Sir Orfeo

This poem was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in the South Midlands, perhaps in London. The text below is based in part on the Auchinleck manuscript, which was copied between 1330 and 1340. Those of you who are familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* may recognize the origin of the story in classical mythology. But here the story as been recast as a Celtic tale of the otherworld.

We redep oft and findeþ y-write,  
And þis clerkes wele it wite,  
Layes þat ben in harping  
Ben y-founde of ferli þing:  
5) Sum beþe of wer and sum of wo,  
And sum of joie and mirþe also,  
And sum of trecherie and of gile,  
Of old avantours þat fel while;  
And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,  
10) And mani þer beþ of fairy.  
Of al þinges þat men seþ,  
Mest o love, forsoþe, þey beþ.  
In Breteyne þis layes were wrought,  
First y-founde and forþ y-brought,  
15) Of aventours þat fel þi dayes,  
Wherof Bretouns maked her layes.  
When kinges mought our y-here  
Of ani mervailes þat þer were,  
Þai token an harp in gle and game  
20) And maked a lay and gaf it name.  
Now of þis aventours þat weren y-falle  
Y can tel sum, ac nought alle.  
Ac herkneþ, lordines þat ben trewe,  
Ichil you telle of "Sir Orfewe."  
25) Orfeo mest of ani þing  
Loveþe þe gle of harping.  
Siker was everi gode harpour  
Of him to have miche honour.  
Himself he lerned forto harp,  
30) And leyd þeron his wittes scharp;  
He lerned so þer noþing was  
A better harpour in no plas.  
In al þe wurld was no man bore  
Þat ones Orfeo sat before -  
35) And he might of his harping here -  
Bot he schuld þenche þat he were  
In on of þe joies of Paradis,
Swiche melody in his harping is.
Orfeo was a king,
40) In Inglond an heighe lording,
A stalworþ man and hardi bo;
Large and curteys he was also.
His fader was comen of King Pluto,
And his moder of King Juno,
45) Ţat sum time were as godes yhold
For aventours Ŵat Ŵai dede and told.
Ŵis king sojournd in Traciens,
Ŵat was a cité of noble defens -
For Winchester was cleped þo
50) Traciens, wiõbouten no.
Ŵe king hadde a quen of priis
Ŵat was y-cleped Dame Heurodis,
Ŵe fairest levedi, for Ŵe nones,
Ŵat might gon on bodi and bones,
55) Ful of love and godenisse -
Ac no man may telle hir fainris.
Bifel so in Ŵe comessi ng of May
When miri and hot is Ŵe day,
And oway be Ŵe winter schours,
60) And everi feld is ful of flours,
And blosme breme on everi bough
Over al wexe þi miri anought,
Ŵis ich quen, Dame Heurodis
Tok to maidens of priis,
65) And went in an undrentide
To play bi an orchardside,
To se þe floures sprede and spring
And to here þe foules sing.
Ŵai sett hem doun al þe
70) Under a fair ympe-tre,
And wel some þis fair quene
Fel on slepe opon þe grene.