulous reading and prodigious commentary and Alan Lupack, Curator of the Robbins Library and second reader, for providing often obscure research materials. Eve's special thanks go to Ronald B. Herzman, mentor and colleague at SUNY Geneseo, and Graham Drake, also at Geneseo, for their critical assessments; to Sarah L. Higley, whose trial run of these materials in the classroom proved invaluable; to Karen Saupe and Jennifer Church for their expertise in the intricacies of Word Perfect; and especially to daughter Meghan whose cooperation and patience contributed to the timely completion of the project. Anne's special thanks go to James W. Earl, colleague and Director of the Medieval Studies Program at the University of Oregon; to the students in her senior seminar on Chivalry and to those in her Romance course for their careful reading and response; to Christy Bradford-Racy for her assistance on bibliographic searches; to the staff of the University of Oregon Knight Library who, in the midst of a major building renovation and expansion project, helped locate research materials not readily available; and especially to family and friends: Suzanne Lesley Gerhardt, Christine Antonetti, and Suzanne Gatch for their love, friendship, and support. Lastly, Anne thanks her mother, Janet Houser, for all those childhood reading hours which provided faith in the human imagination, joy in the presence of ambiguity, and pleasure in the magic of fiction.

Introduction

What is a Breton lay and why is its designation in Middle English important? Without the identification of "Middle English," the Breton lay may refer to any of the poems produced between approximately 1150 and 1450 which claim to be literary versions of lays sung by ancient Bretons to the accompaniment of the harp.[1] The subsequent codification of the literary genre is attributed to the Anglo-Norman writer Marie de France whose twelve lays immortalize this tradition of Breton storytelling in the twelfth century.[2] Set in Brittany, Wales, or Normandy, Marie's lays address matters of courtesy, chivalry, and courtly love, concerns of interest to her multilingual, aristocratic audience.[3] Old French imitations of her lays followed in the thirteenth century with varying degrees of success; many of them are now lost.[4] The Middle English lays – *Sir Orfeo, Sir Degaré, Lay le Freine, Erle of Tolous, Emaré, Sir Gowther, Sir Launfal* – were composed sometime between the late thirteenth or early fourteenth and the early fifteenth century. Of them only Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the anonymous *Lay le Freine* may be considered translations or adaptations of Marie's poems.[5]

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[1] The French lais include: *Desiré, Melion, Graelent, Doon, Guingamor, Tydorel, Tyolet, Haveloc, L'Espine, Le Cor, Nabaret, Le Trot, L'Ombre, Le Conseil, L'Amours, Aristote, Le Vair Palefroi, L'Oiselet, L'Espervier, Narcisse, Le Lecheor, Ignauré*, and the twelve lays of Marie de France.

[2] See Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, translators, *The Lais of Marie de France* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978). Marie's lays include: *Guigemar, Equitan, LeFresne, Bisclavret, Lanval, Deus Amanz, Yonec, Laüstic, Milun, Chaitivel, Chevrefoil, Eliduc*. There are translations or other versions in Old Norse, Middle High German, Italian, French, and Latin (*Laüstic* may be found in Alexander of Neckham's *De naturis rerum*).

[3] There are several examples of translation from Old French into Breton and English, which suggest the multilingual, cosmopolitan nature of Marie's audience.

[4] See Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 65–120. The acknowledged source for *Sir Orfeo, Lai d'Orfée,* is not extant.

[5] See A. C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990), 117–56.

Defining the Middle English Breton lay as a distinct genre has been a nagging concern of modern scholars. In an early attempt, A. C. Baugh offers the following:

> whether a given short romance is called a Breton lay or not depends mainly on whether it says it is one, has its scene laid in Brittany, contains a passing reference to Brittany, or tells a story found among the lais of Marie de France.[6]

The lays themselves support this definition: *Sir Degaré* is set in Brittany, *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Launfal* are "found among the lais of Marie de France," while the others make some "passing reference" to Brittany or a lost Breton source. But the poems also call themselves *contes*, stories, *gestes*, and romances, a tendency that suggests that the Middle Ages felt no clear need for generic types. Needless to say, this has created confusion among scholars about the validity of calling Middle English Breton lay a genre at all.

Most scholars see the lays as a shortened form of romance.[7] John Finlayson, for instance, looks to length as a means of differentiating these poems from other romances in Middle English. For Finlayson, the poems constitute a "sub-genre of romance" equivalent in their relation to the longer romances as short story is to novel.[8] This is certainly a valid distinction since these poems all run between eight hundred to twelve hundred lines, a mere third the length of romances such as *Bevis of Hampton, Havelok the Dane,* and *King Horn*. They also follow the general pattern of romance – separation and reunion – or, as Northrop Frye views it, a journey of descent followed by ascent and a corresponding resolution of the hero or heroine's identity, purpose, and place in the world.[9] The poems often fall into some pattern based on story type or linguistic model depending on the particular critic's criteria

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[6] See A. C. Baugh, ed., *A Literary History of England*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), p. 196.

[7] See John B. Beston, "How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?" in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature,* ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 319–36. See also Paul Strohm, "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romaunce," *Genre* 10 (1977), 1–28.

[8] See John Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English Lay," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984–85), 352–68.

[9] See Northrop Frye, *Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

for evaluation.[10] Yet the attempt to impose a single formulaic pattern on these texts in order to determine a genre has been thwarted by their resistance to conform to any single cohesive system. As Finlayson concludes, "the lay in Middle English is not a uniform sub-type of romance distinguishable by a manner of treatment and by particular combinations of motifs."[11]

Since the composition period of the Middle English lays spans approximately one hundred years, even within the group there are distinctions to be made. While the earlier lays – *Sir Orfeo, Sir Degaré, Lay le Freine* – may be identified by octosyllabic couplets, the later – *Erle of Tolous, Sir Launfal, Emaré, Sir Gowther* – may be identified by their tail-rhyme stanzas.[12] The first group, in imitation of Marie's octosyllabic poems, is more suggestive of the Breton minstrel tradition she codified in her lais; the second group reflects a native English stanzaic practice used in several other Middle English romances. Both varieties are emphatically metrical with rhythmic features undeniably musical, perhaps, as some scholars reckon, something analogous to folk music intended to be performed in public places by minstrels.[13] Certainly the relationship of these English poems to music and minstrelsy is important. In *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, Orfeo finds pleasure and solace in his harp as he grieves the loss of his bride, while in *Sir Cleges*, the hero's identity is revealed in a memorable scene of minstrelsy. None of the other poems contain such overt references to music, though in some cases they provide a courtly ethos against which the drama is played out. But since these are literary texts undoubtedly intended to be

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[10] See Kathryn Hume, "The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance," *Philological Quarterly* 53, 2 (1974), 158–80. Hume argues that there are two types of romance: Type A comprises the armor-clad folk tales, a most attractive group which celebrates achievement, joy, and order. Type B displays their heroes against a significant background, usually a specific swatch of history or pseudo-history. See also Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structure in Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978) and G. V. Smithers, "Story-patterns in Some Breton Lays," *Medium Aevum* 22 (1953), 61–92. Smithers distinguishes between three types of recurring story patterns: Type I include those in which there is contact between a mortal and a supernatural being; Type II include those in which a mortal and a supernatural being have a child; Type III include a father/son combat. In *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), Lee C. Ramsey subsumes the lays into a study of chivalric romances and classifies them by themes such as child exile, superman, fairy princess, and "gentils and vilains."

[11] See Finlayson, pp. 366–67.

[12] See Mortimer J. Donovan's comparison of the two forms in *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties*. Chaucer's Franklin's Tale, and Wife of Bath's Tale, written in decasyllabic couplets, require a third formal category.

[13] See Constance Bullock-Davies, "The Form of the Breton Lay," *Medium Aevum* 42 (1973), 18–31. See also Rachel Bromwich, "A Note on the Breton Lays," *Medium Aevum* 26 (1957), 36–38.

read aloud, the verbal repetitions, rhyming patterns, and exhortations to "listen," all capture the vibrant cadences of oral performance.

With much critical attention turned to matters of "form," it is not surprising that other crucial generic features have been overlooked or even subtly discounted. Subject matter and its treatment, for instance, has been cast aside as having "nothing distinctive" to offer.[14] Neither has there been much attention paid to the extra-literary environment in which these poems were produced. To define the genre then we must not only take into consideration the formal nature of these narratives, i.e., stylistic and structural features, but their discursive nature, the social and ideological contexts which contribute to their generic identity.[15] Furthermore, a genre as elusive as Middle English Breton Lay demands consideration of its interaction with an actual audience whose interests and concerns are their subjects.[16]

The Prologue to *Lay le Freine* is a good place to begin an examination of internal generic attributes because it characterizes the subject matter that is shared by many of the English lays:

We redeth oft and findeth ywrite –
And this clerkes wele it wite – *know*
Layes that ben in harping
Ben yfounde of ferli thing. *marvelous*
Sum bethe of wer and sum of wo, *war*
And sum of joie and mirth also,
And sum of trecherie and of gile,
Of old aventours that fel while;
And sum of bourdes and ribaudy, *jokes; ribaldry*
And mani ther beth of fairy.
Of al thinges that men seth,
Mest o love, for sothe thai beth. *Most*
(lines 1–12)

The Prologue's beginning posits an audience of readers who share in a particular tradition of storytelling – "layes that ben in harping" – that addresses a number of

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[14] See A. C. Baugh, p. 196.

[15] See Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee, *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985).

[16] For discussions of audience interaction with Chaucer's work, see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); R. W. Hanning, "The Audience as Co-Creator of the First Chivalric Romances," *Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981), 1–28.

marvelous happenings: war, woe, joy, happiness, treachery, guile, adventure, bawdiness, ribaldry, the fairy world, and most of all, love. These subjects are familiar to a medieval audience not only from literary narratives "they redeth oft," but from the realities of medieval life. Difficult social problems especially within the family – incest, rape, abandonment, illegitimacy – as well as issues of the larger community – inheritance, exile, orphanage, poverty, violence, social mobility, punishment, rehabilitation, territorial disputes – are subjected to analysis and transformation. "Treachery and guile," which in life may go unpunished, are punished in the lays according to exacting standards of justice. "Adventures" provide the narrative impetus, spelled with occasional humor and comic relief. Plausible social contexts lend the poems an air of realism, while, at the same time, infusions of the marvelous and strange cast an aura of enchantment about them. In some poems – *Sir Orfeo, Sir Launfal, Lay le Freine, Sir Degaré* – the enchantments are of the Celtic fairy world; in others – *Erle of Tolous, Emaré, Sir Gowther*, *Sir Cleges* – they are predominantly miraculous and Christian. In the paradoxes of medieval metaphysics, when death could be life and life, death; when madness could be holiness and criminality the sign of a saint; when supernatural spirits could mate with mortals and transformation could be a possibility of everyday life, the unexpected and magical becomes the norm.[17] The Otherworld, Celtic or Christian, could exist in a subterranean realm or in the heavens, or even just beyond the reach of a hand. When two spheres of reality are perceived to coexist so intimately, the boundaries between them are often indistinguishable.

But the subject matter of most concern, as the Prologue to *Lay le Freine* suggests, is love. This may not be particularly surprising, considering the importance of love to romance, but there are subtle distinctions to be made between love in these poems, the longer Middle English romances, and Marie's lais for that matter. These Middle English lays are not the courtly love stories of Marie de France – stories of arranged marriages, and subsequent longing for happiness and fulfillment outside its parameters – but rather stories of lovers whose happy ending resides in marriage. Five of these poems end in marriages – *Sir Gowther, Sir Degaré, Erle of Tolous, Lay le Freine*, and *Sir Launfal*,[18] while the others – *Sir Orfeo, Emaré*, and *Sir Cleges* – end in marital reunion. Because of their shorter length they intensify and emphasize the importance of truth in love, both for its stabilizing influence on the family unit

[17] See Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, translated by János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 176.

[18] Sir Launfal "marries," is separated from the fay, and then reunited after a year.

and its concommitant stabilization of a larger community.[19] They address both the personal and social in ways different from Marie de France's Norman, aristocratic orientation.

Since many of these poems "beth of fairy," the positing of another time and place, the employment of what might be called a psychology of displacement is a necessary component of their storytelling strategy. The fairytale beginnings disrupt ordinary perceptions of time and allow the audience to reperceive the present by removing it from the events of the moment. The "once upon a time," so familiar to us in our own fairytales, signals imminent entry into an otherworldly environment, where trouble invariably accompanies enchantment, where actual reality is subject to transformation by magic as well as merit.

In the late Middle Ages, Brittany provided fertile soil for the English imagination. The legendary forest of Brocéliande, the open plains and big sky, its rocky coasts and otherworldly remoteness were features that inspired writers like Chaucer whose own version of a Breton lay, The Franklin's Tale, features the rocks of Brittany's coast in a test of marital fidelity. Chaucer's invocation of the Breton tradition at the beginning of the tale effectively removes his audience from their place in the present to sometime in a distant past:

> Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
> Of diverse aventures maden layes,
> Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge; *Rhymed*
> Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe,
> Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce. *read them; their*
> And oon of hem have I in remembraunce.
> (F 709–14)

It is generally agreed that Chaucer knew and made use of the Auchinleck manuscript containing three of the early lays: *Lay le Freine, Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degaré*.[20] Some scholars suggest that he was making the most of a current vogue, capitalizing on the appeal of the "old-fashioned," sentimental nostalgia invoked by the genre. Kathryn Hume more definitively asserts that he was capitalizing on the magical ethos associ-

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[19] See Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 179. Wittig posits a "common model" for romance, composed of "two major linking structures (separation-restoration, love-marriage)." The Middle English Breton lays, because of their brevity, emphasize the latter of these formations.

[20] See Laura A. Hibbard [Loomis], "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941), 14–33.

ated with the Breton tradition.[21] Both perspectives address a process of poetic appropriation not uncommon in medieval literature. But there is more going on here than a sentimental journey into an enchanted pagan past. Rather, Chaucer seems to be reclaiming a tradition that had migrated with the ancient Celts from Britain to Brittany in the fifth century. As Emily Yoder suggests, Breton lays "were considered to be ancient stories of the British people who inhabited the main island of Britain" and are not to be confused with stories told by contemporary late medieval Bretons, inhabitants of Brittany located across the English Channel.[22] Yet the "olde gentil Britons" to whom Chaucer refers are the progenitors of the Breton tradition. The two seemingly separate groups – Britons and Bretons – share the same genealogy and cultural heritage. The very interchangeability of the terms "Briton" and "Breton" underscores that kinship relation as does the dual connotation of *Bretaigne* (both Britain and Brittany or Little Britain as it came to be known). The facts of rivalry between France and Britain for Brittany, the claims of both on its sovereignty, and its strategic importance in the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), infuse a seemingly innocuous poetic act with political motive.[23] The "matter of Britain" (i.e., Arthurian legend), dominated by French writers such as Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, Wace, Marie de France, and others since the twelfth century, was ripe for English reclamation in the fourteenth century. The Middle English Breton lays are part of an agenda for reinstating a cultural heritage.

Both French culture and its aristocratic language, brought to England in the eleventh century by the invading Normans, were, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, systematically displaced by the cultural forces of England. After the deposition of Richard II, whose love of French culture and language was well-known and ridiculed by his detractors, his successor, Henry IV, made English the official

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[21] Kathryn Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin's Tale a Breton Lai," *Philological Quarterly* 51.1 (1972), 365–79. Hume argues that there are three typical features of the lay which Chaucer knew and used: (1) "a concern with love and with what the Franklin calls 'gentilesse,' (2) the frequent use of magic (both fairie and other) as a plot device, and (3) an a-Christian ethic" (p. 366).

[22] See Emily K. Yoder, "Chaucer and the 'Breton' Lay" *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977/78), 74–77.

[23] See Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France, 1337–1453* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 79. Although Brittany remained neutral during the war, there were claims to her sovereignty made by both England and France. Many English garrisons were stationed there and, according to Seward, Brittany was the site of one of the most memorable events of the war. Called the "Combat of the Thirty" it was a staged event, a chivalric tournament between thirty English soldiers and thirty French soldiers. Suggested by the English garrison commander, the idea was to come to some determination of military superiority without a fullblown battle. The French won, killing nine English soldiers including the garrison commander and taking the rest prisoner.

language of Britain.[24] After 1362, with the opening of Parliament in English, rather than French, the dominance of French in England rapidly diminished. English poets could no longer presuppose a bilingual or multilingual audience, but rather they focused on an English-speaking audience:

Bifel a cas in Breteyne,	*Once upon a time; Brittany*
Whereof was made *Lay le Frain*;	
In Ingliche for to tellen ywis	*i.e., I will tell you in English*
of an asche for sothe it is. . .	*ash*
(*Lay le Freine* prologue, lines 23–26)	

The anonymous poet of *Lay le Freine* does not presume that his audience knows the heroine's French name means "asche" in English, but rather explicitly defines it.

One minor geographic change that the poet of *Lay le Freine* makes from Marie's version – where Brittany becomes the "west cuntre" of England – accrues added significance in view of the processes of reclaiming the heritage. Orfeo's removal from a mythical place in ancient Greece to Winchester, the ancient Anglo-Saxon capital, *Emaré's* bringing a tale "out of Brittany," and the changes that render *Sir Launfal* more "public" and "concrete" within a fourteenth-century English context, all suggest an agenda very unlike Marie's. These discernible changes in orientation, as A. C. Spearing suggests, imply a process of adapting Marie's lais to an English "lay" audience in order to speak to their concerns.[25] What Susan Crane suggests about insular romance holds true for the English lays: "[they] are attuned to the realities of English life," with voices shaped to answer England's questions.[26]

Because of the social and political events of the period, some of those questions have to do with issues such as class identity, personal identity, and positioning within society. Perhaps that is one reason there are so many identifiable folktale motifs that figure significantly in the reconstructed action of these poems – the Calumniated Queen or Persecuted Wife of *Erle of Tolous* and *Emaré*; the Wish Child or Devil's Contract of *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Orfeo*; the Spendthrift Knight and Strokes Shared of

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[24] For a thorough discussion of the complexities of linguistic displacement in England, which also included Latin, see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979). See also John H. Fisher, "A Language Policy for Lancastrian England," *PMLA* 107 (1992), 1168–80.

[25] See A. C. Spearing, "Marie de France and her Middle English Adapters," pp. 117–56.

[26] See Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 12.

Sir Cleges; the Father/Son Combat of *Sir Degaré*, for example.[27] Folktales bring with them the tensions inherent within a particular social environment; they constitute the venue by which, according to Jack Zipes, "common people perceived nature and their social order."[28] Drawing much of their social *energia* from folktale, these poems reflect a perception of nature and the social order as seen through the eyes of the "common people." But rather than consistently upholding traditionality, as Carol Fewster claims for Middle English romance,[29] they affirm the dominant values of a dynamic society and an urgent necessity to redefine its norms.

The regional differences among the lays, differences determined by dialect, have fueled speculation about the composition of the actual audience for whom these poems were intended. *Lay le Freine,* whose dialect is similar to Chaucer's, is placed near London or Middlesex, as is *Sir Orfeo. Sir Launfal* and *Sir Degaré* are thought to derive from somewhere in the South Midlands, and *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré,* and *Sir Gowther* are thought to have originated in the Northeast Midlands.[30] These regional and dialectical differences, as some scholars suggest, probably identify corresponding differences in audience. While some posit an audience derived from the new mercantile class of wealthy, semi-aristocratic wool merchant houses of East Anglia, others would define the audience in terms of what K. B. McFarlane calls the "fallen gentry."[31] John B. Beston posits two separate groups: for the earlier couplet lays a "rather sophisticated audience, familiar with the courtly tradition," and for the tail-

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[27] Mortimer J. Donovan's suggestion that a shift in emphasis of the Middle English lays from *courtesie* to *aventure* signals "retrogression and tends to reduce the lay to a folktale" is a significant if rather negative recognition of the relation of the lays to folktale. See *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties*, p. 122.

[28] See Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979; rpt. New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 5.

[29] See Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 1987), p. 30.

[30] The issue of origin is still under contention. Variations occur even among versions of the same poem.

[31] See Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 91–116. See also Harriet Hudson "Middle English Popular Romances: The Manuscript Evidence," *Manuscripta* 28 (1984), 67–68. Hudson uses the term "fallen gentry" as defined by K. B. McFarlane in *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: The Ford Lectures for 1953 and Related Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

rhyme lays "a somewhat crude but robust audience."[32] Eamon Duffy claims that the audience, at least by the late fifteenth century, is composed of a wider segment of society accounted for by "the spread of literacy down the social scale, even to many women."[33] It is not surprising then that the production of these manuscripts corresponded with a growing demand for reading materials – reading materials congruent with the concerns of an increasingly diverse audience.

The poems that we have chosen to present derive from five manuscript anthologies. Beginning with the Auchinleck MS, compiled possibly in 1330 in a London bookshop,[34] we derive *Sir Orfeo, Lay le Freine*, and *Sir Degaré*; later manuscripts – Cambridge University Library Ff. 2.38, British Library Cotton Caligula A.ii, National Library of Scotland Advocates 19.3.1, and Oxford's Bodleian Library 6922 (Ashmole 61) – supply the others.[35] Of the group, Auchinleck reigns first and foremost both in content and presentation. Although thirteen items have been lost, this manuscript contains 334 leaves (voluminous by medieval standards) and a total of forty-four narratives which Laura Hibbard Loomis categorizes as follows: eighteen romances, one chronicle and a list of Norman barons, two pious tales of the miracle type, eight legends of saints and other holy legends, one visit to the Otherworld, one humorous tale, two debates, one homily, two monitory pieces, three works of religious instruction, and three of satire and complaint. As her summary suggests, the romances, a genre in which she includes *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, dominate the manuscript and point to the popularity of such narratives for its fourteenth-century audience.[36]

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[32] See John B. Beston, "How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?" in *The Learned and the Lewed*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 319–36.

[33] See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400– c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 68. For further discussion of literacy in England see JoAnn Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling 1340–1548* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); James Westfall Thompson, *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1938; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1963). See also Carol M. Meale, ed. *Women & Literature in Britain, 1150–1500,* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[34] See Laura A. Hibbard [Loomis], "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330–1340," *PMLA* 57 (1942), 595–627.

[35] Cambridge Ff. 2.38 (*Erle of Tolous)*; Cotton Caligula (*Sir Launfal* and *Emaré)*; Advocates 19.3.1 (*Sir Gowther)*; Bodleian Ashmole 61 (*Sir Cleges)*.

[36] See Derek Pearsall, "Middle English Romance and its Audiences," in *Historical & Editorial Studies in Medieval & Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen,* eds. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes with Hans Jansen (Groningen: Wolters Noordhoff, 1985), pp. 37–47. Pearsall notes that the

Cambridge Ff. 2.38, compiled in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, is equally voluminous, containing forty-three items including *Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, Eglamour of Artois, Octavian, Le Bone Florence of Rome, Robert of Sicely, Syr Tryamoure, Sir Degaré*, saints' lives such as those of Margaret, Thomas, Edmund; Mirk's Festial; a collection of homilies; devotional works such as *The Assumption of the Virgin*; *The Seven Sages of Rome*, which is a collection of didactic narratives; and other miscellaneous items. Cotton Caligula A.ii, compiled from 1451–60, contains thirty-eight items including *Chevaliere Assigne, The Siege of Jerusalem, Octavian, Libeaus Desconus, Isumbras*, *Eglamour of Artois*, *Emaré*, *Launfal Miles* (*Sir Launfal*), *Susannah and the Two Elders*, Lydgate's *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, his piece on table manners, and *The Chorle and the Bird*, medical remedies, saints' lives, seventeen devotional works, and several didactic items. Advocates 19.3.1, compiled in the late fifteenth century, more modestly contains Lydgate's *Stans Puer ad Mensam* and *The Life of Our Lady*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Amadace of Gaul*, though its length (432 leaves) might suggest greater diversity. The late fifteenth century Bodleian 6922 (Ashmole 61) boasts thirty-nine items in 162 leaves and includes *Sir Cleges* (found between *Tale of an Incestuous Daughter* and *The Founding of the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls*), *Erle of Tolous, Kyng Orfew (Sir Orfeo), Lybeaus Desconus*, *Isumbras*, didactic works such as *A Father's Instruction to His Son, A Good Wife Instructs Her Daughter, Twelve Points for Purchasers of Land,* three of Lydgate's works (*Stans Puer ad Mensam, Rammeshorne,* and *The Governans of Man* [dietary advice]), and fourteen devotional items including personal morning and evening prayers. What we are witnessing when we examine the contents of these manuscripts, compiled over the course of more than a century, is not only evidence of increased demand, but also a diversification of literary tastes. From the "highly literary" Auchinleck to the more pious and devotional materials in the later manuscripts there seems to be a marked change in the concerns of a newly literate English audience. Though the new demands may be more pious and practical, the Middle English Breton lays, as well as the instructive romances, remain a part of the new directions.

These manuscript anthologies stand as important indicators both of England's burgeoning literacy and of an increasing privatization of reading for an audience interested in redefining social norms.[37] Frances McSparran and P. R. Robinson

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Auchinleck MS is the medieval equivalent of a "coffee-table" book, probably intended for private household use.

[37] See Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350–1400* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). Coleman argues that the extension of the "middle class" marked a corresponding increase in manuscript patronage. The newly literate were interested in "what concerned pious men of commerce, eager to establish law and order, principles of morality and peace" (p. 71).

posit an audience of "devout and literate layfolk" and conclude that the Cambridge MS functioned as "family reading in a pious middle-class household." Derek Pearsall notes evidence of "more attention to the needs of private readers in the presentation and lay-out of the texts."[38] Whatever reading audience the compilers of these manuscripts had in mind, it is clear that these voluminous collections served many functions: the romance narratives could be read aloud for entertainment and instruction in familial matters; the didactic items could be used for the instruction of children; and the devotional works could address the need for private reading and meditation in the edification of one's own soul. What the diverse contents of these manuscripts seem to indicate is the beginning of a new kind of reading – one more private than public, more family oriented than not.[39] If a genre can finally be determined by its interaction with an audience then these poems are "English" Breton lays largely because they point to a renewed interest in the nuclear English family and the shaping of distinctly English family values.

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[38] See Derek Pearsall, "Middle English Romance and its Audiences," p. 42.

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Sir Orfeo

Introduction

The Auchinleck manuscript, a tremendously important anthology dating from about 1330–40, contains the earliest known Middle English version of *Sir Orfeo*. The manuscript was apparently compiled for affluent but non-aristocratic readers.[1] It includes a wide variety of materials, many of which are extant only in this MS; all the texts of the Auchinleck are in English. The manuscript provides considerable information on literacy and book-production in the early fourteenth century, and it has received particular attention because there is some evidence which suggests that Chaucer may have owned it.[2]

The author of *Sir Orfeo* is unknown. The language of the text suggests that it was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries within the Westminster-Middlesex area. No immediate source for the poem is known. Most scholars assume that an Old French source existed at one time. References to a musical lay of Orpheus can be found in several Old French texts: the twelfth-century romance, *Floire et Blanceflor* refers to "le lai dOrphey" (line 855); the *Lai de l'Espine* mentions "Le lai lor sone d'Orphei" (line 181); and the Vulgate *Prose Lancelot* indicates the existence of a "lay d'orfay."[3] Some scholarly efforts have been made to find connections between *Sir Orfeo* and a number of other texts, including Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, King Alfred's Old English translation of Boethius, Walter Map's

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[1] For information on the MS see the facsimile edition, *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS. 19.2.1*, intro., Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London: Scholar Press, 1977); E. Kölbing, "Vier Romanzen-Handschriften," *Englische Studien* 7 (1884), 177–201; and A. J. Bliss, "Notes on the Auchinleck Manuscript," *Speculum* 26 (1951), 652–58.

[2] See Laura Hibbard Loomis' articles: "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941), 14–33; "Chaucer and the Auchinleck Manuscript: Thopas and Guy of Warwick," in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 1940), pp. 111–28; and "The Auchinleck MS and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330–40," *PMLA* 57 (1942), 595–627. See also *Sources and Analogues of Chaucers Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 486–559.

[3] The passages from these texts are cited in *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. xxxi–xxxii.

De Nugis Curialium, and more. None of these is conclusive. What is certain is that *Sir Orfeo* presents a Breton Lay on a classical theme. The Orpheus myth is, of course, well known throughout the Western world. Whether as lover, musician, or priestly wisdom figure, Orpheus can be found represented in ancient Greek art and literature from as early as the sixth century B.C., and the narrative can be found in a number of different ancient cultures.[4] Orpheus is also well-represented by authors known to the medieval world, including Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Boethius, the anonymous author of the Hellenistic Jewish *Testament of Orpheus*, Clement of Alexandria, Fulgentius, and later William of Conches, Nicholas Trivet, Boccaccio, the anonymous author of the *Ovide Moralisé*, Pierre Bersuire, Christine de Pizan, and Robert Henryson, just to name a few.[5] The power of the Orpheus myth to resonate through time and within both classical and medieval literatures has led to a number of divergent interpretations of the lay of *Sir Orfeo*; it has been read within Christian contexts, Celtic-folktale contexts, as well as within historical, philosophical, psychological, intertextual, and poetic contexts.

The basic narrative of unassuaged grief and the image of Orpheus the magical or shamanistic harper originates in classical literature. For the late Middle Ages, the best known classical sources would have been Ovid's *Metamorphoses* X and Virgil's *Georgics* IV (as well as the numerous commentaries on them). Through medieval commentaries, Christian re-readings of the narrative became well-known: 1) Orpheus's backward glance and his consequent loss of Eurydice becomes emblematic for temptation and sin; or 2) Orpheus becomes a Christ figure and the tale foretells

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[4] See Emmet Robbins' essay, "Famous Orpheus," in *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth*, ed. John Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 3–23. See also Joan M. Erikson, *Legacies: Prometheus, Orpheus, and Socrates* (New York: Norton, 1993); William K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1966; rpt. Princeton University Press, 1993); Elizabeth A. Newby, *A Portrait of the Artist: the Legends of Orpheus and Their Use in Medieval and Renaissance Aesthetics*, Harvard Dissertations in Comparative Literature (New York: Garland, 1987); *The "Vulgate" Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Creation Myth and the Story of Orpheus*, ed. Frank T. Coulson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991); *Le Mythe d'Orphée aux Animaux et ses Prolongements dans le Judaisme, le Christianisme et l'Islam*, ed. Andre Dupont-Sommer (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei lincei, 1975).

[5] See the comprehensive study by John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); also Klaus Heitmann, "Orpheus im Mittelalter," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 45 (1963), 253–94; Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 41 (1966), 643–55. *Orpheus, the Metamorphosis of a Myth*, ed. John Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), especially the essays by Eleanor Irwin, "The Songs of Orpheus and the New Song of Christ," pp. 51–62); and Patricia Vicari, "*Sparagmos*: Orpheus among the Christians," pp. 63–83.

redemption. The lay of *Sir Orfeo* blends these received cultural materials with both Celtic and Germanic folk materials, especially the Celtic journey to the Otherworld, thereby producing what Jeff Rider terms "a hybrid super-myth."[6]

Sir Orfeo situates the action not in classical Greece but in medieval England. Heurodis is not actually killed (as she is in most classical and medieval versions); she is, instead, abducted by the fairy king so that she resembles "the taken" mortals common in Irish *aithed* narratives. Once Heurodis is taken, Orfeo (anachronistically a ruler of a medieval kingdom) appoints his loyal steward to rule in his stead. Additionally, he instructs the people to elect a parliament and name a new king if they ever learn of his death. Donning the pilgrim's cloak, he renounces his kingdom and all his wealth and retreats into self-imposed poverty and exile. The only object he carries with him from his courtly life into his new life is his harp. When he plays his harp, "whereon was al his gle" (line 267), he comforts himself and charms the beasts of nature. After ten years, he happens to spy Heurodis riding a palfrey with the fairy king's hunting party and follows after her. Here we do not travel to Hades or Hell but to the Celtic Otherworld "in at a roche" (line 347). Knocking at the gate of the Otherworld palace, Orfeo, dressed as a begging minstrel, gets past the porter, past the tableau of the dead, and offers to sing for the fairy king. When the fairy king offers the "rash boon" found so frequently in folklore narratives, Orfeo sees his chance and asks for Heurodis. With a bit of hesitation, the fairy king relents and the two mortals are reunited. The fairy king places no taboo about looking back on Orfeo as he does in the classical version. Instead of the traditional backward glance which loses Eurydice forever, the fourteenth-century Breton lay hero leads his Heurodis back home. Disguising himself once more as a beggar, he tests his steward's loyalty and regains his throne.

As with many Breton lays, this narrative recreates folklore motifs: the journey to the Otherworld, the man who loses his wife/lover, the rash boon, the exile-return pattern, and the testing of the loyal steward. The lay creates a double narrative in which the loss of the queen precipitates the loss of the kingdom, and the private recuperation of the queen precipitates the public recuperation of the kingdom. It has

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[6] Jeff Rider, "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 24 (1988), 356. On the complex relationship of medieval authors to tradition, see Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). Alexandre Leupin suggests that "medieval writers show neither idolatrous respect for a tradition . . . nor the anguish of innovation conceived as rupture: at every turn the old is rejuvenated within the new, and the new is the incessant transformation of a textual 'already there'"; see his chapter, "Absolute Reflexivity: Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*," in his book, *Barbarolexis: Medieval Writing and Sexuality*, trans. Kate M. Cooper (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 22.

often been noted that the poem's structure is built upon antitheses: loss and restoration, sorrow and joy, wealth and poverty, the calm beauty of the lush, warm garden and the grief of the stark, cold or indifferent "wildernes," the elegance of the fairy world and the macabre tableau of the death courtyard, the brutality of nature and the civilizing force of art. But contrast is also problematic. More than one scholar has noticed the way the eerie Otherworld seems to mirror the medieval court world of the poem. And more than one scholar has examined the oppositions with a deconstructive turn. Even the task of interpreting the major characters unravels a plethora of possibilities. The fairy king, for example, abducts Heurodis, but he is not overtly identified as evil in the poem; instead, he operates outside and beyond the human framework of understanding. He can be read as a demonic figure, particularly if we invoke a medieval Christian framework. But invoking other frameworks will produce other readings: he can serve as an image of fate, a representative of death, an adversary who comes to life to punish sin, a pre-Christian divinity or spirit, a rupture in meaning, the representative of artifice, irrationality, "king of textuality," and more.[7]

A similar complexity or instability of meaning can be found in Pierre Bersuire's *Reductorium Morale* (c. 1325–1337), a text roughly contemporaneous with *Sir Orfeo*. Written in Latin, this moralized encyclopedia offers opposing interpretations of the Orpheus figure. First, Bersuire imagines Orpheus as a Christ-figure:

> Let us speak allegorically and say that Orpheus, the child of the sun, is Christ the son of God the Father, who from the beginning led Eurydice, that is, the human soul to himself. And from the beginning Christ joined her to himself through his special prerogative. But the devil, a serpent, drew near the new bride, that is, created *de novo*, while she collected flowers that is, while she seized the forbidden apple, and bit her by temptation and killed her by sin, and finally she went to the world below. Seeing this, Christ-Orpheus wished himself to descend to the lower world and thus he retook his wife, that is, human nature, ripping her from the hands of the ruler of Hell himself; and he led her with him to the upper world, saying this verse from Canticles 2:10, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.[8]

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[7] "King of textuality" is a phrase and an idea developed by Roy Michael Liuzza in his article, "*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 269–84.

[8] The Latin reads: *Dic allegorice quod Orpheus, filius solis, est Christus, filius dei patris, qui a principio Euridicem .i. animam humanam per caritatem & amorem duxit ipsamque per specialem prerogativam a principio sibi coniunxit. Verumtamen serpens, diabolus, ipsam novam nuptam .i. de novo creatam, dum flores colligeret .i. de pomo vetito appeteret, per temptationem momordit, & per peccatum occidit, & finaliter ad infernum transmisit. Quod videns Orpheus Christus in infernum personaliter*

Then, immediately following this allegorization, he imagines that Orpheus represents sinful humanity:

> Or let us say that Orpheus is a sinner who, by the bite of the serpent, that is, by the temptation of the Devil, lost his wife, that is, his soul, when she was indiscreetly collecting flowers, that is, applying her mind to the flux of *temporalia*. But he recovered her spiritually when he descended to the lower world through thought and through the power of his sweet measured words. Fear alone of infernal punishment made him penitent for his sins and thus he regained his wife through grace . . . . But many are there who look backward through love of temporalia just as a dog returns to his vomit, and they love their wife too much, that is, the recovered soul, and so they favor their concupiscence and return the eyes of their mind to it and so they put her by and Hell receives her again. So says John 12:25, "He that loveth his life shall lose it."[9]

Similar instability in meaning can be found in the *Ovide Moralisé*, also dating from around the same time as *Sir Orfeo*. But the instability of meaning found in the commentaries on the myth stem from juxtaposing different avenues of interpretation; within *Sir Orfeo*, the ambiguities arise, not in a chronological listing of different interpretations but by the simultaneous interweaving and resonance of different innuendoes and possibilities.

If anything in the poem forms a stable center, it is the harp. More than any character, the harp is the central image of the poem, since, from beginning to end, its presence is known. The harp was a powerful metaphor in classical and medieval culture. As a Pythagorean model of perfect harmony and proportion, its strings came to represent the music of the spheres: a metaphor for the harmonious cosmos. It was also associated with the spiritual life, the power of grace, heavenly music, and the

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voluit descendere & sic uxorem suam .i. humanam naturam rehabuit, ipsamque de regno tenebrarum ereptam ad superos secum duxit, dicens illud Canticorum .ii. "Surge, propera amica mea & veni." Pierre Bersuire, *Metamorphosis Ovidiana, moraliter explanata* (Paris, 1509), fol. LXXXv. Both English and Latin passages are edited and cited in Friedman, pp. 127–28.

[9] The Latin reads: *Vel dic quod Orpheus est peccator, qui scilicet morsu serpentis, .i. diaboli temptatione, uxorem suam .i. animam perdit dum indiscrete ad colligendum flores .i. ad congreganda fluxibilia temporalia intendit, sed tamen ipsam spiritualiter recuperat quando ad inferos per consider-ationem descendit & per orationem dulciter modulatur. Solus enim timor infernalis supplicii facit de vitiis poenitere & et sic facit uxorem per gratiam rehaberi . . . Verumtamen multi sunt qui quia retro per amorem temporalium respiciunt, & tanquam canis ad vomitum mentaliter revertuntur, & ipsam uxorem scilicet animam recuperatam nimis diligunt ita quod concupiscentiis eius favent & ad ipsam mentis oculos retrovertunt ipsam iterum amitunt & infernus eam recipit. Io. xii. "Qui amat animam suam perdet eam"* (fol. LXXIIIr). Cited and translated in Friedman, pp. 128–29.

harmony of the spirit. Michael Masi notes, "Compared to the music of the reed and other wind instruments, [the harp] was the instrument of grace and goodness, not of sensuality and ribaldry. It was a sacred instrument and the quality of its music was not to be confused with the secular entertainment of other music."[10] Certainly for a medieval Christian audience, the image could easily resonate with the numerous citheras of Old Testament kings and prophets, especially with the lyre of the psalm-writer, King David. In *Sir Orfeo*, the harp charms the animals, brings harmony where there was hostility, and is the one item which Orfeo carries over from his kingly world into his beggar world. It is also the one object which is shared by both character and poet; it bridges the fictional world of the lay and the actual world of the lay minstrel. Furthermore, the harp succeeds where armies of men fail; it charms the fairy king and is essential for Heurodis' recovery and for Orfeo's restoration. The orphic song emphasizes the power of art, eloquence, poetry, music, and rhetoric. Like Amphion, the legendary builder of Thebes, who charmed the stones of the city into place with his harp, Orfeo and his harp can represent functions of culture, language, and civilization. In an eleventh-century poem by Thierry of Saint-Trond, Orpheus, "trusting with all the power of his spirit in the divinity of his art, bravely took what he desired from [the Otherworld of] Styx. Thus art, aided by firm purpose, vanquished nature."[11] Nicolas Trivet, who wrote a commentary on Boethius (c. 1305) contemporaneous with *Sir Orfeo*, also emphasizes this aspect of the narrative. Trivet writes: "By Orpheus, we should understand the part of the intellect which is instructed in wisdom and eloquence . . . . Orpheus, then, by his sweet lyre, that is of his eloquence, brought the wicked, brutal, and wild animals/men of the wood to the law of reason."[12]

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[10] Michael Masi, "The Christian Music of *Sir Orfeo*," *Classical Folia* 28 (1974), 19. Masi also points to John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 31–36.

[11] Thierry of Saint-Trond's poem is cited in Peter Dronke, "The Return of Eurydice," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 23 (1962), 199; and in Friedman, pp. 165–66. The Latin reads: *Numine sic artis fidens industria mentis, / Fortiter extorsit a Styge quod voluit. / Sic ars naturam vicit, studio mediante, / Virtuti dominae cedere cuncta probans.* The full text of the poem is in F. W. Otto, *Commentarii critici in codices Bibliothecae Academicae Gissensis Graecos et Latinos* (Giessen: G. F. Heyeri, 1842), pp. 163–65.

[12] Cited in Friedman, pp. 110–11. The Latin reads: *Orpheum intelligitur pars intellectiva instructa sapientia et eloquentia . . . . Iste autem per suavitatem citharae id est eloquentiae impies brutales e silvestres reduxit ad normam rationis.* See also Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, Lib. I, Lec. xxi.

Where the brilliant Otherworld is characterized by visual artifice and stasis, Orfeo's song breaks into its suspended motion and charms Heurodis back to life. As Roy M. Liuzza comments, "Heurodis must be resurrected by the voice of the singer just as the written word, in medieval linguistic thought, must be revived by the voice of the reader/performer."[13] But even the harp, the powerful central image of the lay doesn't have the last word or final sound. Any semiotic system we bring to this poem will fail to capture all the meanings of the text. As Jeff Rider comments, "What makes *Sir Orfeo* so remarkable is the degree of critical response it has generated, the high praise it has earned, and the almost utter lack of accord among critics as to its interpretation. The poem seems to be remythified with each reading; each reading makes us feel that the previous one, even yesterday's, was inadequate."[14]

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[13] Roy M. Liuzza, "*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 282.

[14] Jeff Rider, p. 361.

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and interpretations of the myth. See also his article, "Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon." *Speculum* 41 (1966), 22-29.]

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Liuzza, Roy Michael. "*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance." *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 269–84.

[Considers the lay within the oral tradition and argues that "the conscious manipulation of the boundaries between orality and textuality" (p. 272) creates some of its powerful effects.]

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Rider, Jeff. "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*." *Papers on Language & Literature* 24 (1988), 343–66. [Examines "allegorization" and "remythification" as responses to myth evidenced in medieval readings of the Orpheus myth, particularly within the lay of *Sir Orfeo* and as evidenced in modern interpretations of the lay. Focusing on the interplay of "King" and "Faerie," Rider writes: "The fairy king's abduction of Heurodis might thus be seen as the representation of the allegorization, the capture and reduction, of myth, which is eventually liberated and brought back to full life through the artist's efforts" (p. 366).]

Severs, J. Burke. "The Antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*." In *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*. Ed. MacEdward Leach. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961. Pp. 187–207.

Sir Orfeo

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

	That ones Orfeo sat bifore –	*once*
35	And he might of his harping here –	*hear*
	Bot he schuld thenche that he were	*think*
	In on of the joies of Paradis,	*one*
	Swiche melody in his harping is.	
	Orfeo was a king,	
40	In Inglond an heighe lording,	*high (great) lord*
	A stalworth man and hardi bo;	*brave both*
	Large and curteys he was also.	*Generous; courtly*
	His fader was comen of King Pluto,	*descended from*
	And his moder of King Juno,	
45	That sum time were as godes yhold	*Who once; considered to be gods*
	For aventours that thai dede and told.	*did*
	This king sojournd in Traciens,	*dwelled*
	That was a cité of noble defens –	*fortifications*
	For Winchester was cleped tho	*called; then*
50	Traciens, withouten no.	*denial*
	The king hadde a quen of priis	*queen of excellence*
	That was y-cleped Dame Heurodis,	*called*
	The fairest levedi, for the nones,	*lady indeed*
	That might gon on bodi and bones,	*walk [about] in*
55	Ful of love and godenisse –	*goodness*
	Ac no man may telle hir fairnise.	*But; beauty*
	Bifel so in the comessing of May	*It happened; beginning*
	When miri and hot is the day,	*merry (pleasant)*
	And oway beth winter schours,	*away*
60	And everi feld is ful of flours,	*field*
	And blosme breme on everi bough	*blossoms bright*
	Over al wexeth miri anought,	*Everywhere grow; enough*
	This ich quen, Dame Heurodis	*same*
	Tok to maidens of priis,	*two; refinement*
65	And went in an undrentide	*late morning*
	To play bi an orchardside,	*enjoy themselves*
	To se the floures sprede and spring	
	And to here the foules sing.	*hear; birds*
	Thai sett hem doun al thre	*themselves*
70	Under a fair ympe-tre,	*grafted tree*
	And wel sone this fair quene	*very quickly*
	Fel on slepe opon the grene.	*asleep*

	The maidens durst hir nought awake,	*dared*
	Bot lete hir ligge and rest take.	*let her lie*
75	So sche slepe til after none,	*slept; noon*
	That undertide was al y-done.	*Until midday; past*
	Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,	*But; began [to]*
	Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make;	*loathsome outcry made*
	Sche froted hir honden and hir fete,	*rubbed; hands*
80	And crached hir visage – it bled wete –	*scratched her face; profusely*
	Hir riche robe hye al to-rett	*she tore all to pieces*
	And was reveyd out of hir wit.	*driven*
	The two maidens hir biside	
	No durst with hir no leng abide,	*Dared not; longer*
85	Bot ourn to the palays ful right	*ran; immediately*
	And told bothe squier and knight	
	That her quen awede wold,	*their; was going mad*
	And bad hem go and hir at-hold.	*bade them; seize*
	Knightes urn and levedis also,	*ran; ladies*
90	Damisels sexti and mo.	*[numbering] sixty and more*
	In the orchard to the quen hye come,	*they came*
	And her up in her armes nome,	*their arms took*
	And brought hir to bed atte last,	
	And held hir there fine fast.	*very securely*
95	Ac ever she held in o cri	*persisted in one*
	And wold up and owy.	*wished [to go]; away*
	When Orfeo herd that tiding	*heard*
	Never him nas wers for nothing.	*had he been as grieved by anything*
	He come with knightes tene	*came; ten*
100	To chaumber, right bifor the quene,	
	And bi-held, and seyd with grete pité,	*beheld [her]; sorrow*
	“O lef liif, what is te,	*dear life; with you*
	That ever yete hast ben so stille	*Who; yet; calm*
	And now gredest wonder schille?	*But; cries strangely shrilly*
105	Thy bodi, that was so white y-core,	*exquisitely*
	With thine nailes is all to-tore.	*torn to pieces*
	Allas! thy rode, that was so red,	*face*
	Is al wan, as thou were ded;	*pale, as [if]*
	And also thine fingres smale	*slender*
110	Beth al blodi and al pale.	
	Allas! thy lovesum eyyen to	*lovely two eyes*

	Loketh so man doth on his fo!	*as; foe*
	A, dame, ich biseche, merci!	
	Lete ben al this reweful cri,	*Let be; pitiful*
115	And tel me what the is, and hou,	*what's bothering you; how*
	And what thing may the help now."	
	Tho lay sche stille atte last	*Then*
	And gan to wepe swithe fast,	*very hard*
	And seyd thus the King to:	
120	"Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!	
	Sethen we first togider were,	*Since*
	Ones wroth never we nere;	*Never once; angry [with one another]*
	Bot ever ich have yloved the	
	As mi liif and so thou me;	
125	Ac now we mot delen ato;	*must separate apart*
	Do thi best, for y mot go."	*I must*
	"Allas!" quath he, "forlorn icham!	*utterly lost I am*
	Whider wiltow go, and to wham?	*Where will you; whom*
	Whider thou gost, ichil with the,	*I will [go]*
130	And whider y go, thou schalt with me."	
	"Nay, nay, Sir, that nought nis!	*cannot be*
	Ichil the telle al hou it is:	*I will; all how*
	As ich lay this undertide	*morning*
	And slepe under our orchardside,	
135	Ther come to me to fair knightes,	*two*
	Wele y-armed al to rightes,	*quite properly*
	And bad me comen an heighing	*bade; in haste*
	And speke with her lord the king.	*their*
	And ich answerd at wordes bold,	*with*
140	Y durst nought, no y nold.	*dared not, nor did I want to*
	Thai priked oyain as thai might drive;[1]	
	Tho com her king, also blive,	*their; as quickly*
	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 garments*
	Y no seighe never yete bifore	*saw*

[1] *They spurred back as [fast as] they might go*

	So fair creatours y-core.	*exquisite*
	The king hadde a croun on hed;	
150	It nas of silver, no of gold red,	
	Ac it was of a precious ston –	
	As bright as the sonne it schon.	
	And as son as he to me cam,	
	Wold ich, nold ich, he me nam,	*Whether I wished or not he took me*
155	And made me with him ride	
	Opon a palfray bi his side;	*palfrey*
	And brought me to his palays,	
	Wele atird in ich ways,	*adorned; every way*
	And schewed me castels and tours,	*towers*
160	Rivers, forestes, frith with flours,	*woods with flowers*
	And his riche stedes ichon.	*gorgeous steeds each one*
	And sethen me brought oyain hom	*afterwards; back home*
	Into our owhen 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,	*a hindrance for us*
170	Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,	*Wherever; will be fetched*
	And totore thine limes al	*torn apart; limbs*
	That nothing help the no schal;	
	And thei thou best so totorn,	*though (even if) you are so torn*
	Yete thou worst with ous y-born.'"	*Yet; will be carried with us*
175	When King Orfeo herd this cas,	*matter*
	"O we!" quath he, "Allas, allas!	*woe*
	Lever me were to lete mi liif	*I'd rather lose*
	Than thus to lese the quen, mi wiif!"	*lose*
	He asked conseyl at ich man,	*advice from each person*
180	Ac no man him help no can.	
	Amorwe the undertide is come	*The next day; high noon*
	And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,	*taken*
	And wele ten hundred knightes with him,	
	Ich y-armed, stout and grim;	*Each; strong; fierce*
185	And with the quen wenten he	
	Right unto that ympe-tre.	

	Thai made scheltrom in ich a side	*a rank of armed men on each*
	And sayd thai wold there abide	
	And dye ther everichon,	*die; everyone*
190	Er the quen schuld fram hem gon.	*Before; from*
	Ac yete amiddes hem ful right	*yet amidst them straightaway*
	The quen was oway y-twight,	*snatched*
	With fairi forth y-nome.	*enchantment; taken*
	Men wist never wher sche was bicome.	*never knew; gone*
195	Tho was ther criing, wepe and wo!	*Then*
	The king into his chaumber is go,	*has gone*
	And oft swoned opon the ston,	*swooned; stone (i.e., floor)*
	And made swiche diol and swiche mon	*such dole; moan*
	That neighe his liif was y-spent –	*almost; ended*
200	Ther was non amendement.	*no remedy for it*
	He cleped togider his barouns,	*called*
	Erls, lordes of renouns,	
	And when thai al y-comen were,	
	“Lordinges,” he said, “bifor you here	
205	Ich ordainy min heighe steward	*I ordain; high*
	To wite mi kingdom afterward;	*rule; henceforth*
	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; born*
	Never eft y nil no woman se.	*Never again will I see another woman*
	Into wildernes ichil te	*I will go*
	And live ther evermore	
	With wilde bestes in holtes hore;	*woods grey*
215	And when ye understond that y be spent,	*dead*
	Make you than a parlement,	
	And chese you a newe king.	*choose*
	Now doth your best with al mi thing.”	*do; affairs*
	Tho was ther wepeing in the halle	*Then*
220	And grete cri among hem alle;	
	Unnethe might old or yong	*Hardly; young*
	For wepeing speke a word with tong.	
	Thai kneled adoun al y-fere	*together*
	And praid him, yif his wille were,	*prayed*
225	That he no schuld nought fram hem go.	*from them*

	"Do way!" quath he, "It schal be so!"	*Enough!*
	Al his kingdom he forsoke;	
	Bot a sclavin on him he toke.	*Only; pilgrim's mantle*
	He no hadde kirtel no hode,	*had neither tunic nor hood*
230	Schert, ne no nother gode,	*Shirt; goods*
	Bot his harp he tok algate	*at any rate*
	And dede him barfot out atte gate;	*passed barefoot*
	No man most with him go.	*might*
	O way! What ther was wepe and wo,	*woe!*
235	When he that hadde ben king with croun	
	Went so poverlich out of toun!	*in such poverty out of his town*
	Thurth wode and over heth	*Through; heath*
	Into the wildernes he geth.	*goes*
	Nothing he fint that him is ays,	*finds; for him; comfort*
240	Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.	*distress*
	He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,	*worn the variegated and grey fur*
	And on bed the purper biis,	*purple linen*
	Now on hard hethe he lith,	*heath; lies*
	With leves and gresse he him writh.	*covers himself*
245	He that hadde had castels and tours,	*towers*
	River, forest, frith with flours,	*woodland; flowers*
	Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,	*although it begins; snow; freeze*
	This king mot make his bed in mese.	*must; moss*
	He that had y-had knightes of priis	*excellence*
250	Bifor him kneland, and levedis,	*kneeling; ladies*
	Now seth he nothing that him liketh,	*sees; pleases*
	Bot wilde wormes bi him striketh.	*snakes; glide*
	He that had y-had plenté	
	Of mete and drink, of ich deynté,	*delicacy*
255	Now may he al day digge and wrote	*dig; grub*
	Er he finde his fille of rote.	*roots*
	In somer he liveth bi wild frut,	*fruit*
	And berien bot gode lite;	*berries of little worth*
	In winter may he nothing finde	
260	Bot rote, grases, and the rinde.	*Except roots; bark*
	Al his bodi was oway dwine	*away dwindled*
	For missays, and al to-chine.	*hardship; chapped*
	Lord! who may telle the sore	*sorrow*
	This king sufferd ten yere and more?	

265	His here of his berd, blac and rowe,	*hair; beard; rough*
	To his girdel-stede was growe.	*waist*
	His harp, whereon was al his gle,	*pleasure*
	He hidde in an holwe tre;	*hollow*
	And when the weder was clere and bright,	*weather*
270	He toke his harp to him wel right	
	And harped at his owhen wille.	*played; own desire*
	Into alle the wode the soun gan schille,	*sound began to resound*
	That alle the wilde bestes that ther beth	
	For joie abouten him thai teth,	*gathered*
275	And alle the foules that ther were	*birds*
	Come and sete on ich a brere	*sat; briar*
	To here his harping a-fine –	
	So miche melody was therin;	*much*
	And when he his harping lete wold,	*would leave off*
280	No best bi him abide nold.	*beast; would remain*
	He might se him bisides,	*nearby*
	Oft in hot undertides,	
	The king o fairy with his rout	*of fairyland; company*
	Com to hunt him al about	
285	With dim cri and bloweing,	*blowing [of horns]*
	And houndes also with him berking;	*barking*
	Ac no best thai no nome,	*But they took no beast (game)*
	No never he nist whider they bicome	*Nor did he ever know where they went*
	And other while he might him se	*at other times*
290	As a gret ost bi him te,	*army; went*
	Wele atourned, ten hundred knightes,	*equipped*
	Ich y-armed to his rightes,	*All properly armed*
	Of cuntenaunce stout and fers,	*appearance*
	With mani desplaid baners,	*unfurled*
295	And ich his swerd y-drawe hold –	
	Ac never he nist whider thai wold.	*knew not whither; went*
	And otherwile he seighe other thing:	*saw*
	Knightes and levedis com daunceing	
	In queynt atire, gisely,	*elegant; skillfully*
300	Queynt pas and softly;	*Graceful steps*
	Tabours and trunpes yede hem bi,	*drums and trumpets went*
	And al maner menstraci.	*sorts of minstralsy*
	And on a day he seighe him biside	*on a certain day*

	Sexti levedis on hors ride,	*Sixty ladies*
305	Gentil and jolif as brid on ris;	*lively as bird on bough*
	Nought o man amonges hem ther nis;	*Not a single man was with them*
	And ich a faucoun on hond bere,	*each a falcon on [her] hand bore*
	And riden on haukin bi o rivere.	*a-hawking by a*
	Of game thai founde wel gode haunt –	*great plenty*
310	Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt;	*Mallards, heron; cormorant*
	The foules of the water ariseth,	
	The faucouns hem wele deviseth;	*marked*
	Ich faucoun his pray slough –	*Each; prey killed*
	That seigh Orfeo, and lough:	*saw; laughed*
315	“Parfay!” quath he, “ther is fair game;	*By my faith*
	Thider ichil, bi Godes name;	*I’ll [go]*
	Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!”	*I was wont such sport*
	He aros, and thider gan te.	*began [to] approach*
	To a levedi he was y-come,	
320	Biheld, and hath wele undernome,	*perceived*
	And seth bi al thing that it is	*sees*
	His owhen quen, Dam Heurodis.	*own*
	Yern he biheld hir, and sche him eke,	*Eagerly; also*
	Ac noither to other a word no speke;	*But neither*
325	For messais that sche on him seighe,	*sadness*
	That had ben so riche and so heighe,	*Who; exalted*
	The teres fel out of her eighe.	*eye*
	The other levedis this y-seighe	*saw*
	And maked hir oway to ride –	
330	Sche most with him no lenger abide.	*might*
	“Allas!” quath he, “now me is wo!”	
	Whi nil deth now me slo?	*Will not; slay*
	Allas, wreche, that y no might	
	Dye now after this sight!	
335	Allas! to long last mi liif,	*too long lasts*
	When y no dar nought with mi wiif,	
	No hye to me, o word speke.	*Nor she; one*
	Allas! Whi nil min hert breke!	*will not*
	Parfay!” quath he, “tide wat bitide,	*come what may*
340	Whiderso this levedis ride,	*Wherever these*
	The selve way ichil streche –	*same; hasten*
	Of liif no deth me no reche.”	*nor; I do not care*

	His sclavain he dede on also spac	*pilgrim's gown he put on quickly*
	And henge his harp opon his bac,	
345	And had wel gode wil to gon –	*very good desire*
	He no spard noither stub no ston.	*avoided; stump*
	In at a roche the levedis rideth,	*Into a rock*
	And he after, and nought abideth.	
	When he was in the roche y-go,	*gone*
350	Wele thre mile other mo,	
	He com into a fair cuntray	*country*
	As bright so sonne on somers day,	*as sun on summer's*
	Smothe and plain and al grene –	*Smooth and level*
	Hille no dale nas ther non y-sene.	*was not to be seen*
355	Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,	*saw*
	Riche and real and wonder heighe.	*royal; wonderously high*
	Al the utmast wal	*All [of] the outermost wall*
	Was clere and schine as cristal;	*bright*
	An hundred tours ther were about,	
360	Degiselich and bataild stout.	*Wonderful with strong battlements*
	The butras com out of the diche	*buttresses; moat*
	Of rede gold y-arched riche.	
	The vousour was avowed al	*vaulting; adorned*
	Of ich maner divers aumal.	*With every kind of enamel*
365	Within ther wer wide wones,	*were spacious dwellings*
	Al of precious stones;	
	The werst piler on to biholde[1]	
	Was al of burnist gold.	*burnished*
	Al that lond was ever light,	*always*
370	For when it schuld be therk and night,	*dark*
	The riche stones light gonne	*stone's light shone*
	As bright as doth at none the sonne.	*noon*
	No man may telle, no thenche in thought,	*nor think*
	The riche werk that ther was wrought.	*exquisite*
375	Bi al thing him think that it is	
	The proude court of Paradis.	
	In this castel the levedis alight;	*dismounted*
	He wold in after, yif he might.	*wished to enter if*

[1] *Even the worst (least attractive) pillar you could see*

	Orfeo knokketh atte gate;	
380	The porter was redi therate	
	And asked what he wold hav y-do.	*done*
	“Parfay!” quath he, “icham a minstrel, lo!	*I am*
	To solas thi lord with mi gle,	*entertain; my minstrelsy*
	Yif his swete wille be.”	
385	The porter undede the gate anon	*undid*
	And lete him into the castel gon.	
	Than he gan bihold about al,	
	And seighe liggeand within the wal	*lying*
	Of folk that were thider y-brought	
390	And thought dede, and nare nought.	*seemed dead, but were not*
	Sum stode withouten hade,	*stood; 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,	
	And sum astrangled as thai ete;	*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,	*driven mad*
	And wonder fele ther lay bisides	*wondrous many*
	Right as thai slepe her undertides;	*Just as; their*
	Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,	*taken*
	With fairi thider y-come.	*enchantment brought there*
405	Ther he seighe his owhen wiif,	
	Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,	*dear life*
	Slepe under an ympe-tre –	
	Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he.	*she*
	And when he hadde bihold this mervails alle,	*these marvels*
410	He went into the kinges halle.	
	Than seighe he ther a semly sight,	*fair*
	A tabernacle blisseful and bright,	*canopy beautiful*
	Therin her maister king sete	*their*
	And her quen, fair and swete.	
415	Her crounes, her clothes schine so bright	*Their*
	That unnethe bihold he him might.	*scarcely*
	When he hadde biholden al that thing,	

	He kneled adoun bifor the king:	
	"O lord," he seyd, "yif it thi wille were,	
420	Mi menstraci thou schust y-here."	*should hear*
	The king answered, "What man artow,	*are you*
	That art hider y-comen now?	
	Ich, no non that is with me,	*Neither I, nor no one*
	No sent never after the.	*you*
425	Sethen that ich here regni gan,	*Since; reign*
	Y no fond never so folehardi man	*foolhardy*
	That hider to ous durst wende	*to us dared come*
	Bot that ic him wald ofsende."	*Unless I wished him summoned*
	"Lord," quath he, "trowe ful wel,	*believe*
430	Y nam bot a pover menstrel;	
	And, sir, it is the maner of ous	
	To seche mani a lordes hous –	*seek many*
	Thei we nought welcom no be,	*Although (even if)*
	Yete we mot proferi forth our gle."	*must offer*
435	Bifor the king he sat adoun	
	And tok his harp so miri of soun,	*merry; sound*
	And tempreth his harp, as he wele can,	*tunes; knows well [how to do]*
	And blisseful notes he ther gan,	*began*
	That al that in the palays were	
440	Com to him forto here,	*listen*
	And liggeth adoun to his fete –	*lie*
	Hem thenketh his melody so swete.	*They think*
	The king herkneth and sitt ful stille;	*listens; sits quietly*
	To here his gle he hath gode wille.	*his (Orfeo's); he (the king)*
445	Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;	*Great pleasure; songs*
	The riche quen also hadde he.	*she*
	When he hadde stint his harping,	*stopped*
	Than seyd to him the king,	
	"Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.	
450	Now aske of me what it be,	*what[ever] you wish*
	Largelich ichil the pay;	*Generously*
	Now speke, and tow might asay."	*if you wish to find out*
	"Sir," he seyd, "ich biseche the	*beseech you*
	Thatow woldest give me	*That you*
455	That ich levedi, bright on ble,	*same; of complexion*
	That slepeth under the ympe-tree."	