There is another Breton lay
I must not omit of Bisclavret
(the Normans give him another name,
“Garwaf,” but the two are the same).
It hasn’t happened lately, but then
every once in a while some men
were transformed into werewolves and went
into the forests where they spent
their lives doing mischief. They would eat
anybody they happened to meet.
One who was affected that way,
as you have guessed, was Bisclavret.

There was in Brittany long ago
a baron with whom the world had no
complaint. He was noble and handsome, too.
He advised his lord and was one of the few
to whom he listened with great attention.
The baron had, I ought to mention,
a wife who was pretty and worthy as well.
They loved each other, but I must tell
how every week he would go away
and not return until the third day.
Nobody had the foggiest guess
about where he’d gone. This caused distress
in the wife’s mind. Although she knew
that husbands don’t have to answer to
their wives, she said in the nicest way,
“My dear sweet love, can you not say
where you go when you’re not here?
There is nothing in the world I fear
more than your anger, but can you perhaps
forgive me for my wifely lapse
that arises from my concern for you?”
He was in a good mood and drew
her to him in an embrace.
He kissed her and still was close to her face
when he told her to ask whatever she
liked, and if her question could be
answered, he would enlighten her.
With a sweet smile and almost a purr
she said, “I am so upset without
your presence here! Allay my doubt
and quiet my fear. I have to know
what you do and where you go.
Do you have a lover somewhere?
That would be wrong of you and unfair.
If it’s something else, then put to rest
the curiosity in my breast.”
“Have mercy,” he said, “your inquiry
can only bring great harm to me
if I answer you, and will be of no
earthly good to you. I know
that I may lose your love, and I,
if that should happen, would surely die.”
This ought to have silenced her but of course
gave her curiosity force
and urgency it hadn’t had
before. She persisted, and the sad
husband, with his eyes downcast,
replied to her question and at last
told her that he sometimes became a werewolf. It was with some shame that he explained how, in the wood, he lived on whatever prey he could capture and kill. She digested this and then inquired of him what his costume was in these bizarre forays. “Lady, werewolves are completely naked,” was his reply. She laughed at this (I can’t guess why) and asked him where he hid his clothes—to make conversation, I suppose. “Don’t ask me that, I pray you. If I were somehow to lose them it would be my lot to remain a werewolf forever unless they were returned, and never walk the earth as a man again.” This should have satisfied her, but when she heard him say this, she swore that she loved him and would eternally. For him to keep secrets from her would show doubt on his part. “I have done no wrongs to you! You have no cause for any suspicions!” And without pause she continued in that vein, accusing, wheedling, bullying, and abusing. Finally, he broke down and told her how near the wood there was an old chapel that has a bush close by. “There is a broad flat stone that I have hollowed out in which I store my clothing until I am ready for
my return.” She was wide-eyed and appeared to have been satisfied, but she was alarmed and filled with fear to learn that her husband was a were-wolf. How ghastly! How could she and such a creature have intimacy?

How to get rid of him was her only question. The answers were clear enough — for there was a knight who had been paying her court and was quite ardent. She had never returned the passion with which he said he burned, but she let him know that that could change if he were to help her to arrange a bit of mischief. “I offer you not only my love but my body, too, if you will do me a service.” He agreed to this with alacrity. She told him about her husband and his hiding place for his clothes. At this the knight immediately obeyed — and thus was Bisclavret betrayed by his faithless wife. Because he had vanished before, the court was sad but not surprised. They quartered the ground of the wood but not a trace was found and even his friends had to give up, having their lives to live. The knight married the lady he loved and they lived happily.
A year came and went and one
day the king went out for the fun
of hunting in that forest where
Bisclavret had made his lair.
The hounds picked up his distinctive scent
and followed him wherever he went.
They were about to leap and tear
him to bits but arriving there
was the king, whom Bisclavret espied.
The werewolf ran up to his side,
took hold of his stirrup, and kissed his shoe,
which beasts in the woods don’t often do.
The king was impressed and he summoned his party
to see what had given him such a start. He
thought it was strange and marveled aloud
that the animal could be endowed
with intelligence and could plead for its
life. “A beast that has such wits
I will protect, and on those grounds
I order that you restrain the hounds.”

The king, because it was late in the day,
returned to the palace with Bisclavret
following closely, afraid to be
even momentarily
separated from his benefactor.
The king, because the beast could distract or
amuse, was delighted to have him there,
and he ordered his kitchen staff to prepare
whatever foods the wolf might eat.
The animal seemed tame, even sweet,
and became a palace pet. It kept
watch at night while his majesty slept.

Is this the happy ending? Not quite. So, let me tell you what happened next, when the king held court and summoned his nobles of every sort to assemble before him to celebrate a festival. Among these great peers of the land was the knight you may recall, for the wife of Bisclavret had married him. He hadn’t the least idea about the king’s pet beast but when he entered the palace hall the wolf with no hesitation at all leapt on him and sank his jaws into his thigh. (He had good cause but no one knew what that might be.) He might have killed him instantly but the king spoke sharply and raised a stick as if to beat him, which did the trick. Twice more during the day this same kind of attack occurred. The blame, some said, was the wolf’s, but others believed that the wolf itself might have been aggrieved by the knight somehow, for none but he had aroused the wolf’s ferocity. Back and forth the reasoning went in their good natured argument, and the king enjoyed it although he tended toward those who excused what his animal friend did.

Some time later the king on his way
elsewhere, near the forest of Bisclavret decided to rest for the night and found a convenient inn. Word went around of the royal visit. Bisclavret’s spouse, dressed in her finest, left the house with a basket of elegant dainties to bring to the inn, hoping to please the king. When Bisclavret saw her, he dashed toward her. He could not be restrained even by several men. He pounced upon the woman and then bit her nose from off her face. There were guards and huntsmen all over the place about to kill the wolf, but a wise man told the king: “No one denies the gentleness of the beast. There must be some reason for what he has just done. He has to have some kind of grudge against her and her husband. Judge his case as you would that of a man. Question the lady and see if you can find some reason for his rage.” The king heard the words of the mage and ordered the woman taken away and put on the rack until she would say what she had done to provoke such hate as the wolf’s behaviour might demonstrate. A shriek, a whimper, a plea, a curse, pain, and the fear of even worse . . . To make it stop, she had to expose her plot and the knight’s theft of the clothes of Bisclavret, since which time he
had not been seen. The wolf was he, she was certain. The king demanded the clothes be fetched and they soon were handed to him who put them down before the wolf in a bundle on the floor. But the animal seemed indifferent to this offering. The wise man who had spoken before explained that it might be from embarrassment or fright. He might not want to be seen as he was transformed back to humanity. “Put him in your room with this bundle and we shall learn what is the matter. If he has privacy, that may be enough. We’ll see.” The king took this advice and put the wolf in his bedroom. The doors were shut. Two hours later two barons and he entered the chamber quietly to find Bisclavret on the bed, asleep. The king embraces him. They weep together in their joy. How grand! The king restores Bisclavret’s land and gives him even more. The wife and the knight he banishes for life. They depart and, as one hears, have children, but the girls she bears are born without noses on their faces, the outward sign of their disgraces.

This is the truth, and do not doubt it. The Bretons still tell tales about it.