

SIR ORFEO

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Sir Orfeo by Edward Eyre Hunt

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EDWARD EYRE HUNT

SIR ORFEO

Sir Orfeo

Adapted from the Middle English

BY
EDWARD EYRE HUNT



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EDWIN FRANCIS GAY.
NOV. 1, 1919.

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Introduction

PROFESSOR SCHOFIELD, in his "English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer,"¹ writes as follows:

"In Celtic tradition there were kings as well as queens of the Otherworld, and they too were known to cast loving eyes on mortals. In 'Sir Orfeo' we have an unusually happy embodiment of this conception in a story where it had originally no place. In the hands of a clever poet the ancient tale of Orpheus and Eurydice became a genuine lay of Britain, not simply because it was fashioned by him in the same metre and style as the lays on native themes, but because he transformed it in spirit

¹ London and New York, The Macmillan Company, 1906. pp. 184 ff.

throughout to accord with British notions of fairyland.

“From Hades, evidently, the scene of the old classical story has been transferred to fairyland; the king of the Celtic Otherworld is substituted for Pluto. References in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* to ‘Pluto, that is king of fayerye,’ and in Dunbar’s ‘Golden Targe’ to ‘Pluto, the elrich incubus, in cloak of green,’ attest the familiarity of the mediæval English and Scotch with this new conception of the lord of the dead. Certain other classical stories (e. g. *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and *Narcissus*) were dealt with in old French poems sometimes called lays; but no one of them presents the peculiar situation in ‘*Orfeo*,’ where the Celtic spirit has quite dispossessed the ancient and permeated the whole account.

“The French lay of *Orpheus*, from which ‘*Orfeo*’ is translated, is now lost; but we have references enough to it in other works to es-

tablish its previous existence. One, in the French prose romance of Lancelot, is of unusual interest. King Bademagus, we read, 'was seated in an arm-chair of ivory, which was very beautiful, and before him was a harper who played (*notoit*) the lay of Orpheus; and it pleased the king so much to listen that there was no one who dared say a word.'"

I am indebted to Professor W. H. Schofield for permission to quote the foregoing paragraphs and for encouragement in the preparation of this little volume; to Dr. K. G. T. Webster for interpretations of difficult phrases, although the restrictions of metre have occasionally forced me to disregard them; and to Professor L. B. R. Briggs for his kindly critical judgment of the verse.

E. E. H.

Stoughton Hall, Cambridge,
December tenth, 1909.

[vii]

17

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27

WE often read with new delight
The lays that clerks would have
us know,

For lays there are that sing aright
Each wondrous thing of long ago:
Some are of weal, and some of woe,
And some of joy and gentle mirth,
And some of guile and treacherous foe,
And some the strangest haps of earth;

Some are of jests and ribaldry,
And some there are of fairy lore;
But most of all, as men may see,
They sing of love and trials sore.
In Britain in the days of yore
The harpers writ that men should praise
The gallant deeds that were before—
Of such the Britons made their lays.