As long as I am recording these lays, I’ll set down, if you please, a tale not many people know of what took place long years ago, explaining the strange circumstance of Yonec’s birth — not here in France but in the British Isles. I’ll tell what I heard and remember well: how it was that his mother came to meet his father, a knight by the name of Muldumarec whom she had as a lover to keep from going mad.

There was a very rich old man who, toward the end of his life span, admitted at last to his mortal state and desired to pass on his great holdings to someone who bore his name in order to maintain his claim even after death. It stood to reason that a marriage could provide him with a son and heir. He found a maiden, young and fair, courtly, and from a noble line — exactly suited for his design. Her beauty was great enough to excite if not his desires in the night his suspicions and jealousy. To put his mind at rest, then, he
recruited his sister, a widow, severe and loyal, to keep an eye and ear open and be companion and guard to the bride. In a tower, the windows barred, the young wife lived a solitary life like that in a monastery or cloister with never a visitor to divert, amuse, or comfort her. There were servants of course; they had been told not to converse with their mistress — the old woman’s instructions were crystal clear.

In this way time passed, year by year, and the poor wife bewailed her plight and cried. She longed for death but suicide was out of the question. The holy books forbid it. Still, she lost her looks as women do, however fair, who ignore their maquillage and hair. There was no child. An older man, whatever he wants, must do as he can, and that, no doubt, was why he kept her locked away alone. She wept as she often did. One day the crone, fetching a psalter, left her alone to complain aloud — how she would be captive until death set her free. She cursed his red eyes filled with rheum, and her callous parents who’d given her to him. But mostly it was the husband she despised and cursed elaborately. He’d not been baptized, she was sure,
except in the rivers of hell or a sewer.
Errant knights, valiant and bold,
rescue maidens in stories told
to children, but could she believe
in them? Was there no reprieve
that God might somehow deign to grant
a miserable supplicant?
The poor girl’s eyelids, as she prayed,
were closed. But, then, at the moment she made
the sign of the cross and said Amen,
a large bird approached and then
entered her room. It looked like a hawk
but unlike most birds it could talk.
The creature alit on the chamber floor
and folded its wings. Then, before
her eyes, it changed its form to that
of a noble knight — exactly what
she had been praying might appear.
She was stricken nonetheless with fear
and she covered her eyes. But into her ear
the creature spoke: “Be not afraid,
for I am the one for whom you prayed.
I mean you no harm. A hawk, as you know,
is a noble bird. I swear this is so,
and I also swear that my love for you
is as ardent and steadfast as it is true.
I have never loved another but I
could not come to you save by
your invitation. I heard your words
floating upon the air where birds
soar and swoop. And now I am here.”
The lady was calmed and feeling her fear
diminish, managed at last to reply.

“Sir knight,” she said, “I welcome you, but before I decide what I must do, I ask if you believe in the Lord.”

(The question was not quite absurd, for he was a handsome young man and she feared evil and duplicity.)

“Assure me,” she said, “if you can.”

He then revealed to her a plan, a demonstration, and a test that would put all her doubts to rest. She could feign illness and, in her fear, send for a priest so she could hear the sacred service and be shriven so that her sins might be forgiven.

“I shall assume your form,” he said, “and receive the consecrated bread that is the body of Christ, and you will hear me recite the Credo, too.”

This was a proof she could not question, and she agreed to his suggestion. He took her place in the bed and when the sister-in-law came back again with the psalter she had gone for, he asked that with all celerity a priest be summoned. The woman shook her head and with an angry look said that their lord was out in the wood hunting, and that therefore nobody could be allowed to enter the room.

“What good can a priest do in the tomb?” the knight inquired. The crone, in fright,
supposed that a priest would be all right, and sent for one. Promptly he arrived with the corpus domini, which the knight received. He also drained the wine that the chalice had contained. Thereupon the priest withdrew as did the guardian woman, too, leaving the knight and lady there. I’ve never seen a couple so fair. All night long, they exchanged embraces, endearments, and laughter that those in their places always have and always will. Time, as a courtesy, stood still, but then, in the east, the light of dawn came inexorably on. The knight took his leave. The lady entreated him to return. He gave her a heated kiss and promised whenever she invited him, he would instantly appear, but he warned that she should be careful and moderate. Otherwise he might be discovered. The woman might see or at least suspect and indict the two before her jealous brother, and, one thing following on the other, the knight would have no power to resist: there’d be nothing he could do to prevent his death. “This being the case, be cautious,” he said. A final embrace and he was a hawk again and flew out of the window and into the blue. The next day and the day after
that her mood was better. Her laughter she had to suppress but she could smile in cautious silence once in a while.

She took better care of her hair and nails and no longer filled her chamber with wails, for she was content to wait until her lover returned so they could fill the night with pleasure. What more could there be for woman's perfect felicity?

She never had any awkward wait for her lover who came to her, early or late, and all she had to do to preserve this happiness was, with some nerve, maintain her usual reticent demeanor and drop no slightest hint.

Still, she could not conceal her returned radiance from the love that burned within her bosom. Her eagle-eyed husband noticed. He took aside his sister in his uneasiness to ask, but she could not venture a guess as to what could have happened, but she agreed to do exactly as he instructed, pretend to go out one day while in reality she'd stay, watching the young wife to see what kind of mischief it could be.

How could the lady know what these two were conspiring and plotting to do?

It is only a matter of two or three days before they act. The sister stays
while the husband says he’s summoned to court and pretends to leave. The trip will be short, he tells his wife, and she sees him ride away in a coach. (She assumes he’s inside.) Eager to learn if she would embarrass herself, the old woman, behind an arras, waited and watched to satisfy her curiosity. By and by, the hawk appeared and became a knight, handsome and more than average in height, and he and the lady with warm embraces and words of endearment that in such cases are usual took advantage of their delightful moment together to share. The old woman was not surprised at what took place that her brother surmised was likely, but the change from bird to man and back required a word at least of explanation and she swore it had happened mysteriously. The husband, not so full of awe about what his sister said she saw, set about devising a way by which he might make the intruder pay. He had his smithy forge steel spikes with razor sharp points at the ends the likes of which we have never seen or heard to inconvenience this bird. These he had his workmen secure on the sides of the window’s embrasure through which the knight had come. *Mon Dieu,* it was a wicked answer to
the knight who was unaware
of the danger that was waiting there.
Confident and with passionate speed
when the lady longed for his visit he’d
appear, as he did, this time, pell-mell,
but it did not work out quite so well
as hitherto, and as he sailed
into the window, a spike impaled
his feathered breast from which his blood
erupted in a mortal flood.
He lay down on the bed, which he
stained as he bled copiously,
and he said to her, “Alas, I die,
just as I predicted to you
I would. There is nothing we can do.
She sighed and wept and fainted away,
but he roused her and she heard him say
that it would not help them to grieve,
but she had been able to conceive
and would soon bear a valiant son
who would avenge what had been done
to them as soon as the right time came.
“Yonec,” he said, “shall be his name.
Until then he shall comfort you,
as a son and heir is supposed to do.”

He was in great pain and therefore had
to leave her. The lady, driven mad,
followed, risking a terrible fall
of twenty feet, which did not at all
discourage her. Barefoot, wearing a lacy
nightgown she followed the bloody trace he
left as he progressed until it terminated at a hill.

But, no, there was, as she could see, an opening in it through which she could follow after each crimson mark. But in the tunnel it was dark and she had to grope her way, a blind woman who was trying to find her stricken lover. She went as fast as she could until there was light at last and she emerged into a green meadow that would have seemed serene if it had not been for the dismal red trail along which she now sped. She reached a dazzling city where the silver spires in the air glittered in pride. Around the wall a river provided a natural moat. At last she found a gate unlocked and she did not hesitate but entered at once, not did she stop her pursuit as, drop after crimson drop, the blood led her to the palace. No one challenged her or said hello but let her pass at once into room after room. She hurried through until she found a knight asleep, but not her knight. She had to keep going and then, in another room she could make out in the gloom another knight, but not yet him for whom she searched. In the next dim
chamber, richer than any before
with gold and silken bedclothes, more
opulent than I can say
she recognized him, ashen gray
but still alive. He welcomed her
and took her in his arms. They were
together again, but he told her he
would die that night. “You have to flee
or the citizens in their grief will blame
you for their loss instead of my
passion for you.” “I’d rather die
here with you than go back to him,
she said. “My prospects there are dim!”
“No, no,” he answered. “Take this ring
and wear it always. It will bring
protection to you. He will not recall
what happened with us. Nothing at all
will trouble him. You have my word.
But also, darling, take my sword.
Let no man touch it but keep it until
my son has grown, for then he will
make proper use of it.” Then he
gave her a tunic to wear as she
traveled. When they exchanged their goodbyes
tears were streaming from their eyes.
As she left the palace and town
copious tears were streaming down
and to her sighs the funeral bell
added its voice with the knight’s death knell.
She collapsed and only an act of will
could keep her going on until
she came to the hill and its passage to
her home town. There, it all came true as the knight had said it would. The old man did not accuse or scold, slander, or mock, but was quite correct in his dealings with her in every respect.

In time, the son was born, a strong lad with a sense of right and wrong, handsome, generous, worthy, kind. One could not in that kingdom find Yonec’s better, and he grew up to be a fine man who was dubbed a knight. And now you shall hear what happened to him in that same year. The custom there was that one goes on the feast of St. Aaron the martyr to those places where the saint had prayed or had captured, or had stayed hidden. The husband, wife, and now the young man, too, set out. Allow a day or two to travel there but they reached a castle and abbey where they spent the night. Then at dawn they went to mass. But before they were gone the abbot invited them to see the chapter house and its finery. This they agreed to do and he took them all around to admire and . . . Look! At that elegant tomb with the rich brocade surrounded by its colonnade of candelabras of amethyst. “Who is buried there?” They inquired.
“A knight, much loved here and admired,
the strongest and bravest ever born,
whom the monks and the townspeople mourn
even today,” the abbot replied.
“He was our ruler, but he died
for the love of a lady. It was his fate.
Since his death we have had to wait
for the son he said would come to rule
over us one day and who’ll
avenge his murder.” Hearing this
the lady sobbed and said, “It is
the plan of the Lord that took us here.
Your father is buried in this great
tomb.” She explained about the bird
who was really a knight, and, keeping her word,
handed him the sword she had kept
for him, and she fell on the tomb and wept,
and died. She did not live to see
the vengeance her son then took as he
repaid the old man for the two
deaths — of his father and now the new
death of his mother. Born and bred
for this moment he cut off the head
of Muldemarec. When the people heard
what had happened, their hearts were stirred
and they welcomed Yorec, demanding that
he accept the throne where his father had sat.
This story of love’s consequence
of grief has been often told and, hence,
composed from its details this lay
is what I set down for you today.