

*The Lays of
Marie de France*

MINGLING VOICES

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*Give us wholeness, for we are broken.
But who are we asking, and why do we ask?*

— Phyllis Webb

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The Lays of Marie de France

Translated by David R. Slavitt

the JAYS *of*
MARIE *de*
FRANCE

TRANSLATED BY

David R. Slavitt



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For Janet

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Foreword

Marie who? A number of suggestions have been proposed for the identity of this wonderful twelfth-century poet. Marie, Abbess of Shaftesbury, the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet and half-sister to Henry II, King of England, is a plausible candidate, but Marie, Abbess of Reading, Marie I of Boulogne, Marie, Abbess of Barking, and Marie de Meulan, wife of Hugh Talbot, are all possibilities. There were a lot of Maries, after all, but only a few who could read and write in English, Latin, and Anglo-Norman French. It is not inappropriate, however, for her to be a bit mysterious and even emblematic as the author of these strange, suggestive, and intriguing poems. One important thing we do know about her is that she also translated the *Ysopet*, a collection of 103 Aesopic fables, which could have influenced the *Lais* but at least suggest something about her taste in literature. There is a fabulous quality to these poems, which are at one and the same time childish and very knowing, innocent and sophisticated.

The order of the poems is different in different manuscripts of the *Lais*, and it may well be that Marie didn't write all of them — but the ones she did write were good enough to have the others attributed to her, perhaps as an homage. Or it could have been that a scribe threw in another two or three that he liked,

had space for, and that looked to him to be similar. The unnamed king she addresses at the end of the prologue was almost certainly Henry II of England (ruled 1154–89), her half-brother — assuming she was the Abbess of Shaftesbury.

The Norman Conquest, for all its cruelty, brought European political and literary life to England. In the twelfth century, the French were producing *chansons de geste*, as well as love lyrics of the *troubadours* and *trouvères* and a number of religious and philosophical works

from writers such as St. Bernard and Abelard. Marie — any of these Maries — would have been educated in France, almost certainly in a convent, and would have been familiar with most of these examples of the efflorescence of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

These are courtly poems, which is to say that they fall within the tradition of sophisticated literature that requires an appropriate audience of the kind one generally finds at courts of kings and noblemen. They are full of wit and elegance. If they pretend to be simple folktales, they rely on the capacity of their readers (or, more likely, hearers) to understand their ambiguity and richness. One might think of these poems as toys for adults, for they are decorous variations on themes from fairy tales and *Märchen*. Marie's subjects are the charms and difficulties of love of various kinds and the way that goodness and wickedness are rewarded and punished in a complicated world. But it would be a disservice to her and to the poems to try to extract a philosophical or political "position" from pieces that are, I think, written as entertainments and deliberately mixed in

approach and attitude. The form itself imposes certain constraints, for the *lai* is shorter than the romance, which means that love tends to strike suddenly so that we can concentrate on the crises of various kinds and the frequently surprising *dénouements*. Longer than a lyric, shorter than a *chanson*, the *lai* has its own natural domain to which Marie was particularly well suited.

My intention in making this new translation was not to supply students in comp lit courses with yet another text (although I hope that even the reluctant readers among them may be surprised to discover that what they have been assigned is actually fun). On the contrary, I saw in these *lais* an opportunity to show off, just as Marie was showing off. It was a challenge to try to reproduce the panache of the originals. I wanted to convey not only the sense of the poems but also, beyond the meat of meaning, the sizzle of the poetry — which transcends time and place. If these pieces had been written this year by a Mary Francis from New London, they'd be very much worth reading.

*The Lays of
Marie de France*

PROLOGUE

If one has received from God the great gift of eloquence, it is his fate and duty to exercise and display these talents. If one would compose a lay he must speak or rather write as well as he can for men's delight and appreciation. The talent will first blossom in his company's thirst for more and ever more of the same. Then people will hear of him: his name will spread about him. In his pursuit of fame these blossoms will bloom, and fruit may even appear in the form of books in library shelves and tables and nooks. Some poets dare to be obscure to engage the scholars (although perhaps fewer simple readers). Priscian describes how poets can dupe the scholarly tribes and by this contrarian endeavor contrive for their works to live forever. The scholars' glosses and citations provide them with harmless occupations by which they avoid the rudenesses of the rough-and-tumble world that is the lot of most. My original scheme was to find a Latin text that would seem to lend itself to a version in our French and pass a pleasant hour. But others have done such things before

and I wanted to occupy myself with a more
worthwhile project. I thought of the lays
I had heard in my younger days
that I could preserve for those who care
about bold knights and ladies fair.
Some of these I have put into rhyme
not merely to pass some idle time
but to do some good. Late into the night
I have sat and worked by candlelight.
I did this in your honour, sire,
whom all good men respect and admire,
a paragon of virtue and taste.
If your kind acceptance graced
my little verses it would please
me greatly, and upon my knees
I offer them to you, hoping to win
a royal smile. Let us begin.

I *GUIGEMAR*

A good story deserves to be well told. My gracious lords, Marie understands her obligation on such a fortunate occasion when an interesting story presents itself. And yet I worry that any show of excellence invites envy of women's or men's achievements. Slanders, insults, and lies attend me. Everybody tries to sneer at whatever one composes — they joke and even thumb their noses. They are cowardly dogs that bite, mean, malicious, and full of spite. But I refuse to be deterred as, line by line and word by word, I do my best to compose my lay, whatever the jealous critics say. I shall relate some tales to you from Brittany that I know are true and worthy of your attention. In a friendly spirit, let us begin.

This was back in Hoilas's reign, when in battles men were slain or badly wounded. One of the king's barons, trusted in all things, was lord of Liun: his given name was Oridial. He enjoyed great fame

for valour. His wife had borne him two children, a beautiful daughter who was called Noguent and a son, a smart and very handsome one, named Guigemar. His mother doted on him, and his father was devoted. Too soon he grew to the proper age to be sent away to serve as page in the court of a distant king. The lad excelled there because he had courtesy and charm and wit and with them he showed that he was fit for knighthood. The king's ceremonial sword touched his shoulder and that lord promoted him deservedly to the ranks of noble chivalry and gave him a set of armor, too, to equip him for fighting and derring-do. Guigemar gave gifts to those who had been kind to him. He chose to go to Flanders, which was inviting because of its continual fighting, which was the road to fame. He showed allegiance to the chivalric code and a puissance which was such that he had no equal in Burgundy, Gascony, Lorraine, Anjou, or anywhere else. The whole world knew that Guigemar was brave and above reproach — except in matters of love, to which he was indifferent. He had many an opportunity

from beautiful noble ladies who
made it clear that if he would woo
he would win them instantly.
But somehow he seemed not to be
interested or even aware.
It puzzled his friends; he didn't care,
but went on his solitary way
and there was nothing they could say.

Having earned great fame as a knight,
he decided after a while that he might
go home to visit his parents and his
sister whom he'd begun to miss,
and they were longing to see him, too,
but after a month with them he grew
restless and thought it might be wise
to engage in some strenuous exercise
like hunting. He called on friendly knights
and summoned beaters and when the lights
of the stars gave way to the rising sun
they set out together for the one
kind of venery he found
agreeable. It was at the sound
of a horn that the grooms let the hounds go
to quarter the ground with their noses low
to catch the scent of a suitable stag.
Guigemar and the knights would lag
behind with weapons at the ready,
hoping for a stag, but he
found a hind, completely white,
with a fawn beside her. At this sight
the hounds bayed and the hind darted

out of the bush. As soon as she started Guigemar fired an arrow that found the animal's forehead. She fell to the ground but the arrow somehow ricocheted returning to the knight where it made a passage through his thigh and through his horse's skin from which it drew a trickle of blood. The knight fell down into the thick grass on the ground close to the hind, that said somehow, "I am fatally wounded, and now as long as you live you will feel pain from your wound that will not heal. No root or herb or elixir will ever be of help until you find a woman willing to suffer even more pain than you can imagine, more pain than any other woman has felt, wife or mother, for the sake of your love, and you'll undergo equal anguish — so much so that lovers will be astonished by your torments. Now go and let me die."

The knight was dismayed hearing this and wondered what would alleviate his suffering and if there could be a woman anywhere whom he could love or be loved by. Appalled by what the hind had said, he called his page and ordered him to ride to fetch his companions. Then he tried

to bind the wound as well as he could,
remounted his horse that stood
nearby and managed to ride away.
It's inconsistent: what can I say?
He felt ashamed at having been
so badly wounded and in chagrin
was reluctant to be seen in this
condition. He did not stay for his
friends but disappeared into
the wood on a path that led him through
the trees to an open space where he
found a stream that ran to the sea.
He came to a harbor that he did not
remember (or had he forgot?)
in which was a ship ready to sail.
The planks of her decks were ebony and
her sail was silk and very grand.
He advanced to the shore and climbed aboard
this mysterious vessel, called out a word
of greeting but heard no reply.
The ship was deserted. He wondered why,
but he saw a bed of cypress wood
inlaid with gold and ivory, good
enough for Solomon of old.
In the silken bedclothes were threads of gold
and the pillow was such that any knight
whose head had touched it would never turn white.
The coverlet was sable lined
with satin. Guigemar reclined
on the bed in need of a few minutes' rest —
but he slept for an hour, or so he guessed.
He was about to disembark

but he could make out in the dark
that the ship was now on the high seas
with its sail bellied out in the breeze.
He was not afraid but he realized
his helplessness — which he despised.
He was in pain but this he could bear.
He prayed to God to take good care
of him and help him to survive
and guide the vessel to let it arrive
at some safe harbor. Exhausted, he
lay down again and amazingly
fell asleep as the ship progressed
heading generally west
even with no one at the helm
to arrive at last at an unknown realm.
The lord who ruled over it was old
and very jealous. He controlled
his wife who was so beautiful
that he doubted she was dutiful
(although he had no reason to
but still this is what old men do).
He'd built her a lovely garden at
the foot of the keep, with high walls that
enclosed it — except for its view of the sea.
There were guards, as you would expect, in three
shifts around the clock. Also
there was a chapel where she could go
for solace, with paintings high above
on the walls. Venus, the goddess of love,
was shown in one in the act of throwing
a volume of Ovid into the glowing
fire that waits for sinners who read

its naughty pages and pay them heed.
As her companion, the husband supplied
a niece of his to be at her side
for entertainment. Add to this *mise*
en scène a priest whose privities'
wounds made his vows of chastity
superfluous entirely.
He recited masses and was able
as well to wait on the women at table.

Late one afternoon, the wife
as she did almost every day of her life
went after dinner to take her ease
in the garden, dozing under the trees.
When she awoke the women talked
of this and that and, as they walked
they noticed a ship that lay hove to
without any apparent crew.
The lady thought that this was queer
and felt apprehension and even fear,
but her companion, curious,
bolder, and more adventurous,
proposed that they should take together
a further look to discover whether
it might be good. Her show of spirit
encouraged the lady and they drew near it
and boarded the vessel: a ghost ship but
for the knight on the bed with his eyes shut.
Asleep? Wounded? Dead? The two
conferred about what they should do.
The lady thought that if he was dead
they should fetch the priest: a mass should be said

and he should be buried. “But if he is not,
we can speak with him and ask him what
brought him here and who he is.”

The two of them decided that this
was correct and they advanced to the bed
where the knight was lying, in some dread
that the youth with this beautiful body had faced
danger and died. What a great waste!

She put her hand upon his chest.

It was warm! There were heartbeats, too! She guessed
he was alive . . . And then he woke,
looked up into her face, and spoke,
rejoicing to find that the ship had come
to rest in a place where there seemed to be some
hope of care for the wound he bore.

The lady asked him from what war
he had arrived here. He told her how he
had shot the hind that had to be
charmed for the arrow somehow bounced
and wounded his thigh. And the hind announced
that its only possible cure could come
from the hand of a damsel. (He omitted some
details about how she would suffer
as he would also. This was enough for
the moment, he thought.) He told her how
he boarded the vessel that pointed its prow
to bring him here and he asked her for
help. He was tired. His leg was sore.
He did not know how to steer
the ship that had managed to bring him here.
She in her turn explained to him
about her husband and the grim

constraints he had put on her, increased
by the watchful eye of her jailor-priest.
“If you wish to remain until you are healed,
we shall be happy to keep you concealed
and take care of you as well as we can.”
The knight thanked her for her generous plan
and he raised himself up from the bed. The two
women helped him to take a few
steps and then a few more until,
relying on them and on sheer will,
he reached their chamber at last where he
fell down on the maiden’s bed. Then she
and her mistress brought water in bowls
to wash his wound and bind it in towels
of finest linen. They gave him care
and attention, and set aside a share
of their food for him. His gratitude
transmogrified into a mood
he admitted to himself at last
was love for the lady, and, downcast,
he remembered what the hind had said
in her dying threat. As he lay in bed
he could not imagine what he
should do. What if he were to be
rejected? He would die of a grief
from which there could be no relief.
He recalled her speech, her sparkling eyes,
and proceeded then to anatomize
the many aspects of her perfection
that had inspired his affection.
He had not dared imagine – let
alone expect – that she might yet

find in her heart the same affection.
Hopelessly and in deep dejection
he was unwilling to betray
his passion for her in any way
and he feared to make any mention of
this onset of unexpected love,
which he thought would be a great mistake.
The lady, who'd spent all night awake,
arose in the morning fearfully
to face another day when she
would have to dissimulate and hide
the feelings of passion that inside
her breast were burning. Her niece could see
her pallor by which her misery
betrayed itself. It hardly took
more than a fleeting, cursory look.
She decided that she would
help the couple if she could
and went to the bed where Guigemar lay,
for candor is often the only way
to sort these matters out, and she
was the soul of kindness and decency.

She entered his room and sat down near
the bed. Delighted to see her here,
he asked where his lady had gone and why
she'd risen so early. The maiden's reply
was, "You are in love, and should not conceal
the fact from her or yourself. What you feel,
she feels also. What you must do
is think of her constantly and be true,
which will not be difficult, for she

is beautiful and she can see
that you are handsome.” To this the knight
listened in transports of delight
and said he’d be in a sorry state
if she did not reciprocate.

“Help me, sweet friend. I am at the brink
of madness and am unable to think.

The maiden assured him that she would do
what he and her mistress would want her to.
Whatever was possible she would try
to accomplish for them, and he could rely
on her good will. At once he could see
her courtliness and nobility.

As soon as the lady was done with mass,
she inquired of the obliging lass
how the knight was doing, how
he had slept through the night, and now
how he looked. The maid replied
that she should go to Guigemar’s side
and ask him directly. “He would receive
you graciously, I do believe.”

It was not so simple as she’d expected,
for the knight was afraid of being rejected
and did not want to presume or press
too hard, although in great distress.
He was afraid she might take offence
at what he said and order him hence.
Still, one who keeps his infirmity
concealed is not very likely to be
cured. On the other hand, he thought

of the ladies' men of the court who ought
to behave better and how they flirt
with women who are playful and pert
as this one was so clearly not.
He could not decide exactly what
to say or how to say it. His pain
decided the question. He could not remain
in this discomfort for years and years.
Having no choice then, he confessed
to the passion for her that in his breast
blazed in fury. "If you will not
cure me of this ailment I've got,
I shall perish. I do implore
your mercy. I languish and am heartsore."
The lady replied that she would need
time to reflect. The question he'd
put to her was not of the kind
to which she was accustomed. Inclined
one way by her heart and another by
her head, she allowed herself a sigh
to which he answered: "In God's name,
some women play at love as a game,
enjoying the courtship that gives them a feeling
of beauty and makes them more appealing.
A wiser woman should be prepared
to rejoice in a love that is privately shared.
If she loves a man and is sure that he
loves her too, what can there be
but joy and delight that are the goal
of every philosophical soul?
This argument seemed so persuasive
that she felt no need to be evasive

but granted him her love as she
kissed his mouth repeatedly,
and his response to this was to press
forward manfully to address
their mutual discomfort. Then
they lay together as women and men
do to fondle and embrace
each other, emboldened now to face
their future together. Joy beyond measure
we wish them both and every pleasure.

The arrangement lasted for a year
and a half, but we all learn to fear
Fortune's vicissitudes as she
turns her wheel capriciously
in her reversals and surprises.
One man falls; another rises
Eventually they were found out.
(Did anyone have any doubt?)
One morning as they lay beside
each other, the thoughtful lady sighed
and suggested that sooner or later they
would run out of luck. She went on to say,
"If you die, I, too, wish to die.
If you manage somehow to fly
away and survive, I am quite sure
that among the many ladies who're
able to see your beauty you
will find a suitable one. Or two.
But I shall have to remain here, sad,
lonely, bereft, and nearly mad."
Guigemar answered, "Do not say

such things. I swear there is no way
that I could turn to another. May
I find no peace or joy if I
break this promise. You may rely
on what I am telling you.” “My dear,
allay, if you can, my nagging fear.
Give me your shirt and allow me to
put a knot in its tail. One who,
without the use of scissors or knife,
can undo the knot you may take as a wife,
mistress, or concubine with my
permission.” Guigemar in reply
asked for the same kind of pledge from her,
and gave her a belt on which there were
intricate buckles here and there.
A man who did not cut or tear
the belt but contrive to remove it somehow
he would approve for her and allow
her to take as a lover. The two
agreed and found other things to do.

That of course was the very day when
the lord sent one of his serving men
to deliver a message. When he could not gain
entry he peered through a window pane
high off the ground and there he spied
the lovers. To say what he'd seen inside
the room he ran back to his lord
to report. The master reached for his sword,
took three burly men along,
and went to the chamber to right this wrong.
They broke down the door and entered in

to the scene of the couple's sordid sin.
He ordered his men to kill the knight,
who stood up to meet them and, to fight,
grabbed a laundry pole that he
could use as a weapon. If he were to be
killed he could at least take one
or two with him, if only for fun.
The lord, impressed by this, asked who
he was and how he had managed to
enter the lady's chamber. The knight
explained about how he'd shot the white
hind, and what it had said, and then
the ship that appeared without any men
to steer it that had brought him here.
The lord thought this was rather queer,
either nonsense or else a joke.
He thought for a moment and then spoke,
telling the knight that if he could
summon that vessel back, it would
be permitted that he embark.
To this he added a last remark,
that if the knight on that ghost ship
were somehow to survive the trip,
he would be distressed to hear
the news. But it would give him cheer
to be informed that the knight had drowned.
They went to the harbor and there they found
the vessel waiting. Without delay
Guigemar boarded and sailed away.
Kneeling on the polished deck
the knight prayed for a storm and a wreck
that would take his life if he could not see

his sweetheart again. Mortality was the only relief he could think of for his ailment. But he reached the shore of his homeland and left the ship behind as he made his way up the shingle to find a youth he had raised who was now a squire to another knight from a nearby shire. The youth recognized him at once and he dismounted and bowed, delighted to see Guigemar again. At a canter they rode together exchanging banter while the young man assured him that he would be welcomed home with sincerity. He was, but the knight, nevertheless seemed downcast and in some distress. A few of his friends, concerned for him, suggested he marry: he took a dim view of this suggestion. He said he'd promised not to romance or wed any maiden or dame who could not without violence undo the knot someone had made in the tail of his shirt. It was an unlikely thing to assert and news of this extraordinary requirement was broadcast very far and wide. Many women came to make an attempt at the strange game in which Guigemar himself would be the prize for someone's dexterity. I hardly need report that none was successful. It simply couldn't be done.

Meanwhile, the lady he'd left behind
was locked in a tower and confined
to a single room in which her tears
flowed as she prayed for death. Two years
she spent this way. Indeed, her only
hope was to put an end to a lonely
existence: if she could get to the sea
she could drown herself and it would be
done with. She imagined this
and in her dreams whispered into his
ear of her grief and her despair.
Could he not help her? Did he not care?
She arose one day as if in a trance
to discover that by some curious chance
the door had been left unbolted and she
was able to pass through it, free
and unhindered. She headed rapidly for
a large rock that stood on the shore
from which she planned to leap to her death.
She ran until she was out of breath
and there was that ghost ship tied up beside
it, waiting for an outgoing tide.
She boarded it for she knew it was how
Guigemar had left and now
it would take her as well. She would
have thrown herself overboard if she could,
but she was exhausted, an utter wreck,
and she collapsed upon the deck.
The vessel carried her, as we
might have expected, to Brittany
and either through fate or merely luck
to the fortified castle of Mariaduc.

Looking out of his window he
noticed the ship — a mystery
for there seemed to be no sailors aboard.
He summoned his chamberlain, took his sword,
and, in the brief inspection he made, he
found, of course, the beautiful lady
whom he led to his castle. He gave
her every comfort she might crave.
She was, he could see, of noble blood
and beautiful. She would be a good
wife and mother, he thought, and fell
in love with her. He had her dwell
in her own apartments in which she
had his sister for company.
She was richly dressed and fed with rare
dainties he had his cooks prepare.
He professed his love for her in many
ways but she did not pay any
heed to his declarations. Sad
and distracted, she told him at last
of the belt she wore that bound her fast
to another man — or it was both
the belt she had on and also the oath
she had taken. This news was not
at all welcome. He wondered what
was going on, for he'd had word
of a knight with a similarly absurd
constraint — a knot someone had made
in his shirt tail no one could undo.
“And I think that that someone was you.”
Hearing this, the lady sighed,
and her tears fell fast to make two wide

rivulets down her cheeks. But he
took no notice and brutally
undid the laces of her dress
to unfasten the belt, but without success.
In a fit of petulance he invited
others to try it, but no knight did
better. Each night after dinner
they played the game, but with never a winner.

There came in time a threat of war,
which Meriaduc was ready for,
but he proposed instead to hold
a tournament with brave and bold
knights of each side to joust and decide
the *casus belli* and take great pride
in what they'd done. From near and far
he invited knights, and Guigemar
was one of these. (He was promised a great
reward in order to compensate
him for his trouble.) With this went
every kind of compliment
and protestations of friendship. These
pleasant words and courtesies
brought Guigemar, accompanied by
a hundred knights, each ready to try
his luck and skill. Lodging them all
in a tower richly decked with all
kinds of tapestries, the host
welcomed them and gave a most
persuasive expression of gratitude.
He sent then for his sister, as you'd
expect, and the lady with her whom

he longed for. The two entered the room
hand in hand. Hearing his name
the lady almost fainted. The same
Guigemar? The name is rare.
How many other gentlemen bear
that odd cognomen? But then he spoke,
“Sweetheart! Darling! My heart broke
when I sailed away.” But can it be
she? The similarity
is great but how did she come here?
Is she an illusion as I fear?
Uncertain as he was, he guessed
that he might put her to the test
by sitting beside her. Casual chat
between them about this and that
would make it clear. He took a chair
close to her but a silent stare
was all he was able to get from her.
Meriaduc saw how they were
nonplussed, and said the knight should see
whether the woman beside him could be
the one to untie the challenging knot
in the tail of his shirt. On the spot
Guigemar ordered that it be brought
and given to the lady he thought
would be able to untie it, but she
was afraid and, full of misery,
refused even to try unless
Meriaduc permitted. “Yes,”
he said, “do what you can with it.”
Instantly, without a whit
of trouble, she untied the knot,

delighting Guigemar. But what about the belt? If this was she, she would have it still, and he placed his hands on her hips to feel for the belt. It was there, and she was real! “Beloved,” he said, “my fondest dreams are realized, for indeed it seems that you are here beside me. Who brought you here?” Her answer to these questions you all know: how she found herself at liberty, went to drown herself but then saw the ship. This best of men had housed her here with all respect and behaviour that was quite correct, although he kept proposing to her as constantly he tried to woo her. But here was Guigemar, and she at last was as happy as she could be. Guigemar rose and said, “I implore you, Meriaduc, to restore my love to me. I shall be your vassal for three years or four with my hundred knights.” But the latter replied, “I am not in need of vassals. I’d rather keep her. I was the one who found her and I declare that none shall take her away from me.” But when Guigemar heard this, he had his men mount and ride away. With him came other knights who took a dim view of Meriaduc’s deportment.

They were a most impressive assortment
and they all went to join the foe
of Meriaduc — which meant, you know,
that the war was ended before it began.
But Guigemar, a determined man,
returned to Meriaduc to lay
siege to his town and in this way
force him to give the lady back.
Others appeared. There was no lack
of spirited knights to give him aid
in his cause. Their numbers made
an overwhelming force. Inside
the town many men and women died,
slowly starving to death. At last,
made desperate by the protracted fast,
and having lost heart as well as weight,
someone opened the main gate.
Guigemar stormed the castle and slew
its lord, as we would expect him to.
With joy he took his lady and their
troubles vanished into thin air.

With harp and zither this fine story
has come into the repertory.

II *EQUITAN*

The Bretons were noble people who
composed these lays in order to
remember what had been said and done
and preserve it from oblivion.

One tale concerns a courtly man,
a lord of Nantes, named Equitan.

Greatly admired and well loved, he
upheld the code of chivalry
and gave himself to the pleasures of love.
Those who lack understanding of
this kind of living cannot be
fully alive and cannot see
how a man who is under the sway
of love can have his reason give way
to passion's arbitrary commands.
Governing Equitan left in the hands
of a seneschal who was loyal and brave
so that the master could follow — save
in times of war — his inclinations
for novel and ever more keen sensations,
pursuing animals in the chase,
fishing in his favorite place,
or other rather gentler arts
of making love and breaking hearts.

His seneschal was married to
an extremely beautiful woman who
was so attractive as to produce

great misfortune. Her eyes were bright,
her nose was slender, her skin was white,
his lips were perfectly formed. Let us say
that she was nature's nonpareil.
The king had often heard her praised
and not surprisingly this raised
a frisson of interest in his mind,
such that he contrived to find
a way to meet her (as he had never
managed to do). He was quite clever
and went on a hunt in the region where
she lived — and as long as he was there,
he thought it proper to make a call
at the castle of his seneschal
(who happened at that moment to be
away on Equitan's business, as we
might have guessed). There were, therefore,
during the visit occasions galore
for him to express his admiration
for her grace, her beauty, her cultivation
and hint at the keenness of his desire
for her, as love's spark burst into fire.

That night, in bed, as he turned and tossed,
knowing that he had nearly crossed
the line, and it was indecent and wrong
for him to proceed with this, but the strong
power of Love had seized him and he
had no will to resist it or free
himself from its clutches. He had to blame
himself for forgetting how, in a game,
there are winners and losers, and he was one

of the latter group. What could be done?
He could not betray his seneschal who
had always given him his true
allegiance and would be deeply grieved
if he discovered he'd been deceived.
But could such a beautiful woman be
without a lover? Then why not he?
Perhaps the seneschal had by now
resigned himself . . . Might he allow
such liaisons? Would it be fair
if the two men were somehow to share
this gorgeous woman between them? All night
he tried not to think about her, but light
was appearing in the sky and he
was wide awake and in misery.

In this condition of abject woe
he told himself that he did not know
whether the woman's inclinations
might match his own. His speculations
were otherwise otiose and absurd,
which gave him hope, for it occurred
to him that there might be a way
out of this mess. At break of day
he rose and set out to hunt for game,
and the seneschal, who was back now, came
along to keep him company.
But Equitan complained that he
did not feel well and returned to go
to bed. His companion of course had no
idea of what the matter was
and he sent his wife to learn the cause

of their lord's distress — a woman can often do better at this than a man. She had no plausible reason not to go although she had guessed what was troubling him. She made her visit to ask their visitor, "What is it that ails you?" And he answered, "You! There's nothing I can say or do, I am in love with you, and unless you bring relief for my distress I shall surely die." She said, pursing her lips and shaking her head, "I must have time to consider such a problem. I fear that you very much outrank me and that, should I comply with your wishes, you would by and by abandon me. If I confessed my love and granted your request, our feelings would not be equally shared. I am your vassal, and you are prepared to be my lord in love. As I well know, such an inequity in love is a disability: a poor man's love, though it be rude, is full of joy and gratitude, while a prince or a king will take it for granted, so that the lesser is more. If I were to place my love and trust in a higher station than mine, I must expect unhappiness to follow pleasures that would be brief and shallow. The powerful man takes as his right

the love he desires, if but for a night.”
To these words Equitan replied,
“Say not so!” and with some pride
suggested that these were the calculations
of merchants and men in such occupations,
but not of courtliness, for we
have higher ideals and are therefore free
of tradesmen’s reckonings. Those who
play such tricks — and I trust they are few —
are laughingstocks. You now may be
my vassal, but love’s peripety
would make you queen and me the servant
loyal, obedient, and fervent.
I surrender myself to you
and swear that I shall forever do
your bidding — if you do not allow
me to die for your sake now.”
Many other things he said
to her as he protested and pled
so ardently that in the end
she was unable to defend
herself and (as we thought she’d do)
gave him her soul and body, too.
They exchanged rings and with them swore
to love each other forever more,
and they kept these oaths, which were to be
the cause of their deaths, as we shall see.

 Their love lasted for years without
arousing any suspicion or doubt
on anyone’s part. The king would say
he needed to be bled — that way

claiming a privacy in which she
could visit him in secrecy
for the doors to his suite were locked and none
unless he was summoned would take it upon
himself to intrude. The lord had no
desire for other women, although
the courtiers proposed many times that he
should take a wife so that there might be
an heir. He would not hear of this
and declined to allow discussions in his
presence, but the seneschal's wife
heard the rumors that were rife
and worried that if he might be
married to someone, then surely she
would be cast off and sent away.
She soon found an occasion to say
that she was worried, and understood
that it would be for the country's good
if he were to marry, but in that case
she would, for lack of his embrace,
wither away, sicken, and die,
and she tried her hardest not to cry.
Equitan replied that he
would never marry and said that she
could rely on his word. "Indeed," he said,
"if your husband were to die, we'd wed
at once, and you would share my throne."
In that phrase, the seed was sewn,
and she began at once to contrive
scenarios that would let her arrive
at the widowhood to which he had made
reference. But she'd need his aid.

He promised that he would gladly do whatever she required him to, and she explained her plan: he should come to her husband's castle where good hunting was to be found, and there after this exercise, declare that he would like a bath. The men could both bathe together, but when the tubs were prepared the one would be comfortably warm, but other she would have filled with water boiling hot so that one who stepped in it could not survive. Her husband's death would appear to the world to be an accident. Clear and simple it was, and he agreed that this was the way they would proceed.

A couple of months go by and the time comes for them to commit their crime. On the third day of his visit there at his seneschal's palace, in a rare moment of conviviality Equitan suggests they both be bled and then take a nice bath to relax as gentlemen often do. The lady arranged for a pair of tubs to be brought to the bedroom for their scrubs, one, of course, with the boiling water. Equitan looked at her and thought her lovelier than ever and took his pleasure with her in a donnybrook of erotic positions. A girl was on guard

at the locked door, after all, to ward
off visitors. But the seneschal came
and he thought the girl's excuses were lame.
It was his house, after all, and he
knocked at the door impatiently,
and then, suspecting, or angry, or both,
in a fit of fury and waxing wrath,
he broke down the door and saw his wife
with the lord to whose service he'd given his life.
Resistless, he approached the bed
resolved that one or both would be dead
immediately. Equitan
being naked, was not the man
he would have been wearing clothes, and he
jumped into one of the tubs . . . But you see
he chose wrong and his last breath
was a scream as he was boiled to death.
It was clear to the seneschal that this
boiling tub was intended as his.
One of the would-be murderers yet
remained alive, and he could not let
her get away, so he threw her in
the water headfirst for her share in their sin.
Men and women have often found
that the evil they plan can rebound
and strike them down who intended to strike.
It's poetic justice or something like.

All this happened as I have recited,
for the Bretons tell the tale that I did.

III *LE FRESNE*

I shall tell you the lay of Le Fresne
or, if you've heard it, tell it again.
There lived in Brittany in the past
two knights, neighbours, and, if not fast
friends, then friendly. Both had much
wealth and were worthy and valiant, with such
qualities as knights display.
Both were recently married and they
lived in amity, till one day
one of the wives conceived and then
gave birth to two sons. Thank God, and Amen.
Full of joy the father sent
word to his neighbour of friendly intent —
to ask that he be godfather to one
who would bear his name as his godson.
The messenger knelt as he brought word
to the knight who, as soon as he heard,
offered the messenger a fine steed
as a token of thanks and wished him Godspeed.
The wife, however, an envious, proud
and deceitful woman, wondered aloud
that this was a shame and blot upon
the neighbour's honour. To father a son
is a splendid thing, but no woman can
give birth to twin sons of one man,
and it followed that there would have to be
a question about their paternity.
The husband was taken aback. He glared
at his wife to whom he at once declared,

“The lady’s reputation is
unblemished, and to speak like this
is wicked.” All the servants heard
their master’s disapproval, and word
of his remarks immediately
spread throughout all Brittany
in which all women, rich and poor,
were either roused to anger or
contempt that in their bosoms burned.
The messenger, when he returned
to the knight, his master, made a short,
precise, and accurate report
of what he’d heard. The knight was sad,
felt betrayed, and wished he had
been less trusting. Had she done wrong?
Had his wife deceived him all along?
She had been utterly blameless, but he
confined her now under lock and key
and appointed faithful servants to keep
watch over her both awake and asleep.

That same year, the neighbour who had
for mischievous reasons started the bad
rumor discovered that, for her sins,
she had conceived and was bearing twins,
girls as it happened, but even so,
the words she had said not long ago
remained to indict her. Who could dream
of such a reversal? Honour, esteem . . .
all gone — because of her jest
(to which the woman had never confessed)
about how twins were proof that she

had indulged in some promiscuity.
Retribution was only fair,
except that her husband would have a share
that he did not deserve in her disgrace.
What could she do to save his face?
She decided that she could murder one
of the babies and, when that was done,
make amends to God. This would
maintain her repute as a loyal and good
wife. What other way could she
avoid the smirks and calumny?
Her serving women were horrified
by the prospect of this infanticide
and wept bitterly in the hope
that she might find other ways to cope
with her difficulty. One lady in waiting
suggested a way of extricating
herself: "Give one of the children to me,
and I'll take her away. You'll never see
the girl again or undergo
slanders. There is a church I know
to which I shall take her and there God can
find for her some worthy man
to care for her and treat her well.
The lady thanked the mademoiselle
and offered her a reward if she
could perform this act of charity.
They swaddled the child in a piece of fine
linen, and then, providing a sign
to the world of the baby's noble birth,
wrapped her in a brocade of great worth
from Constantinople. One more thing:

tied by a piece of ribbon, a ring
made of an ounce of gold and set
with a large ruby in a baguette
cut. Its band was inscribed with small
letters — as we shall have cause to recall.

That night, when darkness had fallen, the maid
took the baby and, unafraid,
followed a path that led into
a wood she had to travel through
to get to the town on the other side
and its abbey where pious nuns abide.
Large it was and well endowed,
and the sisters and their abbess were proud
of their good works. This was her aim,
and by the time the sun rose she came
to the outskirts of the town with farms
from which watchdogs sounded alarms.
She reached the abbey and at the door
knelt down with the infant to implore
God for his mercy by which he might keep
safe the child who lay asleep
in its little bundle. Close by there stood
an ash tree that would be a good
safe place to deposit the child,
protected from roving packs of wild
dogs. In the tree, she could be hidden
away but not too well. As bidden,
she left the child and returned to tell
her mistress how all things were well.

A porter, at dawn of the following day,

readied the abbey for people to pray,
lighting the candles, ringing the bells,
and paying attention to whatever else
had to be done in the church. At last
he opened the doors and as he cast
his eyes about he happened to see
the bundle someone had put in the tree.
A penitent thief returning what
he had stolen — his gains ill got?
The cautious porter went to look
more closely and found there in the crook
of a branch the baby. Thank God! He
carried it home with him carefully
to his widowed daughter suckling her
newborn child — so that they were
able to help the foundling. The porter
appealed to the kindness of his daughter,
who cradled the infant in her arm,
bathed her, dried her so she would be warm,
and gave her mother's milk. The poor thing
was hungry! When they found the ring
and the fine brocade they were impressed
and not unreasonably they guessed
that she had come from nobility.
Therefore the porter went to see
the abbess after she'd said her prayers
to inform the lady of these affairs
and seek her advice. The abbess thought
he had done well so far but ought
to bring it to her for her first hand
inspection. The porter, at her command
fetched the child. The abbess took

her into her arms and at first look
decided to raise her herself. “She’ll be
my niece, we’ll say. Do you agree?”
The porter promised his silence, and then
the abbess said, “We’ll name her “Le Fresne,”
for the ash tree in which she was put.
But whatever happens, keep your mouth shut.”

The girl grew up in the abbey’s pleasant
lands. It was clear that she was no peasant,
but, graceful, charming, and quick to learn,
showed breeding one could at once discern.
At length she grew to the age when Nature
transforms young girls, giving them stature
and beauty, to which she also brought
a talent for speaking that she’d been taught
by the sisters who were devoted
to her, for on her each one doted.

There was in the nearby town of Dol
a knight named Gurun, a noble soul,
who heard reports of this demoiselle
of whom so many spoke so well.
This was more than enough to pique
his curiosity – he would seek
an audience with her on his journey
back from an impending tourney.
The abbess was happy enough to show
her prize pupil off who was so
intelligent and even wise,
as he saw in her lovely eyes.
He was smitten but also aware

that if he dallied too long there
or returned too often the abbess might
tighten the reins that were already tight
and he might never again be allowed
to see her. That thought was a cloud
marring an otherwise azure sky.
But Gurun devised a plan whereby
he might establish himself as a great
benefactor, enlarge their estate,
and in return would be given his
own rooms in the premises,
where he could come and go as he
liked with all impunity.
There would be no unseemly grins
for a gift like this for remission of sins.
This arrangement allowed him free
access and the liberty
to speak to the girl whenever the whim
crossed his mind or prompted him.
Interest, attraction, and then passion
possessed him in the usual fashion,
Then, as sometimes can occur,
reciprocal feelings were roused in her.
At last, when he thought the time was right
to speak to the girl forthrightly, the knight
took her hand in his and declared
that he adored her and thought she cared
for him as well. She said she did.
He then said it was time to bid
farewell to the abbey to consummate
their love. "If you should hesitate
you might in time conceive and be

an embarrassment for the nunnery.
We ought not risk offending your
aunt whom I know you adore.
I shall love you and I swear
that you shall be as happy there
in my castle as you have been here
in this otherworldly atmosphere.
It was flattering to be thus addressed
by a great knight whom she loved as the best
of men. She also was excited
to see this world he had invited
her to explore with him and share.
Agreeing to follow him anywhere,
she fetched her brocade and the gold
ring she had from the abbess who told
the story of how these were with her when she
was found on a branch of that ash tree
for whom she'd been named. These relics were
puzzling mementos of her
previous life and she put them in
a casket, setting out to begin
yet another life she could
not imagine. The knight was good
and kind and loved her as did also
his companions and servants from high to low.
But some of the other knight and peers
disapproved and into his ears
there came whispers of those who thought
his life was improper and that he ought
to marry a woman of noble line
who could give him an heir, as a concubine
could never do. To them, it was clear

that he wasn't behaving as a peer must do. To press him on this question they made a more specific suggestion about a worthy man who had a suitable daughter, not at all bad looking, and also rich. His heir, she would bring with her a clear title to many hectares of land, woods and pastures that her hand would put in his. Her name, they said, was La Codre, and they urged him to wed this sensible paragon and put by his present woman. With a sly play on the names, they said that he must bear in mind that the hazel tree — *la codre* — bears fruit, but ash trees can't. A man can't always do as he'd want and finally Gudrun had to yield to these demands. What was concealed from all of them was how the two girls were twins (even though you may have already intuited this). La Fresne did not even take it amiss when the other young lady arrived to be married to Gudrun. Amazingly, she continued there as a servant might as a part of the household of the knight. The only words of doubt were those of the bride's mother who had to suppose that there might be friction between the two women, and she expressed the view that Gudrun should marry her off and be

rid of her so that tranquility
might be maintained in his household.
Le Fresne, however, was good as gold
and welcomed and waited upon the bride,
whatever she might have felt inside.
The whole court was astonished to see
how generous a young woman could be,
and even the bride's mother (hers too)
was amazed and wished that she might undo
her demand that Le Fresne be sent away.
On the evening before the wedding day
Le Fresne and others went to prepare
the bridal chamber with every care.
As they worked, she supervised
their labors with attentive eyes,
and when she saw them making the bed
she interrupted and shook her head.
The bed linen was dull and not
pretty enough. She cared a lot
about her lord, so she remade
the bed with a coverlet of her brocade
to honour him and wish them both
well as they came to plight their troth.
The Archbishop of Dol appeared
at the bedside to ask God's blessing.
The bride in another room was dressing
and now with her mother entered the room.
The mother in the relative gloom
(only a few candles were lit)
glanced at the bed, then stared at it.
The brocade was familiar. She
had given a piece of it once to be

a token of her love for the twin
she had given away — a sin
she had regretted with bitter tears
she had been shedding now for years.
She asked the major domo from whom
the fabric had come. “I must assume
the master’s lady brought it here
to give the room a touch of cheer.”
She asked the girl then, who told her that
it was from the abbess who’d told her not
to lose it. “And there was another thing
she gave me with it — a golden ring.”
The mother asked if she might see
the jewel. At first suspiciously
she studied it and she realized
with certainty what she’d surmised.
“You are my daughter!” she managed to say
before she fainted dead away.
When she recovered she asked that her
husband be summoned *instanter*.
He hurried to her, and on her knees
she offered her apologies
and begged him to pardon her if he could.
He had supposed all things were good
and could not imagine what she had done
either to him or to anyone.
“You have my pardon,” he said. “But for what
I’ve no idea. What fault have you got
to confess to me?” She told him at once
about the neighbour who’d had two sons
and how she had slandered the woman and then
was all too nicely punished when

she became pregnant with girl twins.
One she sent away and since
then has regretted the evil thing
she did. She mentioned the gold ring
and the piece of brocade by which they could see
that their long-lost daughter was she.
This is the damsel with whom the knight
fell in love, although in spite
of his affection for her he is wed
to our other daughter instead.
He could have been angry but the lord
seemed pleased and for concord
and peace all around he sent for the knight
and archbishop to set things right,
which both of them were pleased to do.
The archbishop suggested a way
to dissolve the marriage the following day
when Gurun could marry the one he had first
loved until he had been coerced
to make this match that was said to be better.
The father was delighted and let her
be heiress to half of his estate.
After this wedding he, his spouse,
and his other daughter returned to their house.
La Codre not long afterwards made
a rich marriage — and this time stayed
happily married. Again and again
the vicissitudes of our Le Fresne
have been told by firesides and they
are what I offer you now as my lay.

IV *BISCLAVRET*

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.

v LANVAL

I shall tell you another lay,
a true story: it happened this way
to a noble man whose name, in Breton,
is Lanval. Now, let me go on.

You have heard of Arthur who
was a great king. He had gone to
Carlisle, where the Scots and Picts had come
on raids, and he wanted to keep them from
progressing further into his lands
in their ragged and destructive bands.

It was at Pentecost and he gave
rich gifts to his noble and brave
barons and knights of the Round Table.
In all the world, no one would be able
to find a finer company
of men. To each the king awarded
lands and wives as he thought accorded
with what they had done and had deserved
and how each one of them had served.
But there was one whom he forgot
and for whose sake, somehow, there was not
a good word anyone put in.
Valorous, he was able to win
jousts and battles, and generous,
so that others were envious.
The son of a noble king, he'd come
to join Arthur's household from

a distant land. Arthur never
rewarded him for any endeavor,
and it never crossed his mind to ask
for any payment for a task
he thought he owed by courtesy
and thus was reduced to penury.
For all these reasons, disrespected
and unrewarded, he was dejected
far away from his home with no
friend to whom he was able to go
to ask for advice on how to contrive
to keep himself and his hopes alive.

One day he mounted his horse and went
into the country to try to content
himself with flowers and pale blue skies,
having been told that in this wise
one can restore a troubled soul
sometimes; that was his only goal.
He reached a meadow that had a brook
and he dismounted. His horse then took
a chill and trembled. Lanval removed
its bridle and saddle, for he loved
the animal. He let it graze
in the meadow and gambol in the ways
that horses do. Stretched out upon
the grass, he allowed himself a yawn,
and then he noticed downstream two
damsels dressed in tunics of blue,
beautiful of figure and face
and approaching with incredible grace.
One carried vessels of gold and one

a linen towel with embroidery done
in tiny stitches. Being polite,
Lanval rose, as any knight
would, to greet them. One of them said,
“Our mistress, whose tent is up ahead,
welcomes you. She is wise and fair.
Come with us. We will take you there.”
The horse was happily grazing, and he
saw no reason not to be
grateful. He followed along behind
the two and was amazed to find
a pavilion of which Semiramis would
have been proud. Octavian never stood
in a finer tent. The top was graced
by a golden eagle that had been placed
to catch the sunlight and declare
the enormous wealth and glory there
of the occupant, who turned out to be
a maiden of great beauty: she
surpassed the lily and the rose.
She lay on the bed in languid repose
on a coverlet that surely cost more
than a castle would. The damsel wore
a filmy shift, for the day was warm,
and it displayed her lovely form
to great advantage. Her complexion might
have rivaled even the hawthorn’s white.

The maiden called the knight to come
closer, which he did with some
hesitation. She put him at ease
at once, saying such words as these:

“My friend, I have come from a distant land
in search of you to bestow my hand
and the rest of me as well, if you
are one of the truly worthy few.
I shall make you happier than
an emperor or a king. You can
enjoy the rich life you have earned.”
To this Lanval at once returned:
“Nothing could please me more than to be
loved by you. You will find in me
a loyal servant. Nothing you ask
will be too onerous a task
for me to undertake. I shall
resist any other large or small
temptations but serve only you
as I shall be honoured and grateful to do.”
She invited him forthwith into bed
and while he was lying there she said,
“I shall grant you one more thing —
that any wish you make will bring
instant fulfillment. Give away
or spend however much you may,
you will have more to give or spend,
a bottomless treasure that cannot end.
But there is one proviso that I
give you and you must live by:
you must promise not to reveal
our love or the source of your wealth. You seal
your lips or else you lose me for good.
Do you agree? Have you understood?”
They romped and frolicked all that day,
but then the lady sent him away

with a promise that whenever he
wished for her, immediately
she would appear, eager to do
his bidding. "And no man but you
will see or hear me." Of course, at this
he was delighted, gave her a kiss,
and then obediently arose.
The damsels gave him rich new clothes,
which suited him and made him look
like some fine prince in a picture book.
They brought water and towels and stood
while he washed. They then brought food.
He and the lady dined on dishes
of dainty meats and delicious fishes.
At last he embraced her and said farewell,
but there was no way he could tell
how grateful he was or make mention of
his delight and abiding love.
He trotted off toward town and was in
some confusion: had it been
a dream? A fantasy? A spell?
There simply was no way to tell,
and when he got home he was surprised
that his staff had been metamorphosized,
increased in number as he could see
and dressed in the fanciest livery.
He gave a party that night, a fine
spread with every kind of wine
and to this he contrived to invite
every noble and every knight.
It gave him satisfaction to feed
the rich as well as those in need.

He gave to the poor, and many in jail
he either set free or paid their bail.
It was a life of joy beyond measure
that was only increased by his nightly pleasure
for he could call his beloved, and she
would appear before him instantly.

Shortly after St. John's Day some
thirty knights or more had come
to relax and spend an agreeable hour
in the gardens beneath the queen's watch tower.
Gawain was among them; his fair
and noble cousin Ywain was there.
Gawain remarked that it wasn't right
that they had treated Lanval with such slight
respect. "He is a generous man
and courtly, too. What reason can
there be for our behaviour? He
comes from a land across the sea
where his father is a king. And yet
he is the one we always forget.
For instance, now, look around. I fear
you will notice that Lanval's not here."
They went to ask him to join them all,
which he was unable to recall
their having done before. Even so,
he thanked them and said he would go.

The queen and three of her ladies were
reclining near an aperture
in the stone wall when she caught sight
of Lanval — a most attractive knight.

She summoned, without hesitating,
thirty of her ladies-in-waiting,
the prettiest ones especially,
to come with her to the garden to be
entertained by the gentlemen there
and take the refreshing morning air.
The knights, delighted, gathered about
the women who had deigned to come out
and banter with them in courtly ways,
admiring them and offering praise —
all but Lanval, that is, who withdrew
to the garden's edge, impatient to
return to his beloved and kiss
and embrace her. He had no interest in this.
The queen noticed that he was not
participating, and to the spot
where he was seated she went at once.
Thinking he must be a perfect dunce,
she explained that she wanted him
and to penetrate into his dim
brain, she promised him gifts if he
would come to her in secrecy.
But he declined. "I serve the king
and cannot betray him or do such a thing
as you have proposed. It would not be
allowed by the code of chivalry."
The queen was furious — and ashamed,
and he was the one whom she blamed.
"Lanval," she said, "I have heard it said
that you do not welcome women in bed.
You have your pages and grooms, and you
sport with them as some men do,

and this is sinful and wicked. The king cannot endure the taint you bring to the court and the entire nation. He cannot risk his soul's salvation for the sake of your peculiar taste or allow himself to be disgraced.”

Lanval, not at all pleased, replied, “Lady, what you suggest in your snide and snarky way is not at all true. The fact is I love a lady who is worth far more than any I know. And let me tell you before I go that any one of her serving lasses in body and face and worth surpasses you, not to mention goodness of heart. Now, if you'll let me, I'll depart.” But it was the queen who left and she was in tears and mortified that he had spoken so. She took to her bed and to her chambermaids she said she'd never get up again unless the king would in his mercilessness, in the name justice and of the right, punish this disrespectful knight.

The king returned from a splendid day of hunting. He came to the queen to say good-afternoon, but she was distressed. She fell on her knees and in tears addressed his majesty: “Lanval has made shameful remarks to me. I'm afraid

he is not fit to be serving you.
He had the nerve to compare me to
another lady whose servants were
more beautiful. He said he'd prefer
any one of them to me!"

The king was displeased, for not only she
had been insulted but he also.
Was he a man of honour or no?
He swore to the queen that unless this knight
could defend himself in court he might
be facing the gallows or even the stake.
He sent for three of his men to take
Lanval prisoner. They went
to fetch him — already penitent,
for he had been stupid and absurd
and had lost his love by breaking his word,
nor could he summon her in his pain
to apologize if not to explain.
A hundred times he called out and more
to ask her forgiveness and to implore
that she come and speak with him again,
even if he was the worst of men.
He cursed his brain, he cursed his loose
tongue, and he heaped more abuse
on his faithlessness. What could he do?
I shall impart the story to you.

The guards arrived to take him away
to court. There could be no delay!
The king had summoned him, and the queen
had accused him and she seemed most keen
that Lanval should be tried and found

guilty and upon some ground
or other be condemned to die.
Lanval took this in with a sigh
and didn't care. He was either brave or
convinced they were doing him a favor.
Before the king he was subdued,
while the king, in a very angry mood
said to him, "Vassal, you have been ill-
advised to slander the queen and still
more culpable for insulting me.
You boasted rather stupidly
that the lady whom you love surpasses
the queen in beauty and even the lasses
who serve her are more fair than she."
Lanval explained most temperately
that he was blameless and had not sought
the queen's love, although he ought
not to have spoken as he had,
which he regretted, for the sad
truth was that he had offended
his love and now their affair was ended.
He did not apologize or plead
for mercy. Whatever the king decreed
would satisfy him. The king replied
that a panel of knights would have to decide
what should be done — lest there might be
an appearance of impropriety.
The knights agreed on a time when they
might meet, and Lanval on that day
gave his promise that he would appear.
But who would pledge? He had no near
relatives or friends who might

give surety in case of flight
on Lanval's part. It was Gawain who
offered to stand bail, and a few
of his friends joined in the offer. The king
gave them Lanval and told them to bring
him to the trial or all their lands
and fiefs would be forfeit. They gave their hands
and seals to this and then they all
departed to escort Lanval
back to his lodgings. There they consoled
the knight and, trying to cheer him, told
stories of love's folly. Each day
they visited him to keep away
all morbid thoughts of suicide
that are sinful and must be defied.

On the day appointed for hearing cases
the barons assembled in their places
before the king and queen for the trial
of Lanval, who stood silent while
the charges were read. The king demanded
a just verdict that should be handed
down from the barons, deciding on
the testimony, pro and con.
Some of them wanted to please the king
in this as they did in everything,
The Count of Cornwall, for instance, declared:
"The king accuses his vassal who dared
displease him and insult the queen.
The honour one owes his lord must mean
that Lanval has in some way erred
if not in deed, then surely in word.

Unless he can prove the truth of what he said and thereby show it was not to spite or annoy her majesty. If he can, then he must go free, but otherwise, he must expect banishment – which would be the correct penalty.” And they told the knight why his beloved must come to testify. He answered that she would not appear to help his case. The verdict was clear – and the king pressed hard for them to give their verdict in the affirmative as he and the queen asked them to do in an action that would be fair and true.

There was hardly any doubt which way they would decide, but even as they were ready to announce it they saw two maidens a little way off but approaching quickly, dressed in purple taffeta of the best quality. They were a gorgeous pair, but who these ladies were and where they came from was a mystery. Gawain asked if one could be Lanval’s lover, but he said no. The two dismounted and with slow respectful steps approach the throne of Arthur to make their purpose known. They wanted chambers prepared that might be suitable for their mistress, with white silk curtains and a luxurious bed

on which she may deign to lay her head.
“Our mistress wishes to lodge with you,”
they said, and he was most willing to
accomplish this and accommodate
these two, as well, in rooms of state.

When they were gone the king inquired
as to the baron’s decision. Tired
of waiting, they answered him that they
needed further time to say
what should be done. There was argument
and contention now and bitter dissent,
which only came to a stop when two
more beautiful maidens came into view
riding Spanish mules and wearing
Phrygian silk. As they were staring
at these new visitors, Ywain alerted
Lanval and asked him or, rather, blurted,
“How gorgeous they are! Could one of them be
your love?” He shook his head and he
denied ever having seen them before.
As they dismounted, the barons swore
they never had seen anyone who
compared in beauty to these two.
The elder spoke to the king and said
that he must arrange a room and a bed
fitting for their mistress whom he
would be meeting presently.
The king assured them that he would do
what they had asked and sent them to
join the others to eat and rest
as he would have offered any guest.

When they had gone, the king declared
that the time for a verdict had come — and he dared
the barons to delay (an implicit
threat, I think, for what else is it?).

Just as they were about to say
what decision they'd come to, they
saw another maiden appear
on a white palfrey, caparisoned
magnificently. They were stunned,
every one of them, by the great
cost of it — what man's estate
could pay for it? And its rider, too,
was breathtaking — her eyes, bright blue,
were dazzling; her neck was white,
and her blonde hair glistened in the light.
She wore a tunic over a shift
that showed a glimpse of her snowdrift-
white skin. Or say it was white as milk.
The cloak she wore was of heavy silk.
On her wrist a sparrowhawk rode
and at her side a wolfhound strode
elegantly. Those who saw
her passing by were struck with awe.

Lanval's friends went to convey
news of this maiden's arrival and they
expressed the hope that she might save him.
Lanval sighed. Their description gave him
certainty that it was she,
his beloved. "If she has come for me,

then I am happy. But if not,
it makes no difference to me what
they may do to me.” It was then
that the lady entered the palace and men
fell silent. None had beheld
such beauty as was unparalleled.
The king, well-mannered, rose from his seat
and held out his hand to her to greet
an honoured visitor. She let
her cloak drop (and she was lovelier yet
than she’d been before). She then addressed
the king: “I come, as you may have guessed,
because I have loved Lanval whom you see
standing here. I understand he
has been accused in your court. He meant
no harm and had no bad intent.
He never sought the love of the queen,
or behaved like a vulgar libertine.
The queen was wrong to say otherwise.
And as for his foolish boast, your eyes
may be the judge of what he claimed.
Your barons need not be ashamed
to grant that he spoke the truth and allow
him to go free. Let them speak now.”
The king agreed that it should be
as the judges said, and immediately
they acquitted him. The lady withdrew
and so did those in her retinue.

Outside the great hall there stood
a huge block of marble, good
for guards to stand on. Onto this stone

Lanval climbed, for leaving the throne-
room the lady would pass close by
and when she did, the knight could try
to jump on her palfrey's crupper, which he
managed to do successfully.

He went with her and from then on
dwelt with her in Avalon
on a lovely island, the Bretons say,
and who would know any better than they?

VI *THE TWO LOVERS*

This happened in Normandy many years ago, a story to call forth tears of sympathy from those who care for lovers: this unfortunate pair died for love. And even today the Bretons tell their tale in a lay they call “The Two Lovers,” and I shall tell it to you or, anyway, try.

There is in Neustria (which we call Normandy now) a mountain, tall and beetling, where two lovers lie. On one side of the mountain, the high lord of the Pistrians built a town he called Pîtres, which has come down to our own time, and you can see the walls of the houses and buildings he erected, and we still refer to the Valley of Pîtres. Living there with the king was his beautiful daughter, who had brought him joy and comfort, too, since the death of her mother, the queen. Possessive, as some fathers have been as widowers, this ruler went to great lengths to try to prevent young men from seeking his daughter’s hand. He proclaimed throughout the kingdom that she could marry no man unless he was able to carry her in his arms

up the mountain beyond the farms
that loomed up into the sky.
Many young men came to try
but not even the strongest could
get more than halfway up. They would
sooner or later put her down
and, ashamed of themselves, return to town.
After a time there were fewer and still
fewer who came to try, until
it seemed that her father's plan had been clever
and that she would remain unwed forever.

There was in that country a young son
of a count, noble and handsome, one
who strove to excel and gain prestige.
He came to the court to visit his liege
and fell in love with the daughter whom he
courted, addressing her ardently.
She found him engaging and thinking of
her poor chances of married love
because of her father's arbitrary
rules, she chose to do the very
thing most fathers fear and gave
her love to the young man who was brave
enough to agree to conceal their connection
and any signs of their affection.
They loved each other deeply, but this
having to hide it diminished their bliss
and tested the young man's limited patience.
After a number of awkward occasions
when they had almost been found out
he came to her to speak about

elopement. They could run away. The alternative was that they could stay and he would have to try to carry her up the mountain so they could marry. He was afraid that he would fail in this attempt but did not prevail, for she answered him that if they were to flee, her father, missing her would be in torment and misery for which she would be responsible. She had another idea — she had an aunt in Salerno. rich, half-mad, but of great skill in medical lore, familiar with herbs and the uses for various roots. “You’ll have from me a letter that will explain how we need her assistance. She will make potions and pastes for you to take that will increase your strength until you can succeed, as I know you will, in carrying me to the very peak of the mountain, as you must do to seek my hand.” The young man now had cause for hope and his demeanor was transformed. The next day at dawn he said goodbye and he was gone.

He returned home for money and clothes, pack horses, servants, and all of those things one needs for a journey. From there he went on to Salerno where the aunt lived. He gave her the note,

which she read through (I need not quote the text). She then put into her mixer all the ingredients for an elixir for strength as well as endurance. He tried it and it worked. So she put some into a vessel he could take back with him. He made good time and soon arrived at the court where he settled in and then in short order asked the king for his daughter. His majesty smiled at this, thinking how many burly men had tried and failed. Cheerfully, then, he gave his permission. She, meanwhile, had been preparing for this trial, eating nothing so as to weigh as little as possible on that day. She also wore a gauzy shift that would be no added burden to lift.

The king summoned the gentry and the commoners throughout the land to come and see the candidate for his daughter's hand who would demonstrate his strength in the now conventional way. As the king presented his daughter they all applauded. Before the trial the young man handed her the phial containing the potion for her to hold. (Of the power of its contents he'd told her long before.) At the bank of the Seine the young man lifted her up and then

began the climb and ascended to
the halfway point. From her he drew
great happiness and courage. She
urged him to drink from the phial, but he
said that he felt strong and had no
need for the medicine yet to go
on. Besides I do not desire
to let them see me stopping. Higher
up, perhaps, when I cannot go
three steps more, I shall let you know,
and then I'll drink." Two-thirds of the way
to the top, in pain, he heard her say,
"Stop, my love. You are tired, I think.
This is the moment when you should drink
the potion." But he took no heed of
her offer, relying only on love
to get him to the peak. In vain
she offered again, and he, in pain,
refused and trudged on to the top,
which he did reach — only to stop,
totter, and fall, never to move
again. They terrified maiden strove
to revive him. She held the phial to his lips
and urged him to take little sips
but he could not speak. He had no breath,
and this she recognized as death.
The heart he had given her had tried
too hard and broken, and he had died.
She wailed and moaned and threw away
the potion in a circular spray
(wherever drops of it touched the ground
shepherds say that flowers abound).

What then of the girl? She lay down beside
the body of the man and cried,
took him in her arms to embrace,
kissed his eyelids, lips, and face.
Her heart, too, broke in its woe
and she stopped breathing, dead also.
Below, the king grew worried, waiting
for them to return, and, hesitating
only a little climbed to discover
his daughter dead with her dead lover.
He fainted but recovered to weep
at what had happened and to keep
a three-day vigil there on the crest
of the mountain. Then, at his behest,
a marble sarcophagus was made
into which the bodies were laid.

Because of what happened there it was named
the Mountain of Two Lovers. The famed
couple are thus celebrated
by the Breton lay I have just narrated.

VII YONEC

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.

VIII *LAÜSTIC*

The Bretons' title for this tale
in English would be "The Nightingale,"
or in the French, "Le Rossignol."
The narrative is the same in all
languages. In St. Malo
there lived two knights long ago,
both of whom dwelt in fortified
houses that stood side by side.
Each of these were men of fine
repute whom no one could malign.
One of the knights was married to
a wise and excellent woman who
conducted herself properly
and was all that a good wife should be.
The other one was famous for
his valour in tournaments and in war.
He loved his next-door neighbour's wife
and wooed her day by day and week
by week, and fervently did speak
of his longing for her and, for her part,
she felt growing within her heart
a warmth for him but, circumspect,
they took care that none might detect
their feelings, which they were able to do,
living in buildings adjacent to
each other, so that when she stood
at her bedroom window she had a good
view of him and he of her
and neither of them had to stir

to have a private conversation.
For quite some time, this odd relation
continued as with cautious skill
each of them at the window sill
spoke to the other in fine words of
eternal and all consuming love.

In the summertime, when the tender crops
are pierced to the root with sweet raindrops,
when the meadows turn a deeper green
and the brightly coloured flowers preen
to the songs of birds that call and respond,
even the sternest hearts grow fond
and feel a freshening of desire,
the aim of the knight's ambition grew higher
and he and the lady both wanted more
intimacy than hitherto, for
obvious reasons, but what could they do?
At night when the moon was bright she arose,
went to the window, and struck a pose
one sees sometimes in portraiture,
inviting and yet still demure.
For hours they gazed at each other in
contemplation. (That's no sin.)
The husband after a time became
annoyed that she stood at that same
window for hours. He asked her why
she did this, and her quick reply
was that the song of the nightingale
is a joy beside which others pale.
"With those who do not appreciate
their song I must commiserate

for here for our earthly ears and eyes
are morsels of true paradise.”
The husband, hearing this, was rude
and laughed at her lofty attitude.
He gave his servants orders that they
should set out snares for this irksome prey,
and bird lime too on the chestnut trees.
I cannot say which one of these
worked, but they caught the bird at last
and brought it to him and, right away.
With the bird in hand, he went to say
to his wife that this was the creature that had
kept her awake and driven him mad.
“Now it will trouble you no more,”
he promised. She asked for it, but before
he handed it over, out of spite,
he wrung its neck (it took but a slight
twist) and he hurled it at her so
that the drops of its blood spattered below
her breast on her linen tunic. He
thereupon left the room, and she
cursed all those who had set the snares
and diminished, even if unawares,
the one joy of her life. She wept
for the bird and for herself and kept
thinking how she could no more
stand at the window. “He will think me a poor
lover, surely, and faint of heart.
I must contrive a way to impart
to him what has happened.” She put
the tiny copse in silk that was shot
with threads of gold and gave it to

one of her servants whom she knew
was trustworthy to deliver the thing
along with a message that would bring
the sad news of what had occurred
and explain the gift of a poor dead bird.
The knight listened attentively
and was grieved of course. But what could he
do? He had a casket made
of gold and jewels in which he laid
the body of the nightingale
that he carried with him without fail.

Of this the Bretons composed a lay
they sing in sorrow, even today.

IX *MILUN*

One who tries to present a new
story must pay attention to
verisimilitude and then
to entertaining the women and men
to whom he speaks. I shall now tell
the tale of “Milun” and I may as well
say a word or two about how
and why I wrote what you’re reading now.

Milun, born in Wales, was a knight
who triumphed in every tourney and fight,
for no one had been able to
unhorse him. Everybody knew
his reputation, which had spread
throughout Scotland. It may be said
that in Gotland, Ireland, and even as far
as Norway he was a kind of star,
a model of strength and chivalry,
admired universally.
He was as you will understand
envied by some; on the other hand
he was loved and honoured by even more
for his ability and for
his courtliness. There lived nearby
a wealthy nobleman whom I
cannot name (it has slipped my mind)
and he had a daughter, sweet and refined,
who’d heard of Milun, and from this she
conceived a passion and wanted to be

his love. She sent to tell him this. Milun of course was charmed and his answer was that he would be true and so forth and so on, as you can imagine. He sent back word that he would like to meet her privately, if that could be arranged. He sent a golden ring, significant of abiding love. The messenger bore the ring to his mistress and the more important news that he would come as soon as he had a message from her to do so. In her delight she sent for him and they met at night in the garden her bedroom opened on. Then, at dawn, he would be gone.

Terrific, right? It was for a time but they were taking chances, and I'm sure you're not surprised to discover that she got pregnant. She told her lover what had happened and was upset: her reputation, because she'd let this come about was gone and she faced punishment. She might even be tortured or else sold as a slave. (The curious reason that she gave for such concerns was that these had been the ancient family custom in these awkward cases.) True or not, Milun answered that he'd do whatever she wanted. She had a sister

in Northumbria; she'd enlist her
help. She said, "When the child is born,
you'll take it to her, and when you've sworn
that it is ours, she'll accept it and see
that it is brought up properly,
male or female, whatever it is.
I'll give it the ring and along with this
letter with its father's name
and the story of its mother's shame.
When the child has grown to the age
of reason, it will reach the stage
when my sister can give it the ring and the letter,
and tell it to try to find its begetter,
so that one day you may see
your offspring and may think of me."

He agreed to do this for her. She gave
birth (with the aid of a loyal and brave
servant who had helped her hide
her state) to a baby boy. With pride
she gave him to this nurse who hung
the golden ring around his young
neck. In his swaddling they hid
a silk purse with a note to bid
the world be kind to him. His bed
had a costly pillow beneath his head
and a coverlet with marten trim
to keep him warm and comfort him.
The nurse then gave Milun the child
and as he accepted it he smiled.
He set off that night with a few
servants he trusted on the way to

Northumbria. They had to pause many times a day — there was a wet nurse he'd brought along to keep the baby fed. When he was asleep again they would set forth and make what speed they could for the baby's sake. They reached the aunt at last and he gave her the infant. As soon as she learned whose child it was she swore to love him and do everything for his welfare. Milun thanked her and returned to his own native land.

But then what happens? Milun goes to fight as a mercenary — those engagements can bring wealth and fame. The woman he had loved became engaged to a nobleman nearby, which was a prospect that made her cry and bemoan her fate, for Milun still was the one she loved. A bitter pill to marry someone else, who would discover that her maidenhood was long gone and that she'd had a child, which he would think was bad. What then to do? Would she now be a servant doomed to misery that would continue without end? "I had expected happiness but I find myself in deep distress with servants who I realize are guardians and even spies

who seem to be resentful of
their betters when we fall in love.”
She concluded with a sigh
and even the wish that she might die.
But eventually there came the day
when her bridegroom came to take her away.

At length Milun returned and he
was sad, as one would expect him to be,
but still he was able to take some cheer
on account of the fact that she lived near
enough for him to hope. But how
could he let her know that he was now
at home again? He wrote a note
that he tied around the snowy throat
of a pet swan, the loveliest
of birds. In the feathers of its breast
he hid the paper. He called a squire
and told him to put on different attire
and take the swan to the castle where
his beloved lived. When he got there
he was to see that she received
the bird herself. The lad believed
he could do this and was on his way
with the swan, proceeding without delay.
As soon as he reached the castle he
spoke to the porter quietly,
explaining that he was by trade
a fowler and that he had made
the trip here to present this bird
to the lady within of whom he'd heard
good things — hoping that she might be

a friend in any emergency
in which bird catchers sometimes get
entangled in someone's legal net.
The porter explained that nobody
was allowed to speak to the lady, but he
could find a spot in which he might
have a chance to give her the white
swan he carried. The squire expressed
his gratitude to this brightest and best
of fellows. The porter entered the hall
where a couple of knights sat at a small
table playing chess. He came
back and led the squire the same
way. The knights, intent on their board,
did not look up as they tiptoed toward
the lady's quarters. They knocked at the door
and explained to a maid the reason for
their visit. The lady accepted the swan
and ordered the servants who waited upon
her to care for the bird — but the maid
told her what the squire bade
her say — that nobody else but her
should receive it from the offerer.
It was a lovely specimen
as the lady noticed at once, but then
she stroked its snow-white feathers and found
the letter that had been tied around
its neck. Immediately she knew
from whom it came. She took a few
breaths and ordered, "Let money be
given the man who brought it to me."

When she was alone with only one
serving maid, the knot was undone,
the seal broken, and the envelope
opened in a moment of hope
she tried to control, but she'd hardly begun
to read when she saw the name "Milun"
at the top of the paper. As she spelled
out the dear letters teardrops welled
up in her eyes so it took her
a moment or two before the blur
resolved to meaningful words: he wrote
of how he had suffered in all his remote
travels both night and day. She could
decide for him if his life would
be worth living. She had to devise
a way to avoid suspicious eyes
so they could meet. He would comply
with any instruction she sent him by
return swan. Let the bird
go and it would return with word
of what she proposed. She brooded upon
his plan and decided to feed the swan
well and then withdraw all food
so it would be hungry and therefore would
return at once to its native ground
where it knew its usual food could be found.
She cared for it for a month to allow
it to regain its strength. Somehow
she got hold of ink and a pen
to write a note to Milun and when
she'd finished hung it on the bird
as he had done. And it all occurred

exactly as she'd planned: it flew back home to Milun's town and to his very dwelling where it alit. Delighted. Milun made much of it and immediately had it fed. Only then was it that he read its message that confirmed that she still loved him and could never be happy without him. Thus, the two sent the notes that the swan flew back and forth for twenty years of fidelity. It even appears that now and then they managed to meet, although these occasions were few, but no guards can frustrate forever the schemes of lovers who are clever.

Meanwhile, the sister (remember her?) brought up the baby, handsomer and stronger every day. He grew to an age when she entrusted to his care the letter and the ring and related to him everything she knew about him. He was delighted and set his heart on getting knighted. "To have a father of such rare qualities would be hard to bear if I did not attempt to achieve a like fame. I'll have to leave," he said and set out at once to be a perfect model of chivalry.

He went to Southampton where he crossed
the English Channel, tempest-tossed,
to reach Barfleur and then from there
to Brittany, a region where
he jousted in tournaments and won
all his contests. He played for fun
and gave poor knights a goodly share
of his winnings. People everywhere
sang praises of “The Peerless One,”
which is what how they referred to him, for none
knew his name. But his reputation
spread nonetheless, and the approbation
reached the ears of Milun who thought
anyone else who was famous ought
to be tested — could this upstart be
better in combat even than he?
If not, he should be unhorsed,
taught to respect his betters, and forced
to acknowledge freely that Milun
was the best in the world. When that was done,
he would search for the son who he
believed had recently crossed the sea.
All this he set down in a note
he tied around the old swan’s throat,
and his love, approving, wrote to say
she did not wish to stand in his way.
He travelled to Normandy and then
to Brittany, met many men,
took part in tournaments, and he
entertained most lavishly.

He spent the entire winter there

till Easter when from everywhere
knights came to Mont St Michel to find
worthy opponents of every kind —
Normans, Flemish, Bretons, too,
and French. (From England, very few.)
It was easy for Milun to spot
this arriviste. He had a lot
of time to study his technique:
how he spurred his horse to seek
an opponent's weakness and how he struck
blows that couldn't have been sheer luck.
Milun did well enough but he
awaited the opportunity
to meet this rising star and show
what jousting was like years ago.
At last he drew the other's name
and mounted his charger. He nearly came
to unhorsing him but his lance broke.
The other, in a counterstroke,
unseated Milun and he fell
to the ground — where onlookers could tell
his age, revealing his white beard
and white hair. The other knight
took the horse by the reins and he
presented it respectfully
to its rider: "Sir, I do regret
my act against an elder. Let
me help you mount your steed again.
Milun got up and it was then —
a most extraordinary thing —
he saw and recognized the ring
the other wore. He said, "For the love

of God, tell me what you know of
your parents. Who was your father? Who
was you mother? No knight has been able to do
what you just did. My admiration
you have. But give me the information!”
The other said, “I was fathered by
a Welshmen named Milun, and my
mother was some rich man’s daughter
whose love, it is said, Milun had sought. Her
child was sent to Northumbria where
her sister – my aunt – assumed my care.
My hope is that I may find this knight
and show him the ring and other quite
persuasive tokens. Then I shall see
if he will acknowledge and cherish me.”
Milun could hear no more. He leapt
forward and with one hand kept
a grip on the other’s hauberk while
he announced, “You are my son and I’ll
love you. My life is whole once more,
You are the one I’ve been looking for.”
They wept for joy as they embraced
and then they turned together and faced
the other knights who were delighted
witnessing an old wrong righted.

Later, alone, the father explained
how his love for the lady remained
as fresh as ever and he went on
even to tell him about the swan
and how it carried their secret notes
over the castle’s walls and moats.

The son was enchanted by all of this
and on the instant offered his
help to bring his father and mother
together again. It would be no bother
to kill the husband so that the two
could marry as most parents do.

The next day they headed home with a breeze
that was fresh and fair. The vagaries
of life being what they are, they'd gone
not very far when they came upon
a servant from Milun's lady whose
duty it was to deliver the news
to Milun that the husband was dead.
He told her what the lady had said —
that he should hasten to her at once.
The father's reaction and the son's
was to thank heaven. Nothing stood
in their way now and they could
get married. Which they did forthwith.
Before the summoned kin and kith,
the brave son gave his mother away
and they all lived happily from that day.
Not all endings are tragic and we
may share in their felicity.

x *CHAITIVEL*

There is an old lay I shall tell
that is widely known as “Chaitivel,”
which means “the unhappy one,” but you
will hear of “Les Quatre Deuls,” too,
or “the four sorrows.” With either name
the plot and the characters are the same.

In Nantes, a city in Brittany,
there dwelt a lady of high degree,
intelligent, and fair of face
whom any knight with any trace
of spirit would want to love and claim
for himself. She thought it was a shame
that loving all of them would not be
possible. Still with courtesy she
wanted not to give offence
to any of them. It made no sense
but it was true that a man could fall
safely in love with any and all
women in the land. But refuse
a single suitor, and ladies can lose
their reputations and risk even more.
Therefore women must with a store
of coquettish small talk and jokes divert
all suitors and keep them from feeling hurt.
Their attentions are a kind
of flattery: she could bear in mind
their intent, in a clumsy way,
to compliment her. Night and day,

admirers swarmed about her and she was the object of their gallantry.

There lived in Brittany at that time four young men (I'm afraid that I'm ignorant of their names). Each one was handsome, brave, and courtly. None could be impugned for even a small fault — except that they were all in love with the lady and, trying to show the depth of their passions, were willing to go to any lengths to demonstrate their merits, which in each were great. Among them how could she possibly choose? And why pick one, if she had to lose the other three? To each she displayed a friendly mien, and each she repaid with letters and her presents. Although she couldn't let anybody know about the others' successes, she maneuvered quite successfully among the unsuspecting four, each of whom in tourneys wore her love tokens or coloured strips of her clothing and upon the lips of each of them there was the same battle cry — the lady's name.

With the exercise of impressive tact she maintained this delicate balancing act until one year at Eastertide knights came to Nantes from far and wide

for a tournament — French and Flemish, too,
and from Brabant and from Anjou,
as well as those who lived nearby
who appeared there, each resolved to try
for the glory that success produces.
There was some boasting, but no excuse is
adequate to explain the fights
that broke out among the assembled knights.
When the four lovers left the town
together others tracked them down —
two from Flanders and two from Hainault —
delighted to battle any foe.
The lovers, when they looked around,
saw them coming but stood their ground,
lowered their lances to charge, and they
unhorsed each of the four that way.
They did not trouble themselves about
the riderless horses but without
delay gathered around the fallen
whose friends, responding to their call in
haste, were coming to the defence
of their friends — or that was their pretense —
with swords and battle-axes. They,
the four lovers, in this mêlée
were splendid in this critical hour.
The lady, meanwhile, high in her tower
was able to follow all the action
from which she took much satisfaction.

The following day, the tournament
began, and all the contests went
well for the four lovers, who

among them carried off all the blue ribbons. It was only later while they were celebrating they went astray in a dark alley that men whom they'd bested during the tourney made a sneak attack from the side and spilled their blood in the gutter. Three were killed and the fourth was wounded in the thigh quite badly, but he didn't die. Bizarrely, their assailants then regretted having murdered these men, which was more than they had meant to do. A clamor soon arose and grew to huge proportions as people came from all directions to look with shame at what had happened. Visors were doffed as thousands of men carried aloft the three corpses, each on its shield, and bore them from the killing field. News of this misfortune soon spread. The lady fell into a swoon as soon as she heard it, but then she woke and in between her sobs she spoke, lamenting each by name. "Alas, that such a thing has come to pass! I loved each of them, as I should have done, for each of them was good, so good, in fact, that I could not choose among them and did not want to lose a single one." And having said this, she resolved to bury the dead and do what she could for the fourth knight

who still could recover. To the abbey she sent
funds that the funeral sacrament
might be observed. The doctors did
all they could for the invalid,
but she helped, visiting the dear
lad, whom she endeavored to cheer.
But when she was alone she was filled
with grief for the three who had been killed.

Sometime later, the lady met
that knight in the garden. Her cheeks were wet
with tears, and he asked her to confess
to him the reason for her distress.
“Put aside your grief, and be
comforted if you can. Tell me
what troubles you?” She nodded her head
and in a mournful manner said,
“I think of your companions who are
dead and gone. I have been far
more fortunate in love than any
lady I know to have had so many
splendid men in love with me.
That moment of felicity
has vanished, but I want my grief
to be remembered. Time is a thief,
but poetry can defy it. I
shall write a lay recording my
experience. I’ll call it ‘The Four
Sorrows,’ I think.” She could say no more
for the knight said that she should indeed
compose such a lay for people to read.
“But call it ‘The Unhappy One.’”

They days of the other three are done
and their longing for you has cooled, but I
remain alive and it is my
destiny to meet like this
the woman I love but know the bliss
I sought I cannot have. I long
for her embrace that would be wrong
and, therefore, I suffer with every breath
and envy the others in their death.
The true name you should give your lay
is 'The Unhappy One.' In my dismay
I beg you to recognize the true
name you should be giving to
your poem." With this suggestion she
could not argue but had to agree.

Thus was the lay begun and thus
was it completed and given to us.
Some give it one name, but others call it
"The Unhappy One," for after all it
lends itself to either name
with the people and their deeds the same.
Here it ends, for there's no more
that I have heard or can vouch for.

XI *CHEVREFOIL*

I am pleased to recount a lay
I've heard and also read of the way
Tristram and the queen were brought
down together by love, which ought
to offer pleasure but also can
bring pain and death to woman and man.

Because Tristram loved the queen,
his angry uncle, King Mark, had been
forced to banish him. He went
to Wales where he was born and spent
a whole year there. But then he chose
to risk his life — as many of those
who are in love are moved to do,
when there is no alternative to
perishing of loneliness.
Tristram was in such great distress
that he was not concerned at all
about the danger that in Cornwall,
if he were discovered, he would die.
On stealth and cunning he could rely
as he went through forests where he could hide,
emerging only at eventide
for a little food and shelter, dodging
suspicious eyes in peasants' lodging.
In one of these, he asked for word
about the king, and they had heard
of a proclamation summoning
barons to Tintagel where the king

at Pentecost would be holding court
and there would be merrymaking and sport.
(Tristram reasoned that there was a fair
to excellent chance the queen would be there.)
He even knew the route that she
would have to take, and therefore he
could see her passing by and not
be seen, himself. He knew a spot
in the woods by the roadside. There he found
a hazel branch that lay on the ground
that he cut it in half and squared, and then
he carved his name upon it. When
the queen saw this (as she'd done before)
she recognized it and even more
important knew what it meant — that he
was hiding behind some handy tree.
The rest of the message was implied:
that he loved her still; that he'd nearly died
apart from her; that he'd been waiting
for hours and days anticipating
a glimpse of the one to whom forever
he was joined; that he could never
imagine life without her. He
had once made a metaphor that she
had liked about the hazel and
the honeysuckle, which can stand
together but, if someone tries
to separate them, each plant dies.
He didn't always have to spell
out what she understood so well.

As the queen ambled along the road,

she saw the upright stick that showed
the letters of Tristram's name. She knew
what it meant, for it was clear
that he wanted her to stop near here
to rest for a bit. Obediently
they did what she asked. She summoned to
her side a trusted servant who
could accompany her into the wood.
Faithful Brenguein understood
and together they ventured into the trees
where immediately these
ladies found the man who waited
for her to come with his breath bated.
She told him how he had to proceed
to reconcile with King Mark: he'd
heard the whispers and had had no
choice but to order Tristram to go.
But Yseult had calculated how
Mark might relent enough to allow
Tristram's return. He promised to do
exactly what she told him to.
She turned to leave but could not move,
as if she were paralyzed by love
and only by an act of will
could she walk away from him in the still
of the afternoon. Both of them wept
in this dream that was not a dream and kept
happening even when the two
were awake after the night was through.

Back in Wales, the joyful lover
had the time to ponder over

what might happen, now that they could be reunited. He wrote a lay to express the hope and joy they shared (ironic now, because they fared less well than he'd expected). In English it is "Gotelef." Its twin in French is "Chevrefoil," and you will find in both mixed joy and rue.

XII *ELIDUC*

I shall tell you a Breton lay,
or at least as much of it as I may
remember and understand. There was
a knight (many begin as this does),
courtly, valiant, and of some fame.
Eliduc was this person's name.
He and his wife, who was wise and of
an excellent family, were in love
and had lived together for many years
contentedly, but it appears
that when he went in search of paid
martial service he found a maid
he was unable to ignore.
"Beautiful" is but a poor,
inadequate adjective. Guilliadun
was her name and there was none
to rival her. Meanwhile, his spouse
remained at home and kept his house.
Her name was Guildelüec. And the lay
is about these rival women, for they
are its true subject. (But "Eliduc"
is shorter and that title took.)
I shall now tell the tale to you
that I have been assured is true.

Eliduc's lord was Brittany's king
who trusted him in everything
and cherished him. When the king was gone
it was Eliduc he counted on

to protect the kingdom. This can be
a golden opportunity
for any courtier but with such
prominence there can be much
jealousy from others who
think they are deserving, too.
Slandorous accusations came
from all sides so that his good name
was badly blemished. He was abused,
though never formally accused
and the king, for no specific cause,
banished him. There were no laws
he'd broken and he had served long
and well and knew the king was wrong.
He importuned the king to provide
him a chance to argue his side,
which was that the mud of slander could
befoul a man whose conduct was good.
The king refused to grant his plea
and there was no alternative — he
had to leave the country where
he'd lived for years. It was most unfair.
The rustics say of a lord that when
he chastises his plowman, then
it is not by love but only fief
that he rules — and this is my belief.
Eliduc at any rate
decided then to emigrate
across the sea to Logres, there
to refresh himself in better air.
He would leave his wife at home and he
bade his men to see that she

was well cared for, and his friends likewise.
Then, wiping the tears from her eyes,
he promised his fidelity.

He and his party went to sea
to arrive at Totnes where he found
battles over disputed ground
among the region's kings who all
were caught up in continual brawl.

In the region, not far away
from Exeter, a wizened, gray,
but very powerful king resided
to whom Heaven had not provided
an heir; his majesty had instead
a daughter, and it may be said
that she was a great beauty, which
was a bonus, because she was so rich.
Her father had refused to award
her to the local peers: discord
followed and one of her suitors made
war on the old man. Having laid
waste his tenants' fields, he attacked
the castle. Hearing of this fact,
Eliduc was delighted, for he
saw an opportunity
he could not ignore. He offered his aid
if it was required. He also made
the request that the king, if he had no
need of him, might let him go
with safe conduct to travel through
the land to find somebody who

might have other employment for him.
The king, knowing his prospects were dim,
welcomed the messenger warmly and told
his constable to take what gold
this baron would need for a month and find
him and his companions the kind
of lodgings they deserved. He prepared
a welcoming banquet Eliduc shared
with all the poor knights in the town.
Honoured as if he wore a crown,
Eliduc found that life again
was worth living for him and his men.
He ordered them to refuse to take
money or gifts for appearance's sake —
at least until the fortieth day.
(They weren't fighting just for the pay.)

On their third day, there was a great
cry through the city that at the gate
the enemy would soon appear
to assault the town, which was full of fear.
Eliduc heard this and ordered his men
to arm themselves to be ready when
the fight should come. There were forty more
knights in the town who were prisoners or
recuperating from wounds. When they
saw Eliduc prepare for the fray
they, too, readied themselves to fight
and offered their arms to the puissant knight:
“Lord,” they said, “we shall join with you
and help you in what you must do.”
He expressed his thanks to them and then

asked if any of these men
knew of a narrow pass or defile
where they might enjoy an advantage while
defending the town. One replied:
“I know of such a place beside
a dense thicket where there’s a narrow
path for a handcart or wheelbarrow.
This would be the way that they
would have to return from their first foray.
Often when they come back they are
without their armor, for spoils of war
are all their palfreys are able to bear.
It would be good to attack them there,
humiliate them and, in hot pursuit,
inflict much damage and steal their loot.”
Eliduc approved of this
plan and to encourage his
forces said to them, “Good friends,
I pledge that we shall achieve our ends.
He who never risks his all
must have a heart that is weak and small,
for only the willingness to be
defeated brings men victory.
As you are vassals of this king,
come with me and whatever thing
I do here, you must do also.
I promise that there will be no
obstacle to deter us from
the triumph that must surely come
if we stand together, and the fame
that we earn together will grace each name.”
They cheered him and then led the way

to the bushes in the wood where they
could fall upon the enemy,
which they soon did most vigorously.
The enemy was surprised and fled,
each man running just ahead
of his pursuer. It was a rout,
the king would be happy to hear about.
In fact the king was in his tower
convincing himself hour by hour
that Eliduc might have fled or, worse,
joined the enemy — a reverse
that would mean the end of the kingdom — but
in any event the gates were shut
and he ordered each man to his post
on the walls to shoot at any host
that might approach. Instead there came
a squire riding fast to claim
a victory for Eliduc.
It was like a tale in a story book
of many prisoners, many killed,
and many wounded. Cheering filled
the air and the king descended to meet
Eliduc whose swift and sweet
victory had saved the day.
Eliduc gave the prizes away
keeping for himself only three
horses of high quality.
He gave the prisoners over, too —
twenty-nine, give or take a few —
to the constable for him to hold
for the king until they were ransomed with gold.
The king, in gratitude for this great

success, gave him care of the state
for a year's term, receiving his
allegiance in exchange for this.

Courtly, wise, and handsome, he
enjoyed a wide celebrity:
soon the king's daughter heard
all about him and she sent word
by her chamberlain to summon him to
join her to talk, as people do.
Guilliadun was surprised she had not
met him before, and there was a lot
she wanted to hear about him from
his own lips. She bade him come,
and he replied with thanks to say
that he was already on his way.
He took a fellow knight along
so there could not be any wrong
and malicious misinterpretation
of his visit and their conversation.
When he arrived, therefore, he sent
the chamberlain first, and off he went
to announce the visitors. When they
met at last, in this formal way,
he could not help but notice that she
was as beautiful as she was kind
to have invited him. Her mind
was lively and inquisitive,
and he was diverted by their give-
and-take. She too was much impressed
by Eliduc, who seemed the best
of men. She took his hand and led

him to a seat on her daybed,
where they spoke of many things while she
considered that there could not be
a braver, better looking man
anywhere. And, as it can,
Love dispatched its mischief maker
to descend from the skies and take her
in his grasp to make her sigh
and her face go pale. She had to try
not to let him notice this
effect he had on her with his
mere presence. At length he arose
to bring the interview to a close.
Reluctantly she let him go
on his way, and he did so.
Riding home, he felt an unease
he could not quite define, for these
sighs of hers had been flattering
but also cautionary. The thing
was complicated, for she was appealing
enough to produce in him a feeling
of happiness that was inconsistent
with his marriage to the distant
woman to whom he had sworn an oath
of loyalty that he was loath
to violate, was hardly dim
in his memory, and troubled him.

On the maiden's side there was no debate.
Her esteem for him was great
and she wanted him to be her lover.
At dawn as soon as the night was over,

she called her chamberlain to her side.
(She trusted him and could confide
her deepest secrets to him.) She said:
“I love this soldier. All last night
I could not close my eyes. My plight
is most unfortunate. Either he
will return my love and live with me,
as almost any man would do
if he had an ambition to
sit on a throne and wear a crown.
Otherwise, my heart is down
as I think of the alternative,
for I shall be unwilling to live.”
As the echo of her words was dying
it was replaced by muffled crying.
The chamberlain reflected upon
all this and gave his opinion on
what she should do. “You must let him know
how you are feeling. Either say so
or send him a sash or a ring that will speak
as clearly to him about what you seek.
If he responds to this as he should,
the outcome cannot be but good.
What emperor is there on the earth
who would not be glad if one of your worth
wanted his love? You must provide
the opening he will throw wide.”
She answered him, “How can I tell
from here if he thinks ill or well
of such a gesture? Whatever he
may feel, he will accept from me
and keep any token I may send.

If he be enemy rather than friend,
he could enjoy the chance to make
a joke of me for vanity's sake.
Report to me what you can read
in his face and voice, to which give heed
as well as you can. He may betray
his true feelings either way.
Greet him a thousand times for me
and we shall see what we shall see.”
Forthwith, the chamberlain departed,
while she remained behind. She started
to call him back but changed her mind.
She was more than vexed to find
her heart had been taken unawares
by a stranger, for in these affairs
she had no practice. Who was he,
a member of the nobility
or a commoner? In any case,
he would leave and go someplace
else, and she will be left to mourn,
sorry that she was ever born
and feeling stupid, giving way
to a whim as she had done today.
She had only met him yesterday
and this morning she had sent to say
that she was begging for his love.
But the die was cast with no way of
going back. He would have a reply
that she would flourish or die by.

The chamberlain, meanwhile, made haste
to deliver the ring and the sash for the waist

to Eliduc. The knight seemed pleased
as he took the sash and the ring he eased
onto his finger. Of course, he sent
his thanks and every compliment
back to her. But he said no more
except to offer the chamberlain for
his services a gift that he
declined, albeit courteously.

The servant returned to his lady who
asked him if he had any clue
that might somehow make manifest
Eliduc's feelings. He expressed
his confidence that the knight was not
a fickle person. "He knows what
you meant and he meant. I believe
it was not his purpose to deceive."

"But what did he give you in return?
Nothing? Did he mean to spurn
my display of importunity,
consigning me to misery?"

The chamberlain replied, "I'd say
he could have found another way
to express a lack of interest than
by accepting your gifts. He's not a man
to give offence inadvertently
to a lady and to chivalry."

"I know he does not hate me, for I
never gave him cause. If my
love tokens elicit no
response from him, then abject woe
is what he deserves. But I go mad.
I cannot think until I have had

a chance to speak with him vis-à-vis
and judge his attitude toward me.
I will let him see how I
suffer, and he'll be affected by
pity for me. But even so,
what will that mean? How can I know
if he will stay with me? Dear Lord!"
Her hopes and doubts of her heart warred.
"He and the king have both agreed
on a year of service. Would you need
more time than that to learn if he
desires you reciprocally?"
This cheering news improved her state
of mind at once. If she had a year,
she had rather less reason for fear.

She had no notion that, for his part,
Eliduc was sad at heart,
unable to take pleasure from
the joys of life that did not come
from thinking of her. But even this
was mixed with bitterness for his
promise to his wife. His brain
told him clearly that he should remain
faithful to her, but in his breast
were feelings that could not be suppressed.
Guilliadun's charms were more than he
could ignore, and he desired to be
with her, near her, talking, embracing,
and more. But he knew he was facing
dishonour if he let himself go
a step in that direction, so

he temporized — and his distress
persisted, worsened, and in the end he
went to find a *modus vivendi*
to see the king and, if he could,
the maiden as well and find some good
answer that would leave all three
in honour and in dignity.

The king had finished his meal and gone
to his daughter's chambers to look on
as a chess master from overseas
schooled her in the intricacies
of play, and it was to this room
that Eliduc was led by a groom
and announced. The king at once invited
the guest to take a chair. The knight did.
Then to his daughter the king gave
the instruction that this noble and brave
knight should be given honour, for he
is one in five hundred. She
was happy to be ordered to do
what she would have, impromptu.
She arose and led him to a seat
across the room where their discreet
words might not be overheard,
which at first appeared absurd
because she dared not speak directly
to him. At length the knight, correctly,
thanked her for the presents he
had received from her, and to this she
said she was glad to hear this for
it was a gift that meant much more —

with the ring and sash she had given herself, body and soul, as it were.

She wanted to become his wife.

Otherwise, for the rest of her life, she would accept no other man.

Then she asked him for his plan.

“Lady,” he said, “I am grateful to you, and your esteem means much. I do swear to you I will never forget it.

My oath, to which you may give credit, requires me to stay a year in service to your father here.

After that, I plan to leave and return home. I do not deceive or mean to mislead you in any way.”

To this, all the lady could say was: “I thank you profusely. You are wise and will know what to do about me by the time the year has come to an end. I do not fear, for along with my love you have my trust, and I know you will be kind and just.”

This was by far the best outcome Eliduc could have hoped for from their conversation. He had survived an awkwardness and they had contrived a way in which he could still see and talk with her and yet feel free of those pangs of guilt that otherwise might have obnubilated their skies. Meanwhile, his martial efforts were so

successful that the king's arch foe
he managed to capture and liberate
the entire land. It seemed that fate
was smiling upon him. His reputation
grew by the day throughout the nation.

But then a messenger from his lord
at home arrived: by fire and sword
his land was being laid waste and he
was losing castles. Belatedly
he regretted his having banished such
a fellow as Eliduc — whom he much
needed now. Those who had
accused him and had given bad
advice about him were banished now
forever. “By your oath and vow,
I call you home in my time of great
need. You must not hesitate
but come at once, as I know you will.”
These words could not help but fill
Eliduc with perturbation.
Love was the cause of his agitation,
a pure love on which there had not
ever been even the slightest spot
of sinfulness — except for the slight
omission on the part of the knight
to say he was married. Of his intention
to return to his wife, he should have made mention.
Her hope, as he well knew, was that she
might marry him, though this would be
unthinkable in Christian practice.
“Alas,” he said, “the simple fact is

that I have been here too long and I must leave not only this land but my beloved, whom I'll miss. I should have known that life, when it seems good, is only preparing us for a fall that is sure to follow. To my lord's call I must respond. I cannot refuse, even if I fear that the news may be her death or even my own. But I need not face the question alone. With Guillaudun I shall discuss the constraints that have entangled us and I shall do as she says, for I know she will realize that I must go. Her father's lands are now at peace and he can well afford to release me from my promise to him when my service at home is required by my own liege lord. I shall explain all this to her and ascertain her wishes. Whatever she may decide, I shall let her be my guide."

Forthwith, the knight went to the king both to tell him the news and to bring the letter for him to read. It was clear that there was no way to keep him here, but even so he offered the knight treasure and something more that might detain him — a third of the kingdom. But no, Eliduc said he had to go:
"My lord is in distress and I

must go to him at once, but my
promise to you is that if there be
a moment of need, then instantly
I shall return with a force of men
to do what I can to help you again.”
For this the king was grateful. He gave
much gold and silver and many brave
dogs and horses. Some of this
Eliduc accepted as his
proper earnings. With exquisite
tact, he asked if he could visit
the king’s daughter in order to say
goodbye to her in a gracious way.
The king was pleased by this request
and a squire was sent as his behest
to arrange the meeting. As soon as he
appeared in her apartment, she
greeted him a thousand times
(poets exaggerate in rhymes).
He began to explain his quandary
but before he had finished, she
saw where his argument was leading
and she fainted away, succeeding
in arranging things so that Eliduc
even without thinking took
her into his arms and, having gone
so far, found himself going on
to kiss her mouth and weep with her.
“Sweet love,” he heard himself aver,
“you are my life and death; you are my
comfort and my best hope. I
have taken leave of your father, but you

are the one to decide what I must do,
whatever the consequences. I can't
take you with me, as much as I want
to do that. I would seem to betray
my oath to your father. But set a day
by which you want me to come back here
and I promise you that I'll reappear,
only providing that I still live.
That being the case, then give
me your leave to go." That seemed
acceptable, though not what she'd dreamed.
But because of her love for him she had
to let him go, although she was sad
to say goodbye. They gave and took
rings and kisses, and Eliduc,
having temporized, departed,
his pain diminishing after he'd started.

At home his lord was joyful when
he returned, as was his wife, but then
that was to be expected. She still
was beautiful, wise, and good, but the thrill
of their reunion was somewhat less
than it should have been. His happiness
was torn by his vivid memories of
Guillaudun and of their love.
Conflicted as he was, his mood
was dark and he was so subdued
that his wife was worried about him. She
asked him what the matter could be.
Had he heard some slanderer say
she'd misbehaved in any way

when he was gone? If this was the case, she would be glad of a chance to face any accuser and prove that she had been all a wife was supposed to be. He managed to answer that he had not accused her or ever doubted her. What was troubling him was another thing altogether — he'd given a king his word to serve for a year and yet here he was, having seemed to forget a promise, or even worse, to break an oath he'd given. She should not mistake the cause of his discomfort. He was persuasive enough, explaining the cause of his abstraction. He and his lord took actions that were moving toward a restoration of order and peace in which the various parties could cease their skirmishing. With this behind him, Eliduc could set his mind on Guilladun and returning to her. He took only a few companions: two nephews and their squires, a servant . . . He had them swear to silence, which they were willing to do. He put to sea and this small crew soon arrived on the other side, and although he did not exactly hide, he found a quiet out-of-the-way inn at which his party could stay. He sent his chamberlain to tell his beloved that all was now well

and that he had kept his word. That night she was to go where the servant might lead her — out of town to a place where he would be waiting for her embrace. The servant changed his garments and went to the king's palace where he'd been sent and there he asked for an interview with the princess and was shown into her chambers. When she heard him speak her mood, which had been dark and bleak, brightened at once. She even kissed the servant, having so much missed his master. He recited all the details of how, after nightfall, they would proceed together to the spot arranged for a rendezvous. She was willing and eager and they together managed to get away from the castle and the town, though she was afraid at each step lest there be someone who might recognize her or someone's spy about to surprise her.

Not more than a bow-shot from the city's gate, concealed by some woods, there was a meadow where Eliduc waited. When she got there he dismounted to kiss and embrace his beloved. Then, with easy grace, he helped her mount. He got up, too, and they rode off to meet the crew on a ship at Totnes he had arranged.

They boarded and, before the wind changed,
put to sea. For the first few hours
they made good progress, but nature's powers
turned on them and the ship rolled
and pitched as the weather worsened. Cold
winds whipped the rain and spray
into an angry froth that they
could neither escape from nor sail through.
It got so bad that one of the crew
cried aloud: "What do we think
we're doing? We're all going to sink
because of that woman you brought along,
knowing full well that you did wrong.
At home you have a loyal wife
but you are willing to risk your life
and ours for the sake of this one! No!
Cast her overboard. Let her go.
And the storm will abate and we shall be
saved without the taint that she
brings with her!" Almost mad
with anger at what he just had
heard, Eliduc shouted: "Son
of a whore, if you say even one
more word, you die!" He held, meanwhile,
the girl in his arms because the vile
weather had made her sea-sick and he
was trying to comfort her. But she,
having heard what the sailor said,
fainted away as if she were dead —
or that is what Eliduc thought she was.
Angry that without any cause
the sailor had said such a dreadful thing,

he picked up an oar and took a swing
at the sailor, knocking him flat on the deck
and very possibly breaking his neck.
With the toe of his boot Eliduc shoved
him overboard. The woman he'd loved
was hardly benefited, but he
took some satisfaction that she
had been avenged. In a moment or two
the villain's body sank from view.
Eliduc went to the helm to steer
the vessel into the harbor and here
drop anchor. He looked again and she
lay motionless and appeared to be
indeed dead. His lamentation
was loud as was his supplication
that he should have died with her. But now
he realized that the question was how
properly to bury her.
A king's daughter one should inter
in consecrated ground with a fine
and stately service as a sign
of respect that she was entitled to.
He asked for suggestions from the crew
but none had any to propose.
In Eliduc's memory there arose
the thought of a wood near home wherein
a hermit had lived, wizened and thin,
and he had built a chapel where
those inclined might say a prayer.
This was not far from his home and he
decided that the chapel could be
her resting place. It was holy ground,

and to her memory he could find
an abbey or convent devoted to
prayer and penitence. He and his crew
carried the lady's body there
and he required them all to swear
another oath of silence. They
traveled all night and at the break of day
came to the chapel where they knocked
and called. The front door was unlocked
and they went inside to find the tomb
of the hermit. They could read in the gloom
the date of his death: eight days before
his fresh grave had been dug in the floor.
The others thought that this was what
they should do for the lady, but
Eliduc wanted advice from wise
men who could properly analyze
cannon law about the way
to found an abbey or church. When they
had made this clear, he would know better
the rules in their spirit and their letter.
In the meantime, they'd lay her out
before the chapel altar, devout
but unspecific. He wanted no
errors in any punctilio
that might apply to her resting place.
He said goodbye and kissed her face,
telling her how deep was his regret
that they had ever met — and yet
she had been his greatest delight.
Never again would he deign to fight
but he promised, when she was buried, to take

holy orders and, for her sake,
keep a vigil here at her tomb,
sharing with her its constant gloom.
This was his promise to the poor
girl as he closed the chapel door.

He had sent word home to tell
his wife that he was coming, unwell
and sick at heart but alive. She was
pleased and did as a good wife does,
meeting him to welcome him back,
but she found his mood and mien were black.
He spoke to no one and no one dared
address him. Although the household spared
no efforts to see to his comfort, he
was the picture of human misery.
After two days at home he heard
mass and then, without a word,
went back to the chapel to pray
at the altar where the lady lay.
She had not recovered consciousness.
She did not seem to breathe much less
move. But he thought her colour was good
for someone who, as he understood,
had been dead for days. He wept
in anguish and prayed for her while he kept
beating his breast until his grief
had brought him a modicum of relief.
Then he returned to his house and the same
brooding over his guilt and shame.

The wife grew increasingly alert

to his moods by which she was puzzled and hurt. She asked one of her servants if he could follow surreptitiously and report to her where Eliduc went every day: his emolument would be a set of arms and a horse. He was delighted and, of course, agreed to do this. On the next day he followed his master all the way to the chapel where, not far from the door he heard the lamentations pour forth from the knight and cries of woe. He returned home to let the wife know where it was that Eliduc went and what he did there. What this meant she could not guess. The hermit had died but that was a while ago. She tried to account for such a show of grief that seemed to her beyond belief.

That afternoon, the husband had an appointment with the king and, clad in his finest, went to court — so she exploited this opportunity of going with the servant to the chapel in search of any clue. There on a catafalque the maid on a bed of lovely flowers was laid, the skin pale, the body slender, her beauty enough to account for tender feelings of any man. She knew at once that here was the object that drew

her husband's presence, and evidence of his passionate and abiding love, which might, after her death, have turned to pity. The wife felt herself spurned so that never again could she imagine a moment's felicity. In a trance she knelt down to the floor and began to pray — not so much for the soul of the lady as for her own, feeling that she was all alone, worse off than the woman on the bed, who knew that peace we assume the dead probably have. But then from out of a cranny, came a weasel snout and the rest of the animal that ran across the body. The serving man struck it with a stick and the blow killed it — or that seemed to be so. But another weasel appeared and it came up to the first, poked it a bit with its forepaw, and sniffed but could not make it move. It ran to the wood in search of some herbal medicine and soon it was back and it put in the mouth of the other a brilliant red flower that brought it back from the dead. The lady, having witnessed these strange events, got up from her knees and ordered her servant not to allow the weasel to get away. Somehow he managed to graze it with his stick which was enough to do the trick

for from its mouth it dropped the flower
that had such great restorative power.
The lady snatched it, put it in
the maiden's mouth, and watched her begin
to breathe again and then to move
a finger and from this to improve.
Soon she revived and opened her eyes
to remark in a tone of mild surprise:
“How long I have slept!” The wife
thanked the Lord from whom comes life
and asked the maiden to tell her name,
and how she got here, and whence she came.
The maiden answered pleasantly, “I
was born in the land of Logres, where my
father is the king. I loved a knight
named Eliduc, a man of might
and valour, with whom I ran away
only to find out to my dismay
that he was married. He had not said
a word about a wife. Instead
he had lied to me and I
fainted, although I did not die.
I am left in a distant land,
abandoned. I do not understand
how he could have done this to
one to whom he swore to be true —
even though the story is old
of gullible maidens and often told.”

“My dear,” the other said, “he has been
distraught, for the trance that you were in
he took for death. Now every day

he comes here to this chapel to pray
for you or even to you. I
am his wife and couldn't stand by
and see him in such deep despair.
I followed him to find out where
he went and I discovered you.
I'm joyful, as he will be too.
I shall return you to him and free
him to be with you. As for me
I shall take the veil and live
in a convent as a contemplative.”
The girl revived and was comforted
by what the generous wife had said.

Back home she sent a servant to
her husband to report the new
development. Without delay
Eliduc mounted and sped away.
When he arrived home, amazed,
he saw the girl alive and gazed
into her eyes to ascertain
that she was no figment of his brain
but a real person. He kissed her face
and held her in a warm embrace,
and the wife, seeing this, demanded
to be let go now. She was candid
and said she wanted to be a nun,
which would be convenient for everyone.
If Eliduc could only transfer
a suitable tract of land to her
she'd found an abbey, not far away
from the hermitage. What could he say?

Grateful, relieved, he of course agreed to everything she had asked, for he'd feared a much knottier complication. The wife took the veil of consecration with thirty other nuns. With these who were dedicated to pieties and good works she established a life that was even better than being a wife.

Eliduc married the princess the way he'd hoped to do. Their wedding day was elegant with many guests and impressive services. The tests of life were past, and they lived together in a climate of only balmy weather. They distributed much in alms to the poor and the love they shared was deep and secure. At length they reached that age when they began to think of how best to obey God's will and express their gratitude. It was, then, in this pious mood that Eliduc had a church erected for which a visiting architect did a splendid job. With the silver and gold and tracts of land that would uphold the brothers, Eliduc also lavished gems on the order he established. Then he joined it as a servant of almighty God. And his wife, in fervent agreement, joined the nunnery where the first wife was the abbess and there the two of them lived in harmony

like sisters in a family.
They prayed that a merciful God might look
with favor upon their Eliduc
as he in his turn asked for their
salvation in an earnest prayer.
From time to time in letters they
sent and received, each could convey
good wishes and ask how the others fared.
Each one of them loved God and cared
about the others, and each one came
to a good end, free of any blame.

It is from the story of these three
that the Bretons composed this lay to be
a memorialization of
the possibilities of love.

For Further Reading

The text of the *lais* is available in *Oeuvres complètes: les lais, les fables, le Purgatoire de saint Patrick*, translated from the ancient French by Nathalie Desgrugillers (Clermont-Ferrand: Paleo, 2003); or in *Marie de France: Lais*, edited by Alfred Ewert (Oxford: Blackwell, 1944), or in *Poésies de Marie de France, poète anglo-normand du XIIIe siècle*, 2 vols., edited by B. de Roquefort (Paris: Chasseriau, 1819–20).

There are a number of general studies of Marie de France, the most easily accessible to the Anglophone reader being Glyn S. Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Paula Clifford, *Marie de France: Lais* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1981); Emmanuel J. Mickel, Jr., *Marie de France* (New York: Twayne, 1974); and Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

There are a few other translations, but if I had liked any of them, I shouldn't have felt a need to do this one.

DRS

A Note on the Type

The serif face is Centaur MT, the best known recreation of a roman type cut by Nicolas Jenson in 1469. Frederic Warde designed the italic in 1925 and gave it the separate name of Arrighi. Monotype combined the two designs for release in 1929. The sanserif is ITC Legacy Sans, designed in 1992 by Ronald Arnholm as an unserifed version of Jenson's work.