

Sir Orfeo

anon

*fourteenth century Middle English Breton lai, based upon the
Ancient Greek myth of Orpheus*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by**

Richard Scott-Robinson

This lai has been translated and retold from: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Eds), 1995. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auchinleck Manuscript.

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Sir Orfeo

anon
fourteenth century

We redeth oft and findeth y-write · and this clerkes wele it wite · layes that ben in harping · ben y-founde of ferli thing · sum beth of wer and sum of wo · and sum of joie and mirthe also · and sum of trecherie and of gile · of old aventours that fel while · and sum of bourdes and ribaudry · and mani ther beth of fairy –

Often in books – and men of letters will vouch for this – we find tales that were originally intended to be sung and which have lying at their core some strange and wonderful things. Some deal with war and suffering, others with joyful events, some are concerned with treachery and still others with old adventures that happened a long time ago. Some are bawdy and hilarious, and there are many that deal with the supernatural, with the Otherworld – Fairyland – but most of all they deal with love. These tales are called ‘lais’ and came originally from Brittany and it is here they were first found and from where they all derive; they describe adventures that took place in days gone by, in ancient times, which the Bretons made into songs. When an antique king heard of strange adventures and marvellous events he would take a harp and compose a lay, and give it a name. Now of these old adventures I can relate some, but not all. And of those that I can – listen, all you noblemen who love truth and honour! – while I tell you the story of Sir Orfeo!



Orfeo loved the music of the harp above all else. Every accomplished bard was guaranteed to receive favour at his court. Orfeo himself was a fine musician and directed a supreme intelligence to this skill. Soon there was no finer harper to be found anywhere. There was nobody born into this world who, sitting before the harp of Sir Orfeo, did not think himself transported at once into the joy of Paradise, such a melodious serenity came from his instrument and from his voice.

Orfeo was a king in England; he was a great lord and a courageous man, courteous and generous. His father was of the line of Pluto and his mother descended from the goddess Juno. These were at one time considered to be deities, and it is of this age that I speak. This king lived in Thrace, a strong and noble city, for Winchester was then called Thrace, I tell no word of a lie! He had a lovely queen whose name was Heurodis. She was full of love and human virtue, and no tongue may adequately describe her beauty.

It befell, at the beginning of May, when the sun's heat banishes all memory of winter and everybody is good-humoured – and every field is full of flowers and the blossom covers every bough and there is joy everywhere – it happened during this season that Heurodis took two maidens with her one morning and walked into an orchard. The sun was high in the sky and she wanted to listen to the birds and to look at the flowers and to find some shade from the sun. So she sat beneath an apple tree. And it was not long before Heurodis fell asleep. The two maidens dared not wake her but let her lie.

She slept until the sun had passed its height. And when she woke – God! She screamed and started doin–g some terrible things! She beat with her hands and her feet and scratched her face with her fingernails so badly that the blood ran down her cheeks. She tore at her frock, ripping the costly material into shreds, and behaving for all the world as though she had gone stark staring mad. Her two maidens were frightened out of their wits! They ran to the palace and urged everyone to go and restrain her. Knights made their way as quickly as they could to the orchard, and ladies and damsels also, more than sixty I think. They arrived at the orchard, took the queen up in their arms and brought her into the palace and to her bed, where they kept a tight hold on her to prevent her from injuring herself further.

When Orfeo was informed what was going on, he was distraught. He arrived at the queen's bedroom with ten knights, saw what a dreadful state his wife was in and cried: 'Darling! My love! What is the matter? You are normally so quiet and now you are screaming like a mad thing. Alas! You look as pale as death. Your fingers are covered in blood! Your eyes stare at me as though I was your bitterest enemy. Darling,

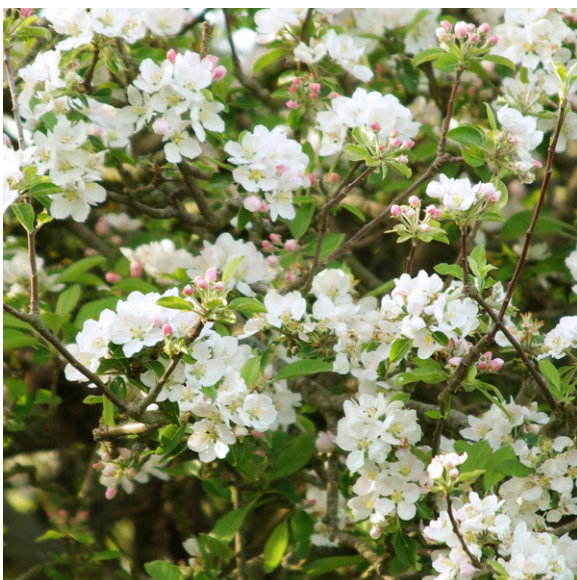
I implore you! Mercy! Stop all this shouting and screaming and tell me what is the matter.'

At last Heurodis stopped writhing and lay still; then she began to weep quietly to herself.

'Alas, my lord, Sir Orfeo,' she said at last. 'Throughout our marriage we have never ever spoken a harsh word to one another. I have loved you as much as my own life, and you have loved me equally, I know. But now I fear that we must part. Behave well when I am gone. For I must go.'

The tale of Sir Orfeo – or Sir Orpheus – occurs in a manuscript written in about 1330–40 in a London scriptorium and known famously as the Auchinleck Manuscript, in which are also found the tales of Sir Degaré and Lay le Freine. It now lies in the National Library of Scotland as Manuscript Advocates 19-2-1 and is thought by some to have been owned once by Geoffrey Chaucer. The tale retells the ancient Greek story of Orpheus's attempted rescue of his wife Eurydice from Hades, in a characteristically Celtic way.

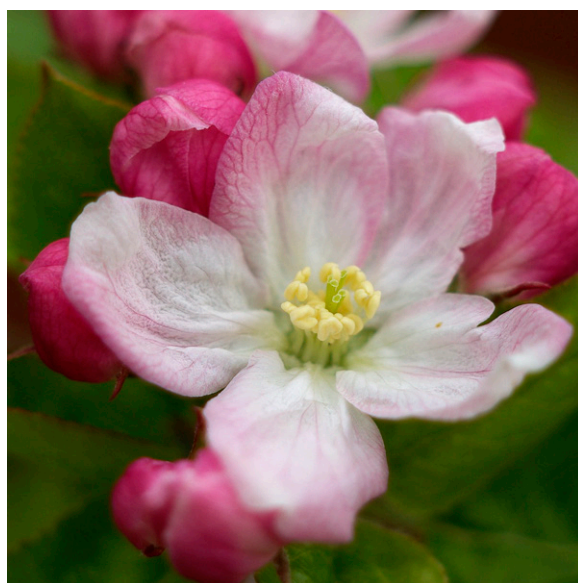
In this tale, Sir Orfeo is king, with his capital city at Winchester, in southern England – or if you prefer, in Thrace. Following his wife's abduction from an orchard by the king of the Otherworld, who, of course, is Hades, or the god of the dead, Sir Orfeo retreats into the forest to live as a derelict. After many years of living like this, he finds his way deep into the Earth and emerges into another world. Here he finds his wife, and he is allowed to return with her. But when he arrives back in Winchester, nobody recognises him.



‘Alas!’ he cried, ‘where must you go? I shall go with you – we shall go together. I shall be by your side always.’

‘No! No, Sir, that is not possible. You do not understand. Listen to what has happened. As I lay this morning asleep in the orchard there came two fair knights, handsome and well-armed. They said that I must go with them. I told them that I dare not and I wouldn’t. They galloped away and soon came back again with their king – and he had a hundred knights with him, and a hundred damsels, all on snow-white horses. All their clothes were as white as milk. I have never seen anything like it before. The king wore a crown not of silver or gold but of diamond. It shone like the sun! As soon as he arrived, he took hold of me and made me ride beside him on a palfrey. He brought me to his palace; it was a wonderful building, and he showed me his castles and towers, rivers, forests, woods full of wild flowers, and all his wonderful horses. And then he brought me back again into the orchard and said to me: ‘Make sure that you are right here beneath this apple tree tomorrow morning, for you must come with us then and live with us forever! And if you frustrate us in any way and try to remain here, we will tear you apart, limb from limb, until you are beyond help; but we will still carry you off with us.’

When King Orfeo heard all this: ‘Oh God!’ he cried. ‘Alas! I would rather die than lose you like this!’ He sought all the advice he could, but there was none to be found. No one could offer any practical help.



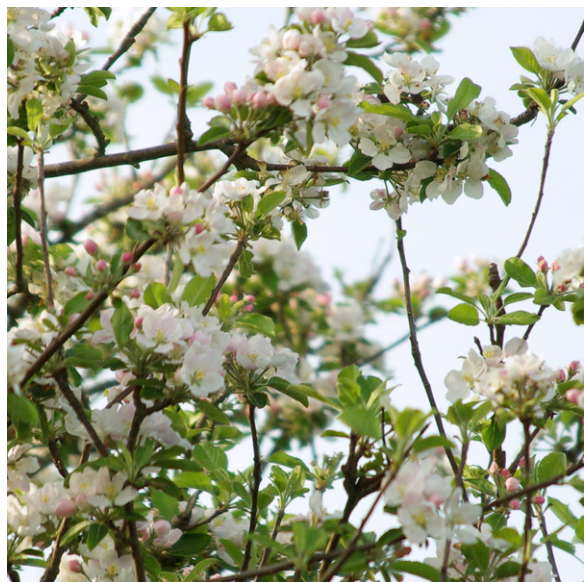
So morning has arrived and King Orfeo has taken up his arms. He gathered a thousand knights, all strong, well-armed and in serious mood, and accompanied the queen to the apple tree. The knights formed an armed cordon around the king and queen and each swore that he would not move an inch but would rather die than see the queen taken. And yet, right in front of their very eyes, the queen was whisked away, seized by the power of the Otherworld! Suddenly she was gone. Nobody had any idea how she had been taken.

Then there was crying, weeping and uncontrollable sadness! The king made his way back to his private rooms and fainted through shock and grief. He moaned and lamented to such an extent that his life seemed in danger. There was nothing anybody could do to help him. He gathered together his barons, earls, noblemen of great renown, and when they were all assembled: ‘Lords,’ he said, ‘before you all I nominate my high steward to rule in my absence. He shall govern in place of me. I have lost my queen, the fairest lady to grace this Earth, and I shall have no opportunity to see another woman for I intend to take myself into a wilderness and to live there with the wild creatures of the forest; and when you understand that I am dead, convene a parliament and choose a new king.’

Now govern this kingdom as best you can.’

The hall was filled with dismay and there were loud cries of disbelief. Scarcely a man was able to speak a word, everybody was so upset. They all knelt down and begged him to change his mind. ‘Let be!’ cried King Orfeo. ‘It shall be so!’

King Orfeo abandoned his kingdom, put on a simple garment, took his harp and walked barefoot out of the gate, refusing all company. Oh, the weeping and wailing that could be heard when the man who had ruled over them all walked out in such poverty! Through woods and over heaths, he came at last into a wilderness. There was nothing to ease him in body nor in spirit, only hardship and discomfort. He who had been used to fine clothes and comfortable beds now lay on heather and hard ground, with only grass and leaves to wrap himself up in. He who has had castles and towers, rivers, forests, woodland with wild flowers, must now make his bed with moss and endure the snow



and the frost. He who has had valiant knights kneeling before him, and beautiful ladies to adorn his court, now sees nothing to cheer him. Snakes glide past his bed. He who has had food in plenty, meat and drink of the finest quality, now has to root about all day in order to find enough to live on. In the summer he lives on wild berries and fruit, and a few grains from wild grasses – barely enough to stem hunger. In winter there is only the bark of trees and roots with which to eke out an existence. He was soon as thin as a rake and looked badly weather-beaten.

Lord! – who can describe the hardship that this poor man endured for ten years and more? His beard, black and matted, hung to his waist. His harp was hidden in a hollow oak, and when the weather was warm and clear he would take it and play to himself. Then he would be happy enough! The sound would carry throughout the whole wood and all the animals would gather around him for joy, and all the birds would come and sit on the boughs of the nearby trees and bushes to hear the music, so beautiful was the melody of his playing; and when he stopped, all the birds and the animals would vanish into the forest again.

Sometimes, on warm summer mornings, he would see creatures of the Otherworld, the king of another world, hunting in the woods; a wild hunt with far-off sounds of horns and human cries and the barking of dogs. But they never killed any animal of the forest and Orfeo had no idea what became of them when they vanished.

At other times he might see nearby a great host, a thousand knights, each magnificently armed and looking fierce, with banners flying and swords drawn. But he could never see where they went to, after they had passed him. And there were other strange things

he saw as well – knights and ladies dancing in old-fashioned clothes, softly stepping out unfamiliar reels to the sound of tabors and pipes.

And one day he saw sixty ladies riding on horseback, happy and courteous with not a man among them! Each bore a falcon on her arm as she rode with her companions beside a river. They found a lot of game birds to catch: mallards, heron and cormorant. These birds rose into the air and the falcons brought them down. Sir Orfeo laughed: ‘By my faith!’ he exclaimed. ‘This is good sport! I shall go over and watch them. I used to enjoy hawking.’

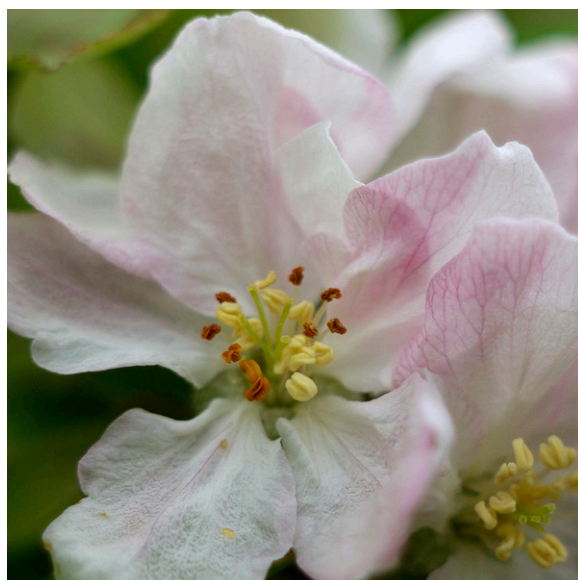
He got up and made his way to the river bank. Coming to one of the ladies, he shrank back in surprise for he could see that it was his own queen, Heurodis. He looked at her eagerly and longingly, and she stared in a kindly way at him with no less intensity, though neither of them spoke a word to the other. Heurodis saw the poverty into which her husband had sunk – he who had once been so rich and powerful – and tears came into her eyes. The other ladies saw this and quickly urged her to set off with them. She could stay with him no longer.

‘Alas!’ cried Orfeo. ‘What sorrow I have to endure! Why will death not take me? Alas that I may not die having seen her! My life has gone on for too long. Why dare I not speak a word to my wife, nor she to me? Why will my heart not break!’

‘But wait!’ he said. ‘Come what may, I shall follow these ladies and pay no heed to life nor death.’ So he took up his ragged garment and, slinging his harp over his back, eagerly set off in the direction they were following, ignoring all stones and briars. The ladies rode into a cleft in a rock and he followed without hesitation.

When he had travelled through the rock for three miles or more, he came into a fair country. It was as bright as a summer’s day; the land was flat and green and there were no hills and no valleys. In the middle of the plain was a castle, magnificently adorned and wonderfully high. The outer wall seemed to be made of glass. There were a hundred towers of crystal and the outer buttresses were made of red gold! Everywhere there was enamel, in every sort of dazzling colour, and within the castle were buildings of solid ruby and diamond and amethyst. The most inferior pillar that Orfeo could see was made of solid gold. And there was never darkness in this land, for when it should be night, the crystal itself gave out as much light as the sun does at noon. No man can describe, nor even imagine, the beauty of this place. Orfeo was in no doubt that this must be the proud court of Paradise.

The ladies rode into this castle and alighted from their horses. Orfeo determined to try to follow them in, if he could. He knocked at



the gate and the porter came immediately to see who it was, and asked him why he was there.

‘I am a minstrel!’ replied Orfeo. ‘I have come to bring pleasure to your lord with my music, if this is his desire.’

The porter undid the gate and let him into the castle. Orfeo looked about and saw lying there many people who had been brought in because they were thought to be dead, but they were not. Some were headless, some had no arms and others had horrific wounds to their bodies. Some were bound like madmen, others had choked to death, or been drowned, or burned. Wives lay in childbirth, some dead and others driven to madness; and many more looked as though they had simply fallen asleep on a warm summer’s morning. Each had been brought there through the power of the Otherworld. Orfeo saw his own wife, Heurodis, asleep beneath an apple tree.

When he had seen these marvels he made his way to the royal hall. A wonderful sight met him there – a throne beneath a canopy, and sitting there was a king with his queen. She was a beautiful lady. Their crowns and their garments shone so brightly that Orfeo could hardly look at them. When he saw all this, he knelt down before the king:

‘Oh lord!’ he said, ‘if it is your desire, I would like to play my music for you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked the king in reply, ‘and how did you get here? Neither I nor anybody else has sent for you, to my knowledge. In all my reign I have never once come across anyone foolhardy enough to venture here without having been sent for first.’

‘Lord,’ replied Orfeo, ‘know full well that I am but a poor minstrel. Sir, it is our habit to wander far and wide to search for rich houses in which we might practice our profession and we have no way of knowing beforehand whether we will be welcome or not.’

Orfeo sat down before the king, took up his harp and tuned the instrument. Then he began to play. It was blissful! Soon a huge crowd had gathered in the hall to listen to Orfeo’s notes. Everybody lay down at his feet, the music was so beautiful. The king listened quietly, taking obvious pleasure in the performance. He soaked up the melody and enjoyed it to the full, and so did the queen. When the lay had finished the king said: ‘Minstrel – I like your music a great deal. Tell me your fee, and you shall have whatever you ask.’

‘Sir,’ replied Orfeo, ‘give me the lady who sleeps beneath the apple tree.’

‘No!’ exclaimed the king. ‘That is impossible! You would make a sorry couple, for you are thin and dirty and she is beautiful. It would be a hateful thing to see her in your company!’

‘Gentle king!’ cried Orfeo, ‘it would be far worse if you were to be seen in front of all these people to be a liar. You must keep to your word!’

‘Since this is the truth,’ said the king, ‘take her hand and go; and I wish you happiness

with her.' Orfeo knelt down and thanked him very much. Then he took Heurodis by the hand and made haste out of that country, by the same route that he had taken to get in.'

He travelled for so long that he came to Winchester, that ancient capital and his own city. But when he got there nobody recognised him. In order to keep himself to himself he dared go no further than the edge of the city, and took lodgings with a skinny beggar and his wife. Orfeo told them that he was a poor minstrel, asked news of the land and who was in power now. The beggar told Orfeo everything he wanted to know; how their queen had been stolen away to the Otherworld ten years ago and how their king had then disappeared into the forest and nobody knew where he was, and how the steward now wielded power over all the land, and many other things besides.

The next morning, as it approached noon, Orfeo told Heurodis to remain in the cottage; then borrowing the beggar's clothes, he slung his harp on his back and went into the city so that men could see him. Earls and barons, rich merchants and fine ladies all stared at him, but none could recognise their king! 'Lo!' they cried, 'look at that dreadful man! Look at his hair! His beard hangs down to his knees! His skin is like the bark of a tree!'

As he walked down a street, he met his steward and shouted loudly at him: 'Sir steward! he said. 'Have pity, I am a minstrel. A harper. Help me to earn a meal!'

'Come with me – come!' said the steward. 'Everything I have on my table you are welcome to share. Every good harper is welcome in my house for the love of my lord, Sir Orfeo.'

The steward sat eating in his hall, surrounded by all his lords and noblemen – there were trumpeters and drummers, harpers, musicians playing stringed instruments with a bow, all making a lovely melody together. Orfeo sat quietly by himself, listening. And when they had finished playing, he took his harp and began to tune it. It was the most beautiful sound that anybody had ever heard – everyone agreed. The steward looked on and recognised the harp.

'Minstrel!' he called. 'Upon your life, tell me where you obtained that harp and how you came by it. Tell me at once!'

'Lord,' replied the musician, 'in a far country, as I was travelling through a forest, I came upon a man who had been torn to pieces by lions. Wolves had begun to eat what was left of him. Beside the body I found this harp. This must have been ten years ago now.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the steward. 'This is tragic news! That was my lord, Sir Orfeo! What shall I do? I have lost the finest lord I ever knew! To think that Sir Orfeo was destined for such an ignoble end!'

The steward fell to the ground in a faint. His barons raised him onto a chair.

King Orfeo knew well, then, that his steward was a loyal man. He stood and said: 'Steward! Listen to me! If I were King Orfeo and had suffered for many years in a wilderness amongst the wild animals, had rescued my queen from the Otherworld and brought

that lady to the outskirts of this town and had, myself, come to you in poverty like this, to test your good will and found you to be true and loyal, you would never live to regret the day. For I will appoint you my heir! But if you had been happy to learn of my death, I would have quickly thrown you out of my kingdom!

Then all those in the hall understood that it was King Orfeo speaking, and the steward recognised this and threw down table after table in a frantic attempt to reach the musician. He fell down at his feet, and so did all the other noblemen and everybody cried: 'You are our lord, Sir! And our king!' They were delighted that he was alive and led him quickly to a chamber where they bathed him and shaved off his beard and dressed him in clothes befitting a king. Then they brought the queen into the town with musicians playing and dancers dancing – lord! there was great melody! They all wept for joy that their king and queen were alive and well!

King Orfeo is newly crowned!

Musicians and bards in Brittany heard what had happened and made this story into a lay and named it after the king. It is called 'The Tale of Sir Orfeo'. It is a good tale, and is set to some fine music! In this way was Sir Orfeo brought out of his distress. May God grant us all a smooth voyage through life!

Amen.