

PROLOGUE TO THE LAIS

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1992

Whoever¹ gets knowledge from God, science,
and a talent for speech, eloquence,
Shouldn't shut up or hide away;
No, that person should gladly display.
When everyone hears about some great good
Then it flourishes as it should;
When folks praise it at full power,
Then the good deed's in full flower.
Among the ancients it was the tradition
(On this point we can quote Priscian²)

When they wrote their books in the olden day
What they had to say they'd obscurely say.
They knew that some day others would come
And need to know what they'd written down;
Those future readers would gloss the letter,
Add their own meaning to make the book better.
Those old philosophers, wise and good,
Among themselves they understood
Mankind, in the future tense,
Would develop a subtler sense
Without trespassing to explore
What's in the words, and no more.

Whoever wants to be safe from vice
Should study and learn (heed this advice)
And undertake some difficult labor;
Then trouble is a distant neighbor--
From great sorrows one can escape.
Thus my idea began to take shape:
I'd find some good story or song

*Ki Deus ad doné esciēce
E de parler bon' eloquence
Ne s'en deit taisir ne celer,
Ainz se deit volunters mustrer.
Quant uns granz biens est mult oïz,
Dunc a primes est il fluriz,
E quant loëz est de plusurs,
Dunc ad expandues ses flurs.*

¹ "That person should display him or herself." Marie writes as if it's a man she's discussing, but the pronouns can also refer to a woman (Marie herself).

² A famous Byzantine grammarian. He didn't say this, though.

To translate from Latin into our tongue;
But was the prize worth the fight?
So many others had already tried it.³
Then I thought of the *lais* I'd heard;⁴
I had no doubt, I was assured
They'd been composed for memory's sake
About real adventures--no mistake:
They heard the tale, composed the song,
Sent it forth. They didn't get it wrong.
I've heard so many *lais*, I would regret
Letting them go, letting people forget.
So I rhymed them and wrote them down aright.
Often my candle burned late at night.

In your honor, noble king,⁵

³ Marie may have been thinking of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which for the Middle Ages was a wonderful collection of classical stories which could be isolated as reading exercises in Latin or translated into the vernacular. Three of these stories at least were in circulation in French in Marie's time: *Pyramus et Tisbé*, *Philomela*, and the *Lai de Narcisse*. The fact that the *Narcisse* was perceived as a *lai* reinforces the idea that Marie was looking for material of this type in other languages.

⁴ The "lais Marie has heard" belong to a completely oral genre of which we seem to have only indirect evidence. The process Marie describes runs as follows: an event (*adventure*) gave rise to gossip and stories, from which a poet composed a lyric set to music (*lai*) in the Breton language; the *lai* was then sung by Breton minstrels from generation to generation, making the details and truth of the original adventure easier to remember correctly. Marie's undertaking is to preserve in written, rhymed narrative these lyrics and also the surviving versions of the stories they represent. Marie ends every single *lai* with a note about its composition, in most cases mentioning that "the Bretons" or "the old ones" or just "they" composed the *lai* to remember the story.

Two of Marie's *lais* describe the composition of the oral *lais* by participants in the stories they represent. In *Chevrefoil*, Tristan commemorates a written text (his name and perhaps other codes inscribed on a stick) and a spoken conversation by composing a song for the harp. In *Chaitivel*, a young woman whose lovers have all died or been castrated resolves on a commemorative composition which is begun and finished by her (apparently) but "carried abroad" by other singers who vary in the name they want to give it. In both stories, it seems clear that Marie draws on other sources besides this single lyric composition for her own *lai*. It has been suggested by Dolores Frese that the lyric *lai* on which *Yonec* is based has in fact survived in Middle English; the tone and imagery of the *Corpus Christi Carol* are close to those of Marie's *lai*, but Marie would have drawn on plenty of other oral material to fill in the names and events to which the lyric refers.

⁵ The "noble king" to whom Marie dedicates her *lais* is probably Henry II Plantagenet (1133-1189), famous as a king of England though he had realms in what is now France; it may however be his son "Young King Henry" who was crowned in 1170 and died in 1183. Both kings were patrons of Anglo-Norman poets.

Whose might and courtesy make the world ring--
All joys flow from you or run to you,
Whose heart is the root of every virtue--
For you these lais I undertook,
To bring them together, rhymed, in this book.
In my heart I always meant
To offer you this, my present.
Great joy to my heart you bring
If you accept my offering--
I'll be glad forever and a day!
Please don't think that I say
This from conceit--pride's not my sin.
Just listen now, and I'll begin.

LANVAL

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1991, 2005

The adventure of another lay,
Just as it happened, I'll relay:
It tells of a very nice nobleman,
And it's called Lanval in Breton.

King Arthur was staying at Carduel--
That King of valiant and courtly estate--
His borders there he guarded well
Against the Pict, against the Scot,
Who'd cross into Logres to devastate
The countryside often, and a lot.

He held court there at Pentecost,¹
The summer feast we call Whitsun,
Giving gifts of impressive cost
To every count and each baron
And all knights of the Round Table.
Never elsewhere so many, such able
Knights assembled! Women and land
He shared out with generous hand
To all but one who'd served. Lanval
He forgot: no man helped his recall.

For being brave and generous,
For his beauty and his prowess,
He was envied by all the court;
Those who claimed to hold him dear,
If Fortune had brought him up short,
Would not have shed a kindly tear.
A king's son, he'd a noble lineage,
But now, far from his heritage,
He'd joined the household of the King.
He'd spent all the money he could bring

¹ Here Marie assumes that her audience is familiar with the story and habits of King Arthur as described by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain*. (written around 1138). Geoffrey laid out the main lines of the legend for the Middle Ages, emphasizing Arthur as a king who ruled over a unified Britain, and who held great feasts, notably his "Pentecost court" at Carelon after subduing Norway, Aquitaine, and Gaul. Marie is more modest in depicting him as defending his own borders. Loegres (Geoffrey's Loegria) is the name for Arthur's British kingdom.

Already. The King gave him no more--
He gave just what Lanval asked for.
Now Lanval knows not what to do;
He's very thoughtful, very sad.
My lords, I don't astonish you:
A man alone, with no counsel--or bad--
A stranger in a strange land
Is sad, when no help's at hand.
This knight--by now you know the one--
Who'd served the King with many a deed,
One day got on his noble steed
And went riding, just for fun.
Alone he rode out of the town,
And came to a meadow--still alone--
Dismounted by a flowing brook.
But his horse trembled now and shook,
So he took off the tackle and let him go,
Rolling free in the broad meadow.
The knight took his own cloak, folded
It into a pillow for his head.
He lay thinking of his sad plight;
He saw nothing to bring delight.
He lay thus, in a kind of daze,
Following the river-bank with his gaze.
Then he saw coming two ladies,²
The fairest he'd seen in all his days.
They were both quite richly dressed,
In deep-dyed tunics, of the best
Silk, fastened with tight-tied laces;
And very lovely were their faces.
A bowl was borne by the elder maid,
Golden, delicate, finely made
(I tell the truth without fail or foul)
--The younger maiden carried a towel.

² Lanval's adventure is similar to adventures of a number of other heroes of lais and romances, in particular the anonymous lais of *Desire*, *Graelant Mor*, and *Guingamor*. The latter two of these begin with an attempt at seducing the hero by his lord's wife, which occurs later in *Lanval*: in all of them, he meets and becomes the lover of a mysterious lady, with attendants, in a watery context, and she extracts from him a promise he then breaks. Some of these works were undoubtedly influenced by Marie's lai, but her integration of the story into an Arthurian context is unusual. Chretien de Troyes' story of Yvain, who also meets, marries, and breaks a promise to a lady of a fountain, seems to derive from a similar tale, possibly originally associated with Yvain/Owein in Scots legend. Yvain is among the knight of the Round Table in *Lanval*.

These two ladies came straightaway
To the place where Lanval lay.
Lanval, mannerly, well-bred,
Quickly scrambled to his feet;
The ladies spoke, first to greet
Him, then with a message. They said,
"Lord Lanval, the lady we owe duty--
A lady of valor, wisdom, beauty--
It's for you our lady has sent
Us. Now come along with us, do!
Safely we'll conduct you through--
Not far--look, you can see her tent!"
The knight went with them, of course;
He forgot all about his horse,
Grazing in the meadow right in front of him.
They brought him where a tent rose above him,
A lovely, well-placed pavilion.
Semiramis, Queen of Babylon,
When her power was on the rise,
And she was so rich as well as so wise,
Or Octavian, who ruled the whole map,
Couldn't have paid for one tent-flap.
On top was set an eagle, pure gold;
How much it cost, more or less--
Or the cords or the poles to hold
Up the tent walls--I couldn't guess.
No King under heaven, with all his wealth,
Could ever buy any of this for himself.
This tent was the maiden's bower:
New-blown rose, lily-flower,
When in Spring their petals unfurl--
Lovelier than these was this girl.
She lay upon so rich a bed,
You'd pay a castle for the sheet--
In just her slip she was clothèd.
Her body was well-shaped, and sweet.
A rich mantle of white ermine,
Lined with silk, alexandrine,
Was her quilt, but she'd pushed it away,
On account of the heat; she didn't hide
Her face, neck, breast, her whole side,
All whiter than hawthorn blossom in May.

The knight took a step toward
The maiden; she called him forward;
Near the bed he sat down, near.
"Lanval," she said, "my friend, my dear,
I left my lands to come where you are;
To find you I have come so far!
Be valiant and courtly in everything,
And no emperor, count or king
Ever had joy or blessings above you;
For, more than any thing, I love you."
He looks at her; he sees her beauty;
Love pricks him, strikes in him the spark--
Now his heart blazes in the dark.
He answers gently, as is his duty,
"Beauty," he says, "If it please you,
And this great joy should befall
Me, that you grant your love,
I'll be at your beck and call,
To fulfill whatever needs you
Have, wise or foolish-- you are above
Me, my only commandant.
All others for you I abandon.
From you I never want to part:
That hope is strongest in my heart."
When the girl hears what he has to say,
This man so filled with love for her,
She gives him her love, and what's more, her
Body; now Lanval is on his way!
Afterwards, she gives a present:
Anything he may ever want
He'll get, as far as his needs extend;
Generously he may give and spend--
She will find the wherewithal.
Lanval has found a noble hostel:
The more he spends, in buying bold,
The more he'll have of silver and gold.
"Now I warn you," she says, "my fair
Friend--a warning, an order, a prayer:
Don't reveal yourself to any man!
I tell you, if you break this ban,
You will have lost me forever!
If this love is known, ever,
Never again of me you'll catch sight;

As for my body, you lose any right."
Lanval can sincerely say,
What she orders, he'll obey.
He's lain down beside her on the bed--
Now is Lanval well lodged and fed!³
He postpones rising from her side
Well into the shadows of evening-tide
And would have stayed longer, I guess,
If his sweet friend had said yes.
"Sweet friend," she says, "Get up! No more
Can you linger here--out the door
You go now. Here I will stay--
But this one thing I have to say:
If ever you want my conversation,
You won't be able to think of a place
Where a man may have his girl, and no eye chase
Them with reproach or accusation,
That I won't be with you--see if I shan't--
To do anything you want.
No man but you will see me when
I'm with you, or hear my words then."
Hearing this, his joy was beyond compare.
He kissed her, and then he arose.
The two maidens who'd brought him there
Furnished him with the richest clothes;
All dressed up, to tell the truth,
Heaven looked not down on a handsomer youth.
Nor was he foolish, like a peasant:
They gave him water--he didn't resent
Washing his hands, and drying them well
On the towel. Now they served a meal.
With his darling friend he dined--
Not the sort of thing that's declined.
Courteously the maidens serve;
He accepts gladly, without reserve.
There was plenty of one special dish
Which satisfied his dearest wish:

³ When Lanval is "well lodged and fed," and in a "noble hostel" with his lady, Marie's phrase is "bien hebergez," that is, housed in an inn. This phrase fits with his condition as a stranger in Arthur's kingdom, who lives not at his own house but in a hostel or inn. There are plenty of references to his hostel later in the poem.

Of sweet kisses there was no end,
And between courses he hugged his friend.

When they'd arisen from the last course,
The maidens brought him his own horse
Properly saddled, equiped with bridle--
The service here was never idle.
He mounts the horse, he takes his leave;
He rides off towards the city,
Looking back often. Pity
Lanval, who feels great fear and grief!
Thinking of his adventure, he goes
Along; doubts fill his heart; he knows
Not what to believe; dazzled, the youth
Can't believe that it's the truth.
Now home to his hostel he comes,
And finds his men wearing new costumes.
That night he holds a jolly feast,
But where it comes from, no-one has the least
Idea.

There's no poor knight in town
Who needs a place to lay his head down,
But Lanval invites him to his hostel
And has him served richly and well.
Lanval was now the richest donor,
Lanval ransomed all the prisoners,
Lanval dressed jugglers and jongleurs,
Lanval did all men every honor:
To stranger and to citizen
Lanval would gladly have given.
Lanval had great joy and delight:
Whether by day or in the night,
He could often see his friend.
Everything is at his command.

It was that year (I think I can say)
After St. John's or Midsummer's Day,
Some thirty knights--kighthood's flower--
Went out to do some playing
In the orchard near the tower

Where Queen Guinevere⁴ was staying,
Among these knights was Gawain,⁵
And his cousin, handsome Yvain.
Gawain said (valiant, frank and free,
The love of every man held he),
"In God's name, my lords, we sin
Against Lanval, our companion,
So courtly and generous in everything--
And his father's a wealthy king--
He should be here; we've done him wrong."
Right away they all turned back;
To his hostel they followed the track,
And begged Lanval to come along.

At a window, framed in stone,
The Queen leaned out--not alone,
But with three ladies. Lo and behold,
She spotted the knights of the King's household.
She recognized, and stared at, Lanval.
She gave one of her ladies a call.
She wants a group of maidens collected,
For beauty and manners they're selected,
To stroll and play with the Queen
In the orchard, where the knights were seen.
Thirty girls she leads, or more.
Down the steps and out the door.
Here to meet them come the knights,
Greatly gladdened by such sights.
Hand-in-hand, their conversations
Are free of low-class intimations.
Lanval goes off all alone,
Far from the others; for his own
Friend he just can't wait--not much--

⁴ Guinevere is not named in Marie's poem. The modern vision of this queen as Lancelot's mistress, the most refined and spiritual of all adulteresses, dates from Chrétien de Troyes's *Knight of the Cart*, written about the same time as Marie was working. Although her character here is extremely unpleasant, this strong woman finds echoes in later Guineveres--for example, in the admirable queen of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, who saves the life of a knight convicted of rape by setting him the riddle, "what do women most desire?" (The correct answer is "sovereignty", a say in their own lives.) This tale of Chaucer's is also, like *Lanval*, a story that one might summarize as "morally educational sexual encounter with a fairy lady."

⁵ Gawain, King Arthur's nephew, is the paragon of knighthood in many romances, particularly those of Chretien de Troyes. As has been noted, Chretien also wrote a romance about Yvain.

For her kiss, her embrace, her touch.
Little he cares about others' delight
When he can't enjoy his own!
The Queen saw him go off alone,
And she headed straight for that knight.
She sat near him, she called him over,
She spoke as her heart would move her:
"Lanval, I really do respect you,
I really care, I really love,
And you can have all my love.
Tell me what you want! I expect you
Must be happy at what I say.
I'm offering to go all the way."⁶
"Lady," he said, "Let me go!
I never thought to love you so!
I've served the King for many a day;
His faith in me I won't betray.
Not for you, your love, or anything
Would I ever act against my King!"
The Queen's heart filled with anger;
Furious, she spoke a slander:
"Lanval," she said, "I think they're right.
You don't care much for such delight;
People have told me again and again
That women offer you no pleasure--
With a few well-schooled young men
You prefer to pass your leisure.
Peasant coward, faithless sinner,
My lord the King is hardly the winner
In letting your sort hang around;
He's losing God's own grace, I've found!"

Lanval is anguished by these lies;
Quickly the accused replies.
He says a thing, in that angry moment,

⁶ "Going all the way," (and also "love-affair," and simply "love") are translations of Marie's word *druerie*. This seems to be Marie's term for a love relationship in which the woman has power over the man, but it also usually implies a physical relationship. The word occurs also in *Equitan*, to refer to the "courtly" but criminally overintellectualized affair between the king and his sensechal's wife; in *Lanval* it applies both to Guinevere's passion and to Lanval's imaginative relationship with his lover. In general, the word translated throughout the poem as "lover," "darling," "dear friend," etc.--the word the lovers use to refer to each other and the court uses to refer to the lady--is always "ami/amie," simply "friend," in the original.

Of which he'll many times repent.
"My lady: That job--don't doubt it,
I wouldn't know how to go about it.
But I do love--I alone love
A lady who'd win the prize
Over all women I've known of.
And I'll tell you this, without disguise,
Just because you need to know:
Her serving maids, a poor or low
One, even, the poorest in her train,
Is better than you are, Lady Queen:
In beauty of body and of face,
In goodness and in well-bred grace."
Away now went the Queen,
Up to her room, all crying.
Pain and anger drove her wild--
She'd been insulted and reviled.
Sick with it, she took to her bed.
Never would she get up, she said,
Unless the King her complaint oversaw,
And gave her justice according to law.

The King had just come home from the wood;
His day's hunting had been good.
He went into the Queen's chamber.
She cried out, loud, when first she
Saw him, fell at his feet, begged mercy,
Accused Lanval--he had shamed her!
He'd asked her for a love-affair,
She'd said no, with this result:
He'd offered her an ugly insult.
He boasted of a friend so fair,
So full of pride, breeding, honor,
That the chambermaid who waited on her--
The lowliest, poorest of the poor--
Compared to the Queen, was worth far more.
The King was angry, to the core.
His oath against Lanval he swore:
In court he'd prove he was no liar,
Or else he'd hang, or die by fire.
The King left the Queen's bedroom,
Called three of his barons to him,
Sent them to bring in Lanval.

Now sorrow and evil befall
Him: coming home to his inn,
He sees right away the trouble he's in.
His darling friend now is lost;
He told their love; this is the cost.
In his room alone he languished,
Sadly thoughtful, madly anguished;
Time after time he called her name,
But his dear friend never came.
He breathes out sighs and complaints,
Sometimes he even faints.
A hundred times he begs mercy of her--
Won't she speak to her dear lover?
He curses his tongue, the heart he couldn't hide--
It's a wonder he doesn't commit suicide.
All his crying and begging and braying,
Self-hatred, self-abuse, humble praying,
All bring no mercy from his dear,
Not even just the chance to see her.
Alas, will he ever find content?

The men whom the King sent
Arrive, the message they relay:
He must come to court without delay.
The King commands, no-one refuses him.
The Queen herself accuses him.
Lanval, in pain, does as they say--
They'd have killed him if he had his way.
Mute, he stands before the King;
In his sorrow, he can't say a thing,
But his sorrow is obvious.
The King speaks, angry, malicious:
"Vassal, against me is your crime!
You acted like a peasant this time.
You debase me, shame, demean
Me, by slandering my Queen!
Madness, foolishness to boast
A lover nobler than we've ever seen,
Whose chambermaid would seem the most
Fair and worthy, beside the Queen!"

Lanval begins his own defense:⁷
Against his lord's honor he's made no offense;
He refutes, word for word,
The demand for love the Queen says she heard.
But as for what he said afterwards,
He admits the truth of those words,
How he boasted of love and his lover--
It grieves him now; he's lost her forever.
For this crime, yes, pay he must
Whatever the court deems is just.
The King's anger still was strong;
He called a council of all his knights,
To tell him to act within his rights,
For he didn't want to be called wrong.
The men came to give advice,
Whether they thought it nasty or nice.
Into the council they all went,
And came up with this judgement:
Until his trial Lanval would go free,
If he gave hostages as guarantee
To his lord that he'd come back when
The court could convene on this case again.
For the trial, more lords would arrive in a hurry;
Today, only the King's household was the jury.
The knights went back to the King
And explained to him their finding.
The King demanded the hostages;
Lanval's alone, lost, without access
To parents or friends who might avail;
Gawain gave himself up as bail,
And all his companions then came forward, too.
The King said, "I give him to you,
But whatever fiefs and lands
You hold from me, are now in my hands."
Whatever they had, they pledged it all.
Now back to his hostel went Lanval,
And with him all the knights came.
They were ready to scold and blame

⁷ It should be clear from the action that the legal power of sworn testimony was very great; Lanval could clear himself of the Queen's charges simply by denying them under oath, though he did not dare deny the truth about his beloved.

Lanval for being still so sad.
They cursed such a love as mad.
Every day at his house they'd meet,
Checking on him, just to find
If he'd drunk water, if he'd still eat;
They feared Lanval might lose his mind.

On the day set for the trial,
The barons have travelled many a mile
To be there; the Queen's there, and the King,
And now Lanval's hostages bring
Him in. They're so sorry for him.
A hundred knights or more, I guess,
Would have done anything for him
So he could walk free away from this case,
So wrongful are the accusations!
The King asks a verdict of his barons,
Based on the charge and defense plea.
Now it's all up to the lords' jury.
They have gone to find their verdict
But they wonder, a little panicked
About this noble foreign knight
Who finds himself in such a plight.
More than one is ready to bring
Him in "guilty," to please the King.
Hear the Count of Cornwall speak:
"Never let us be so wrong, so weak!
Whoever weeps or laughs, it's all one--
Justice, always, must be done.
The King has spoken against his vassal,
The man I hear you call Lanval;
The King has made the allegation.
A felony's the accusation:
His crime is that he had a tiff
With the Queen, boasting of a fair love.
The King is the only plaintiff.
Now by any law I'm aware of,
And by my faith as a lord in this isle,
Lanval should not even be on trial--
Except that honor in everything
Is owed by all men to their king.
We will make him swear an oath,
And the King will pardon him for us.

And, if he can prove the truth,
And his lady appears before us
So that it is clearly seen
It was no lie that upset the Queen,
Then Lanval is vindicated:
No malice there is indicated.
But if he can't prove his defense
Then we must pronounce this sentence:
He loses his right to serve the King,
And the King will send him packing."
They sent word to the accused knight
And told him how he must defend
Himself: he must make his dear friend
Come into court, to prove he's right.
He can't do it, is Lanval's answer;
He will never get any help from her.
Back to the judges the messengers go,
But will they get get help there? No.
The King is pushing on the jury--
The Queen's the one who's in a hurry.

As they got ready to pass sentence,
Two maidens rode into their presence,
On two lovely ambling palfreys.
Very attractive they were, these ladies:
Silken garments, scarlet, thin,
Were all they wore over naked skin.
Everyone enjoyed these sights.
Gawain, and with him three knights,
Went to tell Lanval, and show
Him the lovely maidens two.
Gladdened, he begs Lanval to declare
Which of these is his friend so fair.
Lanval told them he doesn't know
Who they are, whence they come, where they go.
The pair meanwhile passed by, riding
On horseback still; in the same tone,
They dismounted before the high throne
Where sat the lord Arthur, the King.
Their beauty was a great delight,
And their speech was most polite:
"Make ready several rooms, O King,
Hang all the walls with silk covering,

So that my lady may come in;
She wishes to make your home her inn."
Gladly he granted this request;
Two knights he called, to show them the best
Rooms above; they led them away.
Just then they had no more to say.

The King calls his barons, and now he
Demands the verdict and penalty.
They've angered him, he lets them know,
By their delays--they're just too slow.
"Lord, we lost our judgement of the law,"
They said, "because of the maidens we saw.
We've not looked into a decision, then,
And now we'll just have to begin again."
Thoughtful, they got back together,
But then they heard some noise and bother.
They went and saw what caused the to-do:
Prettily equipped maidens, two,
Dressed in silk with a fresh finish,
And riding on two fine mules, Spanish.
They saw them riding down the road.
The knights were filled with greatest joy;
They told each other this must bode
Well for Lanval, that brave fine boy.
Now Yvain went, and with him all
His companions, to find Lanval.
"My Lord," he said, "Now rejoice!
For the love of God, find your voice!
Two young ladies are coming here,
Very refined, so very fair.
Truly this is your friend, your dear!"
Lanval was quick to declare
He recognized neither of them;
He didn't know them, didn't love them.
The ladies rode at a steady pace,
And dismounted before the King's dais.
Most of the courtiers praised them for
Their bodies, their faces, their color.
Either of these girls was worth more
Than the Queen was now, or ever before.
The older was polite and good;
Sweetly she made herself understood:

"Let us be given the rooms, O King,
Set aside for our lady's lodging:
She comes to you with something to say."
The King has them led away
Up to the rooms to join the others.
About the mules, neither bothers.⁸

When he's got rid of the maidens,
The King sends for his barons:
They must pass sentence right away;
Too long they've stretched this trial-day.
The Queen's anger won't abate,
When she's made to wait and wait.

They'd have passed sentence then and there,
When there came wandering a horse laden,
Ambling through town, with a maiden;
Never in this world was maid so fair.
A gentle white palfrey she rode;
Sweet and soft he carried his load--
His beautiful head and neck pleased
All; under heaven, he's the fairest beast.
Richly adorned were all his trappings:
Under heaven, all counts or kings
Could only afford such saddle or reins
By sale or mortgage of their domains.
This was how the maiden dressed up:
Of white linen, her camisole
Was made so that it showed both whole
Sides, shining where it laced up.
Her body was slim, long-waisted, tall,
Her neck was whiter than fresh snow-fall.
Grey were her eyes, white her face,
Lovely her mouth, nose in the right place,
Brown eyebrows, forehead smooth and fair,
Bright blond, crisply curling hair--
The radiant light of pure gold thread
Fades by the brightness of her head.
Deep purple-red silk is her cloak,
Which she's draped in folds all around;

⁸ Another manuscript adds a couple of lines about the mules being properly stabled. Thanks to Antonio Furtado for correcting my earlier translation of this line.

On her fist she bears a hawk,
And behind her runs a greyhound.
In the whole town, great men and small,
Old men and babies, one and all
Came running just to watch this show.
When they saw her riding, these folk
Knew her beauty was no joke.
Still she rode on, so very slow.
The judges spot her; on their honor,
She is a marvel, they all say,
Any man who sets eyes on her,
Pleasure warms him straightaway.
Those who love the knight Lanval
Come running to him now to tell
Him about the maiden come to court
Who will free him, please the Lord.
"My lord, a maiden's come to town,
But she's neither tawny nor brown,
No--just the most beautiful girl
Of all girls living in the world."
Lanval hears them; he lifts his eyes;
He knows her well; deeply he sighs.
The blood mounts up into his face.
He speaks with the greatest haste:
"My faith," he cries, "It is my friend!
I don't care if my life should end,
Or who kills me, if she has mercy;
I'm healed again, when her I see."
The lady rides in at the palace door,
Lovelier than any, since or before,
To come there. Up to the King she rides,
And dismounts, so she can be seen from all sides.
She drops her cloak upon the floor,
So that they all can see her more.
The King, well-bred and most polite,
Stands up to meet her, as is right.
The others, after they observe her,
Crowd up to honor her and serve her.
Once they've all tired out their eyes,
And praised her beauty to the skies,
She began to have her say there,
For she didn't want to stay there:
"Arthur," she said, "Now listen to me!

And all your barons whom here I see.
O King, I have loved your vassal,
This one, here! I mean Lanval.
In your court he's accused of crime.
I didn't want him to have a bad time
For what he said; all along,
You know, the Queen was in the wrong;
He never asked anything of her;
As for his boasting of his lover,
If the law's satisfied by what you see,
May your barons set him free!"
The King approves in advance
Any judgement the barons make.
They decide--and it doesn't take
Long--Lanval's made the perfect defense.
He is freed by their verdict,
And the maiden makes her exit.
The King can't keep her there at all
She has enough servants of her own.
There was set, outside the hall
A great dark marble mounting-stone,
For an armed knight to climb on his horse,
When from the castle he set his course.
Lanval had climbed up there to wait.
When the maiden came out the gate
Lanval made his leap, at full speed,
Up behind her, onto her steed.
With her he's gone to Avalon⁹--
Or so say the poets in Breton--
To the fair island far away
She ravished that noble youth;
No-one can say any more with truth,
And I have no more to tell of this lay.

⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth was interested in Avalon, which he mentions as an island where Arthur's sword was forged, and to which he was carried when he was mortally wounded, "to be cured of his wounds." In a later work, the *Life of Merlin*, Geoffrey identified Avalon as the home of Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half sister, a sorceress or fairy. Marie here associates the name with her powerful fairy queen, an antagonist of sort to Arthur's court and to Guinevere in particular, as Morgan was to be in later Arthurian legend. Whether Marie thought of her fairy lover as Morgan or not, we don't know.

LE FRESNE

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1996

I'll tell you the lai of the Ash Tree now,
Le Fresne,¹ as a story goes I know.

In Brittany lived, yesteryear,
Two knights--they were neighbors, near,
Rich men, the sort who do what they want--
Noble knights, bold, proud, valiant.
They'd lived near each other all their life,
And each had married himself a wife.
Soon one lady grew big with child;
When her nine months was fulfilled,
In one birth she produced two boys.
Her good lord could not count his joys--
Then, to add to his joys' savor
He sent word to his good neighbor
His wife's had not one son, but two!
So many children inside her grew--
He'll give one boy to his friend to raise,
And with his own name to baptize.
At his table sits the rich man--
Look! here comes his friend's footman;
In front of the high table he kneels;
His message, word for word, he tells.
The lord thanked God for the news, of course,
And gave the messenger a fine horse.
The knight's wife smiled just a little
(She sat right beside him at table)
For she was full of envy and pride;
She loved saying cruel things; she lied.
This time she really lost her head:
Right in front of everyone, she said,

¹ Marie gives the title only in French (Le Fresne), not in English or Breton (compare the endings of Chevrefoil and Laustic). "Fresne" is simply a masculine noun, the name of the ash tree; I have retained the French form for the girl's name and included both English and French for the tree's name in my translation. Le Fresne's sister's name, La Codre, means "the hazel," and is (mostly) a feminine noun--the same tree that the honeysuckle twines around in *Chevrefoil*. The grammatical/sexual gender contrast in Le Fresne's name extends an ambiguity that begins when she's born--throughout her infant adventures she's mostly referred to as "l'enfant" (the baby), a masculine noun requiring masculine pronouns; I've used "it" instead of "he" but in French the baby is "he" most of the time.

"So help me God, I do wonder
Where this gentleman found the advisor
Who told him to ask my lord to foster
A child born of shame and dishonor.
For his wife bore two boys, not one,
To his dishonor, and her own.
It's quite true, as we all know well,
That never was, nor will we hear tell,
Nor could it happen on this earth
That one woman in a single birth
Had two separate sons, except where
Two separate men had put them there."
Her lord looked her over, long and hard,
Then scolded her for what he'd heard:
"Lady," he said, "let it drop!
You shouldn't say such things, so stop!
The truth is that, all her life,
That lady's been a faithful wife."

Everyone in the house heard
And remembered every word.
It was talked about and repeated
Until all Brittany had heeded.
The lady was hated for her slur
(Later, worse will come to her)--
Poor wife or rich wife, every and each
Who heard it hated her for her speech.
The messenger went back to his lord
And told him the story, every word.
When he'd heard it told and explained,
He suffered, was confused and pained.
His good wife, his children's mother,
He mistrusted now altogether,
And he guarded her, almost in prison,
Though she had given him no reason.

The lady who'd come up with this smear
Got pregnant herself within the year,
And pregnant, in fact, with twins.
Now her neighbor, the good wife, wins!
She carried them until she was due,
And bore two daughters. It hurts too
Much--she suffers awful torments.

To herself now she laments:
"Alas!" she says, "What shall I do?
I'll never regain my honor, it's true!
My good name! No, shame thrives and lives.
My lord and all his relatives
Will never believe me now, for sure,
Once they hear of this adventure,
For I have judged myself a criminal;
I spoke ill of all women, all--
For didn't I say that it's never been
Nor have we ourselves ever seen
A woman who bore two children
Unless she had known two men?
Now I have two; it's plain to see,
The worst of it's turned back on me.
You can slander others and lie
But not know it'll hit you in the eye;
A person may speak ill of a person
Who's more worth praising than the first one.
Now, to avoid castigation
I must kill one of these children.
I'd rather make it up to God
Than live in shame, under a cloud."
The women in the room there with her
Comforted her but they told her
They couldn't let her act as she spoke--
Killing people is no joke.

The lady kept a damsel; she
Came from the best kind of family.
She'd brought her up with great care
And loved her and held her dear.
She heard how the lady cried,
Wept and mourned and piteously sighed.
This tormented the poor maid; she
Came to comfort her dear lady.
"Madame," she said, "Now there's no need--
Stop mourning so--listen, heed
Me! Give one of these babes to me--
I'll take it and you will be free.
I'll see you never feel shame or pain,
Or ever have to see her again.
I'll dump her somewhere on church ground

(I'll carry her there safe and sound).
Some holy man'll find her in the church;
God willing, he'll find her a nurse."
She spoke thus, and the lady heard
With greatest joy; she gave her word
If the girl carried this task forward
She'd give her a rich reward.
In a fine linen scarf they lapped
The noble babe, then gently wrapped
Her in a wheel-stitched silk brocade.
A gift from her lord, it was made
In Constantinople--he'd been there;
No-one ever saw a cloth so fair.
With a piece of bodice-string
She tied on Baby's arm a ring,
A big ring, pure gold, an ounce heavy,
Set with a fine rosy ruby,
And letters engraved all around.
Wherever the baby might be found,
Anyone would know, at once and truly,
She had been born to good family.

The damsel picked up the infant
And left the lady's room that instant.
That night, after the sun was down,
She slipped quietly out of town.
She took her way along a high road
Which led her into the wild wood.
She keeps to the path through the forest shade
To the other side, still holding the babe;
Off the main road she never veers.
Far away, to the right, she hears
Dogs bark, cocks crow to call the dawn.
That way, she knows, she'll find a town.
Quick as she can she makes her way
In the direction she heard dogs bay.
In a town of beauty and wealth
This young woman finds herself.
In the town is an abbey
Richly endowed in every way;
I happen to know, here live some nuns
And a prudent abbess runs
It. The maiden spots the steeple, tall,

Sees the abbey towers and wall.
She goes there at her quickest rate
And stops before the abbey gate.
She lays down the child she's borne all night
And kneels down, humble in God's sight.
She begins her prayer this way:
"God, by your holy name I pray
If it please you, please, dear Lord,
Protect this child, be its safeguard."
When she'd finished all her prayer
She happened to look behind her.
She saw an ash tree thick and wide
With boughs and branches on every side;
At its fork it branched in four.
Shade is what it was planted for.
She picked the baby up again
And ran to the ash tree-- "fresne."
She put the child up, left her there;
God watch over you, was her prayer.
Now the maiden goes back home
To tell her lady what she's done.

In the abbey there was a porter
Who used to open the church door--
The gate through which the people pass
When they come to hear the Mass.
That night he was up betimes,
Lit lamps and candles, rang the chimes,
Opened the church, ready for Mass.
He glimpsed the cloth up in the ash.
He supposed it was some loot, seized
By a robber, hidden in the trees.
He had no other theory.
Quickly he went to the tree,
Felt around, and found the child.
Now he thanks God's mercy mild.
He doesn't leave the babe in the boughs,
But takes it right home to his house.
He has a daughter; she's a widow--
Her lord died leaving her a little
One in the cradle, still at her breast.
The good man calls her from her rest:
"Get up, get up, my dear daughter--"

Light fire and candles, bring some water!
I've got a child, newborn, you see.
I found it outside, in the ash tree.
With your own milk you will nurse it.
Warm it up now, gently wash it!"
She does just as he commands--
Lights fire, takes the child in her hands,
Bathes the baby, gets it warm,
Nurses it with her own milk.²
She finds the ring tied on its arm;
They see the rich, fine piece of silk.
They understand and both agree
This child is of the nobility.

The next day, when the good abbess
Leaves church after hearing Mass,
The porter comes to speak to her.
He wants to tell the adventure
Of the baby he found in the tree.
The abbess commands that he
Bring this foundling child around
To her, just as it was found.
The porter goes home quickly,
Brings the baby back gladly,
Shows my lady abbess the child.
She looks it over for a while;
She herself will have someone raise
This child as her niece, so she says.
She sternly forbids the porter
Ever to tell just how he brought her.
So the abbess brings the girl up now.
Because she was found in the ash-tree bough
(Ash is "fresne"), they called her "Le Fresne,"
And Le Fresne is her name among men.

The lady tells folk she's her niece;
Thus a long time hidden, in peace,
Dwelling within the abbey close,
Gently brought up, the damsel grows.

² In Marie's lai *Milun*, which is also the story of a baby abandoned at birth, she makes particular note of the provision of nurses for the baby as it is transported to the mother's sister's house. Here it is coincidence that provides little Fresne with milk.

When she reaches that age and stature
Where beauty is formed by nature,
There's no lovelier girl in Brittany,
No young lady more versed in courtesy.
Her noble nature was easy to teach
Good manners and gentleness of speech.
All who saw her loved this damsel,
Admired her, prized her as a marvel.

The lord of Dol was a noble prince--
No better lived before or since.
I'll tell you his name before I'm done:
His subjects called their lord Gurun.
He heard tell of this hidden maiden,
And began to love her unbidden.
He went jousting to a tourney,
And returned by way of the abbey.
He asked for the damsel fair;
The abbess showed her to him there.
He saw her, so beautiful, wisely ruled
By prudence, polite, well-bred and -schooled.
If he can't have her love, he mused,
He will curse Fate and feel abused.
He's lost; how to do it? If he went
Too often to visit the convent,
The abbess'd think what might occur,
And he'd never get to set eyes on her.
He comes up with one strategy:
He resolves to endow the abbey;
He'll give land with such generosity
The abbey will benefit in perpetuity.
As benefactor, his only request
Is a room there, just a place to rest.
To join their brother- and sisterhoods
He's donated plenty of worldly goods;
It seems his purpose ends and begins
With obtaining remission of his sins.
Often he goes there to stay,
Talking to the girl all day.
With prayers and promises he haunts
Her till she gives him what he wants.

When he's sure of her affection,

He one day makes this proposition:
"Beauty," he says, "before this is over
Truth will out: you've made me your lover.
Now come live with me! Come, leave!
You know, as I think and believe,
If your aunt discovers our affair,
It'll be so hard for her to bear,
And if you should get pregnant here
She'd be so angry, having you near.
If you will just take my advice,
You'll come home with me--don't think twice.
For I will never fail or hurt you--
I will tell you what's best to do."
She, whose love always increases,
Gives in and does whatever pleases
Him. She goes off with him alone;
He takes her to his castle home.

She brings her ring and silk brocade,
Hoping they'll someday be of aid.
The abbess had given them to her,
Telling her the whole adventure
How she had been sent to the abbey,
How she was found lying in the ash tree.
The silk and ring were her only present
From whoever it was who first sent
Her; she had no other legacies;
But she had raised her as her niece.
The girl looked them carefully over,
Then shut them up in a little coffer.
Now she brings this coffer along;
To leave or forget it would be wrong.
The knight who took her from the abbey
Loves and cherishes her dearly,
And his servants and the men of his hall--
There isn't one, big man or small,
Who doesn't love her noble ways,
And honor her as worth all praise.

Long had she lived with him this way
When his vassal knights one day
Began to treat this as a grievance.
Often and often they spoke to advance

Their plan: he'll take some noble bride,
And send this other from his side;
If he had an heir, they'd be glad,
Who'd have from him, as he had had,
His title, lands, and property.
What a crime--what a pity
If, because of this concubine,
He had no child in the legal line.
From now on, he loses his feudal rights;
He won't be lord of his vassal knights
Unless he does what they want him to.
The knight grants them their due:
He'll take a wife, with their advice.
Have they looked into a likely choice?
"My lord," they said, "Near our manor
Lives a nobleman, your equal in honor;
His one daughter's his heir, as it stands--
With her you could get vast lands.
She's called La Codre, the Hazel Tree,
No damsel for miles is so lovely.
Leave the Ash now lying there,
And trade her for the Hazel fair.
The Hazel gives sweet nuts and pleasure;
Barren Ash, fruitless, is no treasure.
We'll try to arrange to get this bride
To give you, if God's on our side."
They do what they can to attract
This marriage; soon they have a contract.

Alas! fate strikes a cruel blow
For none of these good men even know
These two damsels' past adventure:
Each is the other one's twin sister!

Her sister's hidden from Le Fresne--
Her lover marries the other one.
When she learns another's in her place,
She never makes an ugly face,
But serves her lord³ with sweet patience,

³Another interesting ambiguity derives from Marie's use of the word "sire/seigneur" (here, "Her lord"). The word means "lord" but also "husband" and could certainly be translated "husband" many times--that is what it means in the opening story about Le Fresne's parents. But as Le Fresne's story develops, the

And treats his court with deference.
The knights of the lord's household,
Squires, servants young and old,
They all mourn for Le Fresne,
For now they'll never see her again.

The wedding day comes; her lord sends
Invitation to all his friends,
Dol's archbishop especially,
Who owes him feudal loyalty.
Now they present him with his bride.
Her mother's come there, at her side.
She fears that young girl, for her part,
Who, they say, holds this lord's heart;
She'd make mischief, surely, if she could,
Between her daughter and her lord.
They'll have to dump her, get her out,
She'll talk to her son-in-law about
Marrying her off to some gentleman--
He'll be free of her then. That's her plan.

The wedding feast was richly laid;
Music, games of all sorts were played.
The damsel had gone to the bedroom.
For all she'd seen, no sign of gloom
Hinted feelings deeply troubled,
Or, by a little anger, ruffled.
In the bride's entourage, sweetly,
She'd served everyone politely.
They marveled at her lack of venom,
All who saw her, men and women.
Her mother too had looked her over;
Her heart began to prize and love her.
She thought, and said, if she had known
What she was like, this other one,
She'd never have lost out to her daughter--

double meaning gains force: Gurun is her "seigneur," her lord and master, yet he is not her legal husband. After leaving the abbey, she is no longer a "damoiselle" or young lady, but a "meschine" or servant-girl (translated just "girl"); she is certainly not his bride or wife, the role reserved for her sister. Her intensification of the master-servant relationship finally brings it about that her "seigneur" really becomes her "seigneur," and a wifely (!) attitude triumphs over the technicalities of marriage contracts. I might add that, as in the other *lais*, the lovers are called "ami-amie," friend or lover, as well as "her lord" and "that girl." But Le Fresne's mother also addresses her as "belle amie" ("Beauty, dear"), a loverlike phrase.

She'd not have taken her lord and master.
So, that night, to help prepare
The wedding bed for the bridal pair,⁴
The damsel went to the bridal chamber;
She doffed her cloak (to disencumber
Herself for work), called servants there,
Showed them exactly how and where
Her lord liked things done and set;
For she had often noticed it.
When they'd prepared the wedding bed
On top they tossed an old bedspread.
The cloth was just some thin, worn stuff;
The girl saw it--she'd seen enough
To know it's no good, not suitable;
It weighed down her heart with trouble.
She opened her coffer, took her brocade,
On her lord's bed this silk she laid.
She did this to honor the pair,
Since the archbishop would be there
To sign them with the cross and bless
Them--it's his job, he can't do less.

⁴The story is related to the "patient Griselda" legend (retold by Petrarch and then immortalized by Chaucer in his *Clerk's Tale*), in which a husband gets carried away playing God to his Job-like wife. Marie's Guron, though, seems morally weak rather than tyrannical and cruel like Griselda's husband Walter. I can't resist citing Graham Greene's portrait of a jealous lover, which seems to owe something to Marie's story or an analogue of it (the first speaker is the woman):

It angered me that she didn't make any claim.

"Of course. You may be right. I'm only saying I want you to be happy. I hate your being unhappy. I don't mind anything you do that makes you happy."

"You just want an excuse. If I sleep with somebody else, you feel you can do the same--any time."

"That's neither here nor there. I want you to be happy, that's all."

"You'd make my bed for me?"

"Perhaps."

--*The End of the Affair*, 2.2

Despite the unfeminist (and, I think, unironic) message that humility triumphs and a good wife is a good slave, the lai depicts a world in which power--to legitimize children and to save or slay them, to slander, to confer social dignity and to educate, to solve the mystery and make all things right--is in the hands of women. Le Fresne's mother, who seems unpromising moral material at the outset, turns out to be a good mother after all; instead of being punished at her abused daughter's wedding like the stepmothers in many fairy tales, she is allowed to grow out of her youthful rage and spite, to reform and be forgiven.

When everyone had left the chamber,
The lady brought in her daughter.
She wants to put her to bed; best
Begin, she says, by getting undressed.
She sees the silk brocade spread there;
She's never seen a cloth so fair
Except the one in which she wrapped her
Baby daughter when she hid her.
Now she remembers that lost child;
Her heart trembles, she grows wild.
She calls in the head chamberlain.
"Tell me, as you're a Christian, when
And where did you find this fine brocade?"
"Madame," he answered, "that's easily said;
The damsel brought it, for the bed;
She dumped it on top of the old spread,
An ugly one--she saw that in a wink.
The brocade belongs to her, I think."
Next the lady called her in;
She came and stood before her, then
Respectfully she doffed her cloak.
Finally the mother spoke.
"Beauty, dear, don't hide the truth!
Where did you find this fine silk cloth?
Where'd it come from? How'd you get it? Who,
If it was a gift, gave it to you?"
The girl answers, "Madame, please,
My aunt, the abbess--I'm her niece--
Who raised me, she gave this to me
And told me to keep it carefully.
I was given this and a golden ring
By those who sent me, a foundling."
"Beauty, may I see the ring?"
"Yes, ma'am, that's an easy thing."
She brought the ring to the mother,
Who very carefully looked it over.
Identification was easily made;
She knew the ring and the silk brocade.
She doubted no more, she knew, believed,
That this girl was her daughter indeed.
She can't hide it; so all can hear,
"You are my daughter, beauty dear!"
She cries. From pain and pity she fell

Back in a faint, and lay there a spell.
When she's revived from her swoon,
She calls her lord to the bedroom.
He comes, worried, full of fears.
The moment her husband appears,
She falls at his feet, clasps his knees,
Lets her kisses mix with her pleas,
Begging pardon for her sin.
He can't make out the case she's in.
"Lady," he said, "What do you mean?
There's only ever been good will between
Us. Whatever you did, I forgive it!
Say what you want; I will give it!"
"Lord, since you grant me pardon,
I'll tell you all, so now listen!
Once, long ago, my evil nature
Let me speak nonsense of my neighbor:
I vilified her for having twins--
I blackened myself, for my sins.
I gave birth; truth is, when I did,
I bore two daughters--one I hid,
Had her dumped in a church by my maid.
I sent with her our silk brocade
And the gold ring you gave to me
When first you spoke of love to me.
I can no longer hide anything:
I've found the brocade and the ring!
I recognize this girl, our daughter.
Through my folly we almost lost her!
And this is the same demoiselle
(Beautiful, wise and good as well)
Who was so loved by that knight
Who has married her sister tonight!"
The lord replied, "I am glad of this!
Never before have I known such bliss!
Now we've found our girl who was lost,
God has given us joy rejoiced,
Before we could double the treachery.
Daughter," he said, "Come here to me!"
The girl rejoiced at heart, for sure,
When she heard this adventure.
Her father won't wait; from the room
He goes himself to fetch the groom

(His son-in-law) and archbishop,
And tell the tale from start to finish. Up
The knight's heart rejoicing flew,
At this adventure, when he knew.
The archbishop said it'd be all right
To leave things as they were that night.
Tomorrow he'll divorce or divide
The knight from his espoused bride.
They all agreed on this good plan.
Thus separated was wife from man
And he married his dear, next day,
And her father gave the bride away,
For his heart was warm toward her;
He made her his half-inheritor.
He and his wife and their daughter
Stayed till the wedding-feast was over.
Then they returned to their own country,
Taking La Coudre, the Hazel Tree;
They found her a fine rich groom
And married her off nearer home.

When this story got around,
Just as it happened, people found
A lai of it, Le Fresne, the Ash Tree;
The named the lai after the lady.