

Marie de France

The Twelve Lais

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Introduction

Little is known of the life of Marie de France (flourished c1160-1215), a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, other than that she was probably born in France, but lived mostly in England. She dedicated the Lais to a king, most probably Henry II of England. She wrote in French (in the Francien dialect) but was also fluent in Latin and probably Breton, suggesting she was of at least the minor nobility. As well as writing the Lais, she translated Aesop's fables into French, and wrote other religious works.

The first French female poet of note, she conjures up a courtly ethos further developed in Chrétien's romances, though penning her Breton tales, the twelve Lais, from oral tradition. She may indeed have been born in Brittany. Traces of Anglo-Norman in her language suggesting an origin in Normandy or thereabouts may be due to her living in England, or to the transcribers of her works.

Her name, Marie, and origin in France are simply derived from comments in her own work, and though there have been numerous suggestions as to her identity, she remains otherwise anonymous. The Lais became popular in medieval times, and a number of manuscripts survive, the most complete being in the British Library (MS Harley 978). Attesting to the influence of Ovid's 'The Art of Love' and 'The Cures for Love' on the medieval period, as witnessed by the work of Chrétien de Troyes, here are Marie's trials, tribulations and consequences of love.

Prologue

THOSE whom God has granted sense,
And taught to speak with eloquence,
Should not be dumb, or hide away,
But willingly their skills display.
When all listen to aught that's fine
Then it flourishes, and doth shine.
And when tis praised by the hour
Then it blossoms in full flower.
In times past twas customary,
For such is Priscian's testimony,
To speak, in the books they made,
Obscurely, of all they conveyed,
Knowing that others would follow
Who, that they the work might know,
Would gloss the text, every letter,
And, with sense, their source better.
This the philosophers all knew,
Among themselves, and held it true
That when more time had passed,
Old wisdom would be surpassed,
And more then would be revealed,
Of that which had been concealed.
Whoever would guard from vice
Should study, such is my advice,
And some great work should undertake,
And thus all vice indeed forsake,
And be delivered from great ill.
So I began to muse until
I thought some tale to relate,
From Latin to Romanz translate;
Yet its value might be denied,
Since many another had tried.
I thought then of the lais I'd heard,
For, I doubted not, every word
They'd forged so as to remember

All the truth of some adventure
They had heard of, and so began
A tale set forth for everyman.
Of such I'd heard many a one.
Wishing to lose and forget none,
Thus I've set them down in rhyme,
Working late, full many a time.
In honour of you, our noble king,
True and courteous in everything,
To whom all pleasures do incline,
In whom do root all virtues fine,
I undertook to make these lais,
In rhyming verse, all in your praise;
And thus present, as I have sought,
To you, the content of my thought.
If to receive them is your pleasure
I shall have joy in ample measure,
And in that favour delight forever.
Think it not presumption, ever,
If such tales, to you, I present.
Hark now to their commencement!

The Lay of Guigemar: His parentage and youth

ALL those who do fine work conceive,
If tis ill done, are forced to grieve.
Hark, my lord, for so says Marie,
Who'd seek not to mar this story.
That man the people ought to praise
Whose deeds they speak of always;
But if there is somewhere on earth
A man or woman of great worth,
Who, by their virtue, sparks envy,
Folk will oft speak of them basely,
And seek then to decry the brave.
So doth some vicious dog behave
That takes to acting feloniously,
And biting folk, full treasonably.
But in no manner shall I desist,
If those malicious tongues insist
On directing me toward aught ill:
Such is their right, to slander still!
These true stories of other days
Of which the Bretons made lais,
I'll now relate to you; and thence,
The first with which I'll commence
Told to the letter and the scripture,
Is a story of high adventure,
And it took place in Brittany,
In ancient times, so all agree:
Then King Howell held the land,
War and peace at his command,
And in his suite there rode a baron,
He who was the Lord of Léon,
Indeed, Oridial was his name;
And he was prized, by this same
Noble king, as a man of courage.
There were born of his marriage
Both a son and a daughter fair;

She was Noguent, while, his heir,
He bore the name of Guigemar;
None more handsome near or far,
Thought a marvel by his mother,
And a fine lad by his father.
Now, once of age, he took wing
And left them, to serve the king.
Prudent and brave, it did befall,
That he was loved by one and all.
When his promise was fulfilled
And he was old enough and skilled,
The king then dubbed him a knight
Granting him armour, as of right.
Then Guigemar left, having bought
Fair gifts for all his friends at court.
In Flanders he his fortune sought,
Where unending war was fought.
In Lorraine, or in Burgundy,
In Anjou, or in Gascony,
No finer a knight, to my mind,
In those days, could any find.
In so much had Nature misfired
That ne'er to love had he aspired.
Yet there was not beneath the sky
One fair maid or lady, say I,
Who'd not her love have invested
In him, gladly, if so requested.
Many had sought his, and often,
Yet he resisted, time and again.
None could see that he'd ever
Be minded to seek a lover;
So that, friends and all, they
Thought him doomed to ill always.

The Lay of Guigemar: The white deer

IN all the flower of his fame, he

Sought return to his own country,
To greet his lord, his dear father,
His good mother, and his sister,
Whom he'd long wished to see;
And spent, so it was told to me,
A whole month with them entire,
To hunt the forest his desire.
So he summoned his company,
Knights, huntsmen, and eagerly
At dawn to the forest they went
Such being their joyful intent.
They were after a mighty stag
And loosed the dogs, nor did lag
The huntsmen, who swiftly led
The young man, and rode ahead.
A squire bore his hunting bow,
His quiver and his spear also.
The knight was led, by his horse,
To wander now from his course,
And saw, beneath a spreading tree,
A doe, with her faun in company,
And the creature was purest white,
Yet bore horns, a wondrous sight.
The hounds, baying, bounded high;
He drew his bow, and then let fly,
Striking her on the hoof, so she,
Fell to the ground there, instantly.
Yet the arrow turned back in flight
And on returning struck the knight,
There on the thigh, so violently
He too fell earthward instantly.
Stretched upon the grass he lay
Beside the deer he'd sought to slay.
The doe, wounded, plaintively
Sighed, in anguish, then did she
In this manner, give forth speech:
'I die, alas, yet now shall teach

You, the wretch who struck at me,
The form of your own destiny.
You shall find no healing now,
No root no herb will it allow,
Nor from potion or medicine
Shall you a lasting cure win
For that deep wound in your thigh,
Unless one comes who shall sigh,
Suffer deeply, for love of you,
The deepest pain and sadness too,
More than woman e'er did suffer,
While you endure the like for her;
And both shall greater wonders be
Than any that this world did see,
Or shall hereafter, till time cease.
Now go from here! Leave me in peace!'
Guigemar his wound surveyed,
By all he had heard, dismayed;
And then soberly considered
Where he might be delivered
Of a cure for that grave ill;
To cheat death was all his will.
And yet he found that he knew
Of no fair lady living who
Might accept his love, and so
Heal him of his great sorrow.
He summoned his squire, and said:
'My friend, now spur on ahead!
Tell my companions to return
So I may speak of my concern.'
The squire spurred onward; he did stay,
With sighs his pain he did betray.
Strips of his shirt he then wound
About his wound, tightly bound.
Then he mounted and did depart,
Slowly riding some way apart,
So that none of his company,

Might trouble him now too closely.

The Lay of Guigemar: The ship of ebony

THROUGH the wood he did stray
Travelling down a green way,
That led, beyond it, to a plain;
And saw he might a headland gain,
With high cliffs above the water,
A bay there, a natural harbour.
One sole vessel lay there afloat,
Its flag he knew not; that boat
Was well-fitted, inside and out,
It was caulked with pitch about,
So no man could find a crack;
And every timber front to back,
Was fashioned out of ebony;
The finest the heavens might see.
Much astounded then was he;
For on the coast of that country
Of such ships he'd heard none tell,
Among those who there did dwell.
He rode on and there dismounted,
Then, despite his anguish, mounted
To the ship for he thought to find
Those aboard, to its care assigned;
There were none, none did he see.
A bed he found amidships, finely
Adorned, at head and foot, as one
Once was wrought for Solomon,
Of pure gold, carved skilfully,
And cypress, and white ivory;
Silken cloth all laced with gold
Did the mattress there enfold;
Beyond price the other sheets;
And if of the pillow I must speak
Whoe'er there their head did lay

Never a white hair would betray.
Alexandrine purple the spread,
Trimmed with sable, on that bed.
Two candlesticks of fine gold
That each a tall candle did hold,
Each candlestick a treasure yet,
Upon the ship's bows were set.
At all this, Guigemar marvelled,
Then lay down, much travelled,
Tired by his wound, he rested so.
When he rose, prepared to go,
Thwarted of his return was he,
For the vessel was now at sea,
Running freely o'er the wave,
Before a light wind, though brave.
Nor could he affect aught there,
All sad and helpless in this affair.
No wonder if he showed dismay,
His wound festered night and day.
To suffer pain was now his fate.
He prayed to God ere too late,
To find port, a cure somewhere,
To save him from dying there.
Then down again to sleep he lay
While the ship sailed all that day,
Until, ere night, the ship and he
Arrived at a fine ancient city,
The capital of all that region,
Where a cure might yet be won.

The Lay of Guigemar: The walled garden

THE lord who ruled there for life
Was elderly, with a young wife,
And she was a highborn lady
Free, courteous, wise and lovely;
He was jealous beyond measure,

For such is an old man's nature;
Old men will espouse jealousy –
All hate the curse of cuckoldry –
Such is the common fault of age.
He prisoned her, as in a cage,
For below the keep there lay
A garden closed up every way;
Of green marble was the wall,
And it was broad as it was tall;
To pass it there was but one way,
Which was guarded night and day.
On the far side it faced the sea;
So none could reach it easily,
For they'd have need of a boat
To reach a keep with such a moat.
The lord had made a chamber fair,
Within the wall to house her there,
No finer chamber neath the sky.
And a chapel he built nearby.
Now, the chamber was painted all;
Venus, love's goddess, on the wall
Was portrayed in many a picture;
In one part, depicting the manner
In which all men in love must be,
And serve her well and faithfully;
In another, she consigned to fire
Ovid's book; he did conspire
To teach the cures for such a fate;
Thus would she excommunicate
All who that book of his might read,
And practise aught of such a creed.
There was the lady held, in prison.
Of chambermaids she had but one
Whom her master had allowed her;
Her niece, daughter of her sister,
Both virtuous and kindly too,
Great was the love between the two.

For she kept the lady company
As she walked with her, did she.
No man or woman comes there,
None beyond the wall doth dare.
And an old priest with white hair,
Holds the key to door and stair.
His lower limbs are but frail,
And he beyond jealousy's tale.
He says the mass, and every day
Serves at table the best he may.

The Lay of Guigemar: The ship comes to shore beside the garden

ON this day, after dinner, she
Went to the garden, by the sea
Together with her faithful maid,
And together long they strayed,
For having slept after the meal
She wished to wander a good deal.
Glancing then towards the sea
A fair ship floating they did see,
The vessel was cresting a wave,
Seeking the shore it did lave,
Though none seemed to steer.
The lady turned pale with fear,
Scared by this wondrous sight,
And thus all prepared for flight,
But the maiden who was sage,
Possessed of greater courage,
Comforted and reassured her.
The boat now came to harbour.
The maiden did her cloak resign,
And went aboard the ship so fine.
But there she found naught living
Except the knight, yet sleeping,
So pale, she thought him dead.
She gazed, standing by his bed,

Then ran back to seek her lady,
Crying out to her, hastily.
All the facts she then relayed,
Of the dead knight there laid.
To her lament, she then replied:
'We must inter whoe'er has died,
With the priest's aid: yet, return;
Whether he lives, we must learn.'
They climbed aboard, as she bade,
The lady first, and then the maid.

The Lay of Guigemar: He tells the lady of his fate

SHE went aboard, as I have said,
And halted there, beside the bed;
She upon the knight took pity,
Seeing his wound and his beauty;
Grieved for him, and gave a sigh,
Saying his youth was marred thereby.
She placed her hand upon his chest
And felt it warm, and neath the breast
His heart there she found was beating.
The knight, who had been but sleeping,
Now awoke, his eyes oped wide,
He greeted the lady at his side,
And realised he was come ashore.
The lady, pensive, weeping more,
Answering him in kindly manner,
Asked him then how he'd come there,
From what land he'd sailed before,
And whether wounded there in war.
'Lady,' said he, 'such was not so,
If you would hear the truth though,
Then I shall relay the tale to you,
Nor will conceal aught from view.
I come, in truth, from Brittany,
And, hunting there in that country,

In the wood, shot a white deer,
Yet the arrow returned full clear,
Wounding me thus in the thigh,
Ne'er to be healed before I die.
The doe lamented, and she spoke,
Cursed me, saying that the stroke
Could ne'er be cured, as you see,
Except it were by a certain lady.
Yet I know not who she may be.
So, thus apprised of my destiny,
I left the wood, and went my way,
And found this vessel in the bay.
I entered the ship, thoughtlessly,
And it then sailed away with me.
I know not where tis I am now,
Nor this city's name, I do avow.
Fair lady, for God's sake, I pray,
Of your mercy, counsel me this day;
For I could not direct the vessel,
Nor know where lies this castle.'

The Lay of Guigemar: The lady encourages him to remain there

AND she answered him: 'Fair sire,
I shall counsel you, as you desire:
My lord is the master of this city
And all the neighbouring country;
He's rich, and of noble parentage,
But bowed down now with age,
And he is riven with jealousy.
For that reason, as you may see,
Within these walls, I'm caged about.
There's only one way, in or out,
And an old priest guards the door.
Thus God grants, ill goes amour!
Here am I prisoned, night and day,
Naught can I do, nor find a way

To leave except by his command,
For I must stay if he so demand.
Here my chamber and chapel be,
And my only maid, for company.
If it would please you to remain,
Until you might depart again,
Then gladly you may be our guest
And we will serve you of the best.’
When he had heard her speech, he
Thanked the lady most graciously,
He would remain there, he said,
Then dressed himself, on the bed;
And with their kind aid, moreover,
They both led him to a chamber;
Above the chambermaid’s bed,
There hung a canopy overhead,
That curtained off the bed-space;
It was the maid’s sleeping place.
They brought him water by and by,
And washed the wound in his thigh,
And with a cloth of purest white
Rinsed the blood from the knight.
Then they bound the wound tightly,
For they cared for him most dearly.
When the time for dinner came,
The maid served him of the same
Until the knight was fair replete;
A fine meal, with wine complete.
And yet love had struck him deep,
He Torment’s company did keep;
The lady’s beauty pierced him so,
Thoughts of return he did forego.
And of his wound he felt no ill,
And yet he sighed in anguish still.
The chambermaid he addressed,
Asked that she leave him to rest,
So, departing, she left him there

By his leave, and did then repair
To her mistress, whom she found
Was by a like anguish bound;
The same fire that, with its art,
Had inflamed Guigemar's heart.

The Lay of Guigemar: He is enamoured of the lady

OUR knight remained there all alone,
And he was pensive and made moan.
He knew not yet what he should do,
Yet nonetheless he thought it true,
If he were not healed by the lady
Then he would die, of a certainty.
'Alas,' he cried, what shall I seek?
I'll go to her, to her I'll speak;
Beg her to have mercy, and pity
A wretch so drowned in misery.
If she should refuse my prayer,
Is full of pride, and hath no care,
Then must grief be mine, I say,
I'll languish of this ill alway.'
Then he sighed, yet in a while
A new intent did him beguile,
For he said that he must suffer
He indeed could do no other,
And all the night he lay awake
And sighed for his lady's sake,
In his heart's depths recalling
All her words and her seeming,
Her grey eyes, her lips' sweet art,
Whose sadness touched his heart.
And to himself he cried mercy,
That he could not her lover be.
If he had known how she felt
How Love his blow had dealt,
He would have known delight.

A little ease it brought the knight
All of this excess of dolour
That stole from his face its colour.
If he knew sorrow for love of her,
She with that sorrow must concur.

The Lay of Guigemar: The maid, her niece, promises to help him

AT dawn, ere the sun shone red,
The lady rose from her bed.
She had lain awake, she cried,
Love had caused it, and sighed.
Her niece who kept her company
Saw, by the lady's face, that she
A profound love now revealed,
For this knight now concealed
In the chamber, for his healing,
But knew not the knight's feeling.
The lady went to chapel to pray,
While she went to where he lay,
But found him seated by the bed.
And he addressed her, and said:
'Fair friend, where goes my lady?
Why is she risen now, so early?'
Then he fell silent, and sighed.
The maid to him now replied:
'You are in love, sire,' said she,
'But do not love too secretly.
You may love in such a guise
That love is well won; likewise,
He who would love my lady,
Must think of her graciously;
Such love doth befit the other,
You were made for one another.
You are handsome, she is fair.'
Swiftly came his answer there:
'I'm seized by such love, I vow,

That I must come to ruin now,
If I find nor succour, nor aid;
Give me counsel then, sweet maid!
How then shall I further this love?
The maid did with sweetness move
To reassure, and comfort him,
And promised her aid to him,
By every means within her power;
Good and kind was she that hour.
After she'd heard Mass, the lady
Returned again and asked that she
Learn how her guest was and kept,
If he was awake now, or slept,
Since love of him filled her heart.
She summoned her maid apart,
And sent her to seek the knight,
Who thus at his leisure might
Speak to her, reveal his state,
And turn the edge of his fate.

The Lay of Guigemar: The lovers' meeting, and the nature of love

SHE greeted him as he did her.
Both of them were full of fear,
And hardly dared say a word.
For his foreignness deterred
Him from speaking out lest he
Err at all, prompting enmity.
But none can be healed until
They choose to reveal their ill.
Love is a pain within the heart,
Silent, that dwells not apart.
It is an ill that long endures,
For it comes of nature's laws.
Yet many make a mockery
Of love, as some vile courtesy,
Who gallivant about the earth,

Yet find their acts of little worth,
Not love, indeed, but rather folly,
Mere wrongdoing, plain lechery.
Who finds a true and loyal friend,
Should love and serve without end,
And be ever at their command.
Guigemar loved, you understand,
In such a way, and lastingly;
New life and health he might see,
Love had roused his courage,
He must let his passion rage.
'Lady,' he said, 'I die for you.
My heart it languishes anew.
If you deign not to heal my ill,
I, in the end, must perish still.
I ask of you loving-kindness,
Deny me not your tenderness!'
When she had heard all his plea
She answered him, smilingly:
'Friend, thus to grant your prayer
May make for too rash an answer,
I am not accustomed so to do,
Perhaps then I should resist you.'
'Lady, for God's sake, mercy,
Be not annoyed if I spoke freely!
A woman light in her manner
Will long resist every prayer
For she wishes none might see
Her wield her art too openly.
But if a woman of good intent,
Whose actions are all well-meant,
On finding a man of manners,
Is not too proud to grant his prayers,
She should love him, or lack joy,
And then, ere any gossip employ,
They'll have their love joyfully;
For then the thing is done, lady!'

The lady knew that he spoke true,
And granted him her friendship, too,
And kissed him most willingly.
And thus was Guigemar at ease.
They lay together, spoke together,
Kissed and embraced each other,
Pure excess did their joy offer,
Of all the other had to proffer!
So a year and a half passed by,
That Guigemar with her did lie;
Delightful was that life indeed,
But Fortune, her law, decreed
That she turn her wheel about,
And one was in, the other out.
A sad wound they now received,
For their loving was perceived.

The Lay of Guigemar: Their love affair is exposed

ONE morning in summer they,
Both he and she, together lay,
She kissed his lips, tenderly,
Then: 'Fair sweet friend,' said she,
'My heart declares I must lose you,
Our love will be brought to view;
And if you die then I shall die,
But if you should depart, say I,
You will find some new amour,
And I'll be left with my dolour.'
'Speak not so, my lady,' said he,
For I would have no joy or peace,
If to another I should turn!
Fear not that for such I yearn!'
'Of that, love, grant me surety!
Yield your shirt, give it to me!
I'll knot a corner of the cloth,
You must swear to me, in troth,

That you will love whoever
Can loose what I knot together.’
He swore, and granted surety.
She then tied the knot securely,
Such that none could it undo
Unless twas torn or cut in two.
The shirt he gave she did return,
He received it, and in his turn,
Asked her for mutual surety,
For a belt likewise now she
Must wear around her waist,
About her bare flesh laced,
And she must love whoever
Might undo it yet not sever
Its fastening, nor it destroy.
He kissed her, she did it deploy.
That very day their love was known,
They were seen and found alone,
By an ill-disposed chamberlain,
That to her husband did pertain.
He would speak with the lady
And yet could not gain entry.
Through the window then, he saw
The pair, as to his lord he swore,
Who upon hearing all his story
Was transported with rare fury,
And summoning servants three
Led them away to seek the lady,
He had the door oped outright,
And within he found the knight.
Filled with anger he demanded
Instant death, and so commanded.

The Lay of Guigemar: He is forced to return to his own country

NOW Guigemar leapt to his feet,
Fearless, not deigning to retreat.

He swiftly seized a wooden bar
Which held the canopy, a spar,
In his grasp, and made a stand;
Good to take any man in hand;
Ere he might be seized by them
He was ready to trouble them.
The lord, regarding him closely.
Asked who he was, of what country,
And of his birth, and how that he
Had come there, and gained entry.
He told of how his ship did stray,
How the lady had made him stay.
He told about his wretched fate,
Of the deer he'd wounded of late,
Of his own wound, and his foray;
Now in the lord's power he lay.
The lord said he believed him not,
Nor that there by ship he had got,
But if the vessel could be found
He'd set him homeward-bound.
As to his wound, be he assured,
If he drowned it would be cured.
Once they had swiftly ascertained
That there the ship still remained,
They set him aboard it; instantly
It sailed toward his own country.
The ship it might not there abide,
The knight aboard wept and sighed,
His thoughts upon his love intent,
Praying, to the Lord Omnipotent,
To deliver him the death he sought,
Nor let the vessel come to port,
If he might not regain his lover,
Whom he loved more than ever.
As he thus lamented endlessly,
The ship attained his own country,
Reaching the port whence it came.

Swiftly he disembarked the same;
And met a youth he knew on sight,
Who was walking behind a knight,
Leading a war-horse in his hand.
He called aloud to the young man,
Raised in his household previously,
Who recognised him, instantly.
His lord seeing them, in due course,
Dismounting, gifted him the horse.
He rode home to his friends, then,
Who joyed on finding him again.

The Lay of Guigemar: The tower of marble

HE was welcomed in his country,
But every day sighed, pensively.
They wished that he would marry,
But he was not inclined to any.
He'd accept none anywhere,
Not in love or marriage, there,
Unless they could undo the knot
In his shirt, without tear or cut.
Through Brittany went the news,
Maid nor lady would he choose,
Unless they could loose that tie;
None could, though a host did try.
Now I must tell you further of,
That one lady he could so love:
The lord took counsel of a baron,
And thus the lady did imprison,
In a grey marble tower, perverse
Her fate; days ill, the nights worse.
None in this world could e'er relate
How sad, how wretched was her state,
All the anguish, all the dolour
That she suffered in that tower.
Two years and more passed by,

No joyful sight there met her eye.
Oft her love she regretted too:
'Guigemar, ill the day I saw you!
I would rather die now, swiftly,
Than suffer such pain endlessly.
Could I but escape, my friend,
In those waves I'd make an end,
Where your fair ship took flight.'
Then she arose and, strange sight,
Found the door unlocked, and so,
Seizing her chance, stepped below,
For none she found to trouble her;
And saw a ship there in the harbour.
To the rock it was tied, she found,
Where she had wished to drown.
Seeing the ship, she went aboard;
But one thought it did her afford:
As for her love, it was not likely,
He was alive, in his own country.
Though its coast he may have spied,
Yet of his wound he'd surely died,
He'd suffered such pain and travail.
Of its own will, the ship set sail,
And Brittany it reached ere long
Beneath a castle, tall and strong;
And the lord of that very same,
Was one Meriadu by name.

The Lay of Guigemar: The lady reaches Meriadu's castle

ON his near neighbour he made war,
And was about to send out more
Of his troops to bait the enemy;
Thus he himself had risen early.
Now, standing at a window, he
Watched the vessel dock from sea;
By the stairway, the hall did gain

And, summoning his chamberlain,
He hastened to view it further,
Climbing aboard, by the ladder.
On the ship they found the lady,
She, like a faerie for her beauty;
By the cloak he now seized her,
And to his castle swiftly led her,
Delighted to have found a lady
So immeasurably lovely.
Whoe'er sent her o'er the sea,
He knew she came of nobility.
He conceived such love for her
Toward none was his love greater.
In his house, he'd a fair sister,
He asked that she serve and honour
This lady, whom he commended
To her, and she, as commanded,
Decked out the lady splendidly;
Yet the maid sighed pensively.
He oft came to speak with her,
Seeking to make her his lover.
He might ask; but she cared not,
Showed the belt, had not forgot;
Never a man could she now love
But he who might the belt remove
Without breaking the clasp there;
Thus, mortified, he answered her;
'Likewise there is within this land
A worthy knight, I understand,
Who is prevented from so loving
Any maid by the shirt he's wearing,
That bears a knot on its right side,
That may not, by force, be untied,
By tearing at the cloth, or cutting;
And you, I fear, knotted the thing.'
When she heard this, she sighed,
Awhile, her breath it almost died.

In her arms he took her no less,
And cut the laces of her dress:
And then would undo the clasp,
But could not achieve the task.

The Lay of Guigemar: Guigemar sees a fair lady at the tournament

NEVER a knight did there abide,
Who did not fail, though each tried.
Then he arranged a tournament,
And news was spread of his intent;
Meriadu brought knights from afar,
To fight those on whom he made war.
He summoned them all to his side,
And Guigemar too, to him did ride.
He had been asked his aid to lend,
As his companion and his friend,
And thus assist him in his need,
And come to him as he decreed.
Thus more than a hundred knights
Gathered there, a splendid sight.
Meriadu lodged them in his tower,
And showed them honour that hour.
He sent two knights at his command
To his sister, and did thus demand,
That she bring to them the lady
Whom he now loved so deeply.
She, at his command, addressed
The lady, whom she richly dressed,
Hand in hand they went to the hall,
Though the lady was pale withal.
Hearing Guigemar named, she
Was ready to fall there at his feet,
And if the other had not held her,
She would have swooned further.
The knight rose, seeing her there,
Gazing at her, he saw her manner

And her seeming, and then he
Drew back a little, amazedly:
'Is it she, then, my dear friend,
My hope, heart, life without end,
That fair lady whom I so love?
From whence did she remove?
Who led her here? Tis my folly,
This cannot be my love, surely?
Women may in her guise appear,
A form, my mind confuses here.
But since she doth so resemble
Her, it makes me sigh and tremble,
With her I would willingly speak.'
So her company he did seek,
Kissed her, sat her at his side.
Not a word did he say beside,
Except to beg her to be seated.

The Lay of Guigemar: The lovers are united once more

MERIADU, that act completed,
Musing on all that he could see,
Spoke to Guigemar, smilingly:
'Sire, he said, 'now, if you please,
That lady, sitting there at her ease,
Might seek that knot to untie,
In your shirt.' 'Yes,' was his reply,
'I'd wish her to do that very same.'
And calling to him a chamberlain,
He who had the shirt in his care,
He ordered him to bring it there;
Then gave it to the lady yet
She hesitated, seemed upset,
Her heart was filled with distress;
And yet she'd attempt the test,
For at her own knot she stared;
If she might, and if she dared.

Meriadu, troubled to the core,
Grieved, he could do no more:
'Lady,' he said, 'now make assay,
Untie the knot here if you may!'
When she heard his command
She took the fabric in her hand,
Then unknotted it skilfully.
The knight, now, wonderingly,
Knew that it was she, although
He could scarce believe it so.
He spoke to her in quiet measure:
'Ah my friend, ah sweet creature,
Is it you indeed, tell me truly!
Now, at your waist, let me see
The belt set there, which I tied!'
Placing his hand upon her side,
He touched the belt, instantly,
'Fair one, by what chance,' said he
Comes it that I find you here?
Who, indeed, has led you here?
She told him of all the dolour,
The pain and grief of the tower,
Where she had lain in prison,
And the manner and the reason,
How escaped the lord's grip;
Wished to drown, found the ship,
Went aboard, and came to harbour,
Where Meriadu had with honour
Treated her, yet sought her love.
But now, by all the heavens above,
Now, all was joyful once more.
'Friend, love me now as before!'

The Lay of Guigemar: Meriadu tries to seize the lady and is defeated

NOW Guigemar rose to his feet,
'My lords,' he cried, 'I do entreat

Your attention; my love is here,
Whom I thought lost, many a year!
Meriadu, of his mercy, I pray
To grant her to me, here today;
And then his liegeman I will be,
And serve him two years or three,
With a hundred knights and more.’
Meriadu spoke thus: ‘Guigemar,
Fair friend,’ said he, ‘think not that I
Am so troubled so by war, that I
Have need of what you propose;
I have men enough, God knows.
I did find her, and will hold her,
And against you I’ll defend her.’
On hearing all this, Guigemar
Summoned his knights to war.
He went from there, defiantly,
Sad at leaving her so swiftly.
None of the knights who went
There to fight the tournament
But took his part in this affair,
And stood beside him there.
All of them swore to follow
Him wherever he might go,
And would consider as a traitor
Any man who failed thereafter
To join that night the lord who
Now warred against Meriadu.
That lord lodged them willingly,
Delighted, joyful them to see,
And the aid Guigemar brought.
To end the war he now sought.
They rise at dawn the next day,
Gather, and swiftly ride away.
Issuing forth with a mighty din,
Guigemar leading, they begin
Meriadu’s castle to assail;

Yet they cannot at first prevail.
Guigemar laid siege, as well,
Nor would retreat until it fell.
So many his friends and allies,
That all went hungry there inside.
The castle was laid to waste,
And its lord of death did taste.
Guigemar led his love away,
All their ills ended that day.
And of this tale, I have relayed,
The lay of Guigemar was made,
That they sing to harp and rote,
And sweet to hear is every note.

Note: The name Guigemar may be derived from Guihomar, Viscount of Léon (c1021-1055).

The End of the Lay of Guigemar

The Lay of Equitan: Marie's introduction

NOBLE indeed were the barons,
Those of Brittany, the Bretons.
And long ago they would make
Fine lays for remembrance sake,
Tales enshrining great prowess,
Nobility, and courtliness,
Out of the adventures they heard
That to many a man occurred.
One they made, that I've heard told
For not a word was lost of old,
Of Equitan, that courteous king,
In Nantes, judge, lord of everything.
Equitan was deemed most worthy,
And much loved, in that country.
To love and hunting wed was he
For so they maintained chivalry.
Such do life neglect for pleasure;
Love has neither sense nor measure,
For herein is the measure of love,
That from it reason doth remove.

The Lay of Equitan: The Seneschal's wife

NOW Equitan had a Seneschal,
A worthy knight, good and loyal,
And he watched over his estate,
As both steward and magistrate.
Except for war there was naught
Kept the king from what he sought,
His river-sport, and the hunting life.
Now the seneschal he had a wife,
One who brought that land great ill,
Yet she was very beautiful,
Possessed of every quality,
In manners both fine and courtly,

And of noble form and feature,
A true masterpiece of Nature;
Her eyes grey, lovely her face,
Fine mouth and nose, set with grace,
In that realm she had no peer,
Her praise oft reached the king's ear.
Often he would send his greetings,
Gifts as well; without their meeting,
He desired her and, though unseen,
Wished to speak with her, I ween.

The Lay of Equitan: The King in love

TO amuse himself he, privately,
Pursued the chase in that country.
With the Seneschal he did stay,
And in that castle the lady lay;
There, slept the king that night,
Sated with hunting, his delight.
Now he might display his art,
Show his worth, reveal his heart.
He found her sage and courteous,
Lovely of face and form she was,
In her, warmth and manners met;
Amour had caught him in his net.
An arrow through him he'd shot,
A grievous wound was now his lot;
His heart pierced, through and through,
Wisdom and sense, away they flew.
He was so taken with the lady,
Quiet and pensive, he mused sadly;
Saw now where his folly might end,
While naught of it could he defend.
That night scant sleep had the king,
But blamed himself for everything.
'Alas, what fate was this,' said he,
'That led me here, to this country?

Since for this lady, it did reveal,
Pure anguish in my heart I feel,
My whole body is set a-quiver.
I seek now that I might love her,
Yet if I love her I may work ill.
She is the Seneschal's wife still.
I must keep faith with him, as he
I hope would be true to me.
If by some chance he knew all,
Great grief on him would fall.
Nonetheless worse would it be
If I were thus maddened utterly;
So fine a lady must lack, alas,
If she nor love nor lover has.
What good is all her courtesy,
If she in her loving is not free?
Any man on earth would, if she
Loved him, improve, lastingly.
If the Seneschal should hear all,
Little sorrow ought him befall;
Although she'd not be his alone,
I would share her, and not own.'
After repeating this, he sighed,
Lay down, mused, and replied
To himself, saying: 'Now whence
Comes all this to addle my sense?
For I know not, and cannot know,
If she might deign to love me so;
Yet I must know, without delay.
If she feels what I feel, this day
I'll shake off this deep sorrow;
Lord, so long tis till the morrow!
I can achieve but scant repose;
I lay down long ago, God knows'
The king now lay awake till morn,
Waiting, in anguish, for the dawn.

The Lay of Equitan: He open his heart to the lady and wins her

THEN he rose and went hunting,
But soon returned, as if ailing,
Saying he felt much distressed;
And went to his chamber to rest.
The Seneschal grieved, not knowing
What ill it was troubled the king,
Nor what caused his looks askance,
His wife being the circumstance.
The king for his ease and pleasure,
Now sent for her, to talk at leisure.
His heart no longer he concealed,
And that he died for her, revealed.
She might save him, in a breath,
Or might bring about his death.
'Sire,' now replied the lady,
'I must have time, grant it me;
Hearing you, how can I reply?
For no counsel in this have I.
You come of the high nobility,
Far greater, wealthier than me;
And ought not to think of me
So lightly, nor so amorously.
If you were thus to have your way,
Then I doubt not, tis truth I say,
Desertion would prove my lot,
Tis truth I say, and doubt it not;
If you were to love as you wish,
Your desire be fulfilled in this,
The love-play twixt you and me
Would affect us both unequally.
For you are my king, as of right,
While my lord is but your knight;
You hope, no doubt, thus to prove
Your power, by acting so in love.
Love between equals, such has worth;

Far better a lover of humble birth,
If sense and virtue lie within,
And greater such a love to win,
Than that of a prince or a king,
Who little loyalty doth bring.
If a man's love doth higher aim
Than his status can maintain,
He's anxious about everything;
The richest man fears his king,
Who can simply steal his lover,
By a straight display of power.'
But Equitan, at once, replied:
'Lady, yet that must be denied;
Such yield not out of courtesy,
Rather tis but the bourgeoisie,
That for wealth or status will
Strike a bargain, and so work ill.
There's no woman on earth, wise,
Courteous, brave, of noble guise,
A woman who holds love dear,
And changes it not year by year,
Though she's but the cloak she's in,
A rich prince would not seek to win,
Who, to gain her, would not suffer,
And be her true and loyal lover.
Those who love but changeably,
Those who resort to trickery,
Are often themselves deceived,
As we may see, and sorely grieved.
No wonder then if they should lose;
They do earn it, who others abuse.
Dear lady, I give myself to you!
As a king keep me not in view,
But as a man, and as your friend!
I swear to you, on this depend,
That I will serve your pleasure,
Leave me not for death to measure!

You are the lady, I but serve her,
You the proud one, I the suitor.’
The king spoke on in this manner,
She praying he take pity on her,
Till he so convinced her that she,
Yielding, granted him her body.
Exchanging rings then, the two
Plighted their troth, swore to be true;
And true they were, in every breath,
Until, together, they met their death.

The Lay of Equitan: They could marry, if her lord were dead

THEIR loving lasted many a year,
Not a word of it did any man hear.
When they wished to be together,
And so converse with one another,
The king would tell his people he
Wished to be bled, most privately.
His chamber doors were firmly closed,
All entry there was straight opposed,
Unless commanded by the king;
And none could be found so daring;
The Seneschal himself held court,
Heard all pleas, and justice sought.
Long now the king had loved her
Such that he thought of no other.
And he sought not to marry, either,
Thus none dare speak of the matter.
All folk considered this an evil,
As did the Seneschal’s wife, ill
She thought it, and so did suffer,
Though she feared to lose her lover.
When she could speak with him,
Whene’er she should have been
Kissing, hugging in pure delight,
Loving him with all her might,

She was full of tears, and sad.
The king asked what ill she had,
What caused it, why did she cry?
The lady made him this reply:
'Sire, tis for our love I mourn,
Love in truth makes me forlorn.
You will wed a king's daughter,
And leave me alone thereafter.
I hear it oft, know that tis true,
And then alas, what shall I do?
Through you, death will be mine,
No other comfort shall I find.'
Of his great love, the king did cry:
'Dear friend, have no fear, for I
Shall surely marry with no other,
Nor leave you now for another.
Believe this; know it to be true,
If your lord dies, then I wed you,
You'll be my lady and my queen,
And thus none shall come between.'
The lady, thanking him sweetly,
Addressing him right gratefully,
Said, if he swore that it was so,
And to none other he should go,
She would arrange, and speedily,
That dead her husband should be;
For it would be easy to achieve,
If she his aid might now receive.
It would be given, was his reply,
Naught was there beneath the sky
She might ask he would not do,
Wisdom or folly, he'd be true.

The Lay of Equitan: They conspire at murder

'SIRE,' she said, 'if it please you, go
Hunt in that forest, that you know,

In the country, where I dwell,
In my lord's castle lodge, as well,
Be bled there, where you do stay,
And bathe there, on the third day.
My lord will be bled beside you,
And will take his bath there too.
For say to him, that such must be,
That he must keep you company.
And then the water I shall heat,
Have the baths brought complete;
His bath will be so boiling hot,
There's no man alive would not
Be scalded, and so die, I swear,
As soon as he was seated there.
Once he's scalded and is dead,
Have your men and his be led
To see him, and there be shown
How he died; let that be known.
The king agreed to all she said,
He would follow where she led.

The Lay of Equitan: The assassination attempt and its outcome

NO more than three months had passed,
And the king came to hunt at last.
There was he bled, as a cure-all,
Together with the Seneschal.
The third day, he wished to bathe,
The Seneschal the like did crave:
The king said: 'You shall bathe with me.'
Said the Seneschal: 'I agree.'
Then the lady the water did heat,
The baths were brought in, complete;
Before the bed as she'd planned,
Each of the bathtubs did stand.
The one with boiling water in it,
In which the Seneschal would sit.

Her lord had risen, he, at leisure,
Had gone it seems about his pleasure.
The lady came to talk with the king,
Who drew her to him; embracing,
On her husband's bed, they lay,
And took their pleasure every way.
There they toyed with one another,
Behind the bath, clasped together.
A maid was stationed by the door,
Charged with keeping them secure.
But her lord, returning swiftly,
Beat on the door, and then was she,
The maid, forced to throw it wide,
He struck with such fury, outside.
His wife, and the king, he found
Twined together, all close-bound.
The king rose; leaping to his feet,
To hide his shame, and his deceit,
He leapt into the bath feet first,
Bare as he was, as if accursed;
He took no care except to hide,
Scalded himself, and so he died.
His plan upon him did rebound,
While her lord was safe and sound.
The Seneschal seeing everything,
All that transpired with the king,
Seized his wife, and instantly
Plunged her in, head first, so she
Died there in the scalding water;
The king went first, and she after.
Who to wisdom bends an ear,
May find a fitting moral here:
For he who planned to harm another,
But harmed himself, as we discovered.
All this, I've told, is true, I say,
The Bretons made of it this Lay
Of Equitan, how he met his end,

And of the lady, his loving friend.

The End of the Lay of Equitan

Note: The name Equitan suggests equity (équité) and justice; also the knightly status of the main male characters (Latin: eques, a Roman knight of the equestrian order)

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): Two neighbours and two sons

THE Lay of the Ash Tree I will tell,
As I heard the tale; I know it well.
In Brittany, so my pen writes,
Lived two neighbours, both knights,
Well-established men and wealthy,
Noble knights, brave and manly.
Close, and natives of that country,
Each knight had wed a fair lady.
One was with child, and that same,
When shortly to full term she came,
Gave birth to two boys; the knight,
Her lord, was overjoyed; delight
So possessed him, when he heard,
That to his neighbour he sent word,
That his wife had borne two boys
And he so wished to share his joy,
He desired that one of the same
His neighbour would raise and name.
Now he, being seated at dinner,
Saw before him this messenger,
Who by the high table, did kneel
And his message did then reveal.
The lord gave thanks to God, and he
Gifted the man a palfrey, but she,
His wife, could barely raise a smile,
(She was seated by him the while);
For, proud, she was filled with envy,
Ill-speaking, and showed her folly
By saying, before one and all,
In words too hasty to recall:
'God save me, indeed I wonder
What possessed your neighbour
To assume my lord would name
One child and so share the blame
Of his wife bearing sons like this;

Since all the shame is hers and his.
All here know what our folk say,
That none have ever heard or may,
Of such a thing as we see here,
That, at a single birth, appear
Unlike offspring, unless two men
Were involved in begetting them.’
Her husband gazed at her, full long,
Then scolded her, his words were strong:
‘Lady,’ he cried, ‘Let such things be!
And speak not so, in my company!
For his fair wife has, in verity,
At all times proved a virtuous lady.’

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The virtuous wife is maligned

ALL of the folk who were there
Remembered the gist of this affair,
And it was spoken of and known
Throughout all Brittany, I’d own.
For those ill words she was hated,
And thus to great ill was she fated.
All women hated her without fail,
Rich or poor, who heard the tale.
He who had the message brought
Returned, and his lord he sought
And related all to the lord who
Much troubled, knew not what to do.
The good woman thus descried,
He now mistrusted, and denied,
And he well-nigh imprisoned her,
Though it was quite undeserved.
That lady who her thus reviled,
Within a year, was with child,
And two infants then she bore,
As her neighbour had before;
Two girls, indeed, she now produced

And, shamed, was to tears reduced,
Weeping sore, as if demented,
To herself she now lamented:
'Alas,' she cried, 'what shall I do?
For now I am dishonoured too!
In truth now, I am doomed to shame,
My lord, and all who share his name,
Will ne'er believe me virtuous,
When they hear such news of us.
Thus my own self I did condemn
When I spoke ill of others then;
For did I not say none e'er knew
Of a single birth producing two
Unlike offspring, unless two men
Were involved in begetting them?
Now I have borne two, all can see
My malice has returned on me.
Who speaks ill, and speaks a lie,
May harm themselves by and by;
One person may another slander,
Whom they should praise rather.
To save myself from shame, I fear,
I must slay one of these two here.
Better thus that God should blame
Me, than that I should live in shame.'

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The problem of two daughters

THE women who surrounded her
Now set themselves to comfort her,
And said that they would not allow
One child to die; and thus did vow.
This lady she possessed a maid,
Of noble birth, a faithful aide,
Whom she'd nurtured many a year,
One she loved and she held dear.
On hearing how her lady sighed,

How she grieved and how she cried,
All this she found most troubling,
And sought to comfort her, saying:
'Lady, naught's worth grieving so!
You'd do well to cease your woe,
And hand me now one of the two!
I'll relieve you of her, and you
Free of shame, and woe and pain,
Need not see the child again.
To the church I'll bear her now
Safe and sound she'll be, I vow,
Some good man will find her there,
If God pleases, and grant her care.'
So she spoke, and the lady heard,
With delight, and gave her word
That if this service she would do,
To her a guerdon would fall due.
With a fine linen cloth did they
Wrap the infant, and did array
Their burden in a silken shawl,
That her lord had brought withal
From Constantinople, one year,
That none other e'er came near.
With a ribbon she tied a charm,
A ring, there, to the infant's arm,
Fashioned of an ounce of gold,
Whose clasps a ruby did enfold.
And letters in the gold around,
So that when the child was found,
They'd realise that, assuredly,
She came of a wealthy family.
The maid now took up the infant,
And left the room, on the instant.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The infant and the ash-tree

THAT night, when folk were all abed,

Out of the town, the maiden sped,
And took a broad road that ran
Between tall trees on either hand.
Through the wood she made her way
Holding the child, and did not stray
One instant from the broad road till
Far on her right she heard the shrill
Cockerels' cries, and dogs barking;
There lay the town she was seeking.
Swiftly then she covered the ground
Making towards the distant sounds.
At last the maiden reached a sign
That marked a town rich and fine.
In the town there lay an abbey,
Well-endowed, and most wealthy.
Many a nun, tis said, dwells there,
And an abbess hath it in her care.
The maiden viewed the spire tall,
The bell-towers, turrets, and wall,
Swiftly she advanced towards it,
And then came to a halt before it.
She laid down the infant there,
Knelt humbly, and said a prayer:
'Lord God, by your holy name,
If it please you, guard this same
Infant, and keep her in your care.'
Such was the tenor of her prayer.
When all was silent once more,
She looked about her, and saw
A living ash-tree, tall and wide,
Towering boughs on every side,
Planted there for its cool shade,
That at its fork a cradle made.
She lifted the child, carefully,
Placing her in the old ash-tree;
Thus she left her, with a prayer,
To God above commending her.

Then to her lady she was gone
There to relate all she had done.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The porter finds the child

THERE was a porter at the abbey
Who worked the door; and when any
Folk arrived at the church to hear
The service, then he would appear.
He rose before the sky was bright,
The candles and the lamps to light,
To ring the bells, and ope the door
For Mass, and so he saw the cache,
Of shawl and child, up in the ash,
And thought it from some robbery,
The spoils abandoned in the tree;
For naught else did he consider.
Yet, as soon as he could stagger
To the place, he found the child.
He uttered thanks to God awhile,
Took the bundle from its lodging,
And then returned to his dwelling.
Now, he had a widowed daughter,
With a child that lacked a father,
Her little one, still at the breast;
He summoned her from her rest,
Crying: 'Rise now, my daughter,
Light the fire, and bring me water,
Here's an infant, as you will see,
That I found in the old ash-tree.
You shall nurse the child, I vow,
Bathe her; warm her, gently now!'
She carried out his firm command,
Lit the fire, took the babe in hand,
Bathed and warmed her, at his behest,
And then suckled her at the breast.
Tied to her arm they found the ring,

Gazed at the silk, saw everything
About them was fine, thus she
Came of some wealthy family.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): She is adopted and named Ash

NEXT day, after the service, when
The abbess had heard Mass, he then
Approached her, so he might speak
Of his adventure, and thus seek
Her advice as to the foundling.
The abbess ordered him to bring
The child to her, safe and sound,
And present her as she was found.
The porter went home, willingly,
Then brought the child for her to see.
On viewing the child, and after
She had gazed a long while at her,
She said she would raise her now,
As her niece, such was her vow.
The porter was then forbidden
To say aught, all must be hidden.
She took up the child, tenderly.
Since she was found in the ash-tree,
She was called Ash – *Le Fresne* –
And all folk knew her by that name.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): Gurun, a lord of Dol, loves her

THE abbess raised her as her niece,
And she long dwelt there, in peace,
Within the abbey close, there she
Was nurtured, raised in privacy.
When she'd achieved those years
When beauty naturally appears,
None so fair dwelt in Brittany,
And none more versed in courtesy.

She was noble, refined of speech
And manner, well-trained in each.
All who viewed her did love her,
For all considered her a wonder.
At Dol there lived a noble lord,
A finer the realm did not afford.
His name I shall relate, twas one
The people called him by: Gurun.
Now he heard talk of this fair maid,
And signs of love for her betrayed.
Returning from a tournament,
By the abbey grounds he went.
Once there, the abbess did agree,
That the maiden he might see;
He found her lovely, well-taught,
Wise and courteous; in short,
If he could not win her love,
A tragedy to him twould prove.
He was lost, he sought the how,
For the abbess would not allow
Him lightly there, nor would she
Accept their meeting frequently.
Then a fine thought came to mind,
He would endow the abbey, find
Enough land to grant that they
Might prosper for many a day.
Then he would ask for a retreat,
To rest in, and they could meet.
To stay there in their company,
He gave greatly of his property;
Though he sought far more to win
Than mere remission of his sins.
So often then did he repair
To the place, speak with her there,
So press his suit, and so exhort
Her, she granted what he sought.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): She leaves the abbey with him

WHEN he was certain of her love
This proposal he sought to move:
'Fair one,' said he, 'soon twill out,
That I am your lover, sans doubt.
Come and be with me completely,
You know, and I believe it truly,
That if your aunt discovers all,
Great trouble to us may befall,
And if you should be with child
She'd be angered, you reviled.
If my advice you'll dare to take,
Your home with me you'll make,
I shall not fail you, that is sure;
Good counsel I give, and more.'
She who loves him endlessly,
To his proposal doth agree.
With him she quietly slips away
To reach his castle walls that day.
She took the silk shawl and the ring
The sole adornments she could bring.
These, the abbess had given her
Telling her of that adventure,
When she was found, formerly,
Rescued from the old ash-tree,
In the silk shawl, with the ring,
Fair gifts of unknown origin,
Possessed indeed of no other;
Thus as her niece she'd raised her.
The girl had gazed long upon them,
Then in a casket had enclosed them.
Thus the casket she had brought,
Lest she forget or she lose aught.
The knight who took her away
Loved her dearly for many a day,
And of his household, of his men,

There were none among them then
Failed to love her noble manner
Or to cherish her with honour.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The vassals' grievance

LONG she lived there with him so,
But then his vassals, to her woe,
Began to think all this was ill,
And spoke to him of it, until
They sought to see her put aside,
That he might wed a noble bride,
Desiring that he have an heir
To maintain the lordship there
After him, his estate and name.
Would he not then be to blame
If he, due to this paramour,
Neither sought to marry nor
Produce a legitimate child?
As their lord he'd be reviled,
They'd not serve him willingly
If he chose to reject their plea.
He said that he would take a wife
But, as to whom, he sought advice.
They said: 'Sire, not far from here,
Lives a lord, who is your peer,
He has a daughter, she's his heir,
And he owns land a-plenty there.
La Codre, Hazel, is her name,
Peerless beauty she doth claim.
Thus Hazel for this Ash exchange
Let us the marriage, now, arrange.
Hazel yields fruits and delight,
Ash is fruitless, a barren sight.
We will undertake to win her,
And to you we shall bring her.
If God wills.' This they agree,

And so convince the other party.
Alas! What strange mischance,
That they in all their ignorance
Know not that each one is sister,
Unmatched twin, to the other!
For Ash now, is hidden away,
He marries Hazel, on a day.
Though she must see them wed
She seems no different, instead
She serves her master, patiently,
And honours all his company.
All the knights of his household,
Squires, servants, young and old,
Grieve for poor Ash, since they
Must lose her, this coming day.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The marriage

ERE this, the lord gladly sends
Word; and summons all his friends,
The archbishop, especially,
Of Dol, who owes him fealty.
Now they bring forth the bride,
With her mother at her side,
And she this other girl doth fear
Who loves the man it doth appear,
And if she can, will surely foster
Ill between him and her daughter;
From his house, they must remove her,
She'll tell her son-in-law to wed her
To some likely gentleman,
Be free of her. Such was her plan.
The wedding thus was celebrated
With rich display, the couple feted.
The girl, Ash, went to her chamber;
Despite seeing him with another,
No token of her troubles, I vow,

No trace of anger crossed her brow.
With the bride, she'd dealt kindly,
And treated one and all politely.
They all considered her a wonder,
The men and women who saw her.
Her mother too had observed her;
In her heart, prized and loved her.
If she knew – she thought and said –
Her own worth, she'd have wed
The lord, not her own daughter,
And not have lost him to another.
That night though, Ash, instead,
Went to prepare the bridal-bed,
In which the newly-weds would lie.
Doffing her cloak, by and by,
She summoned the chambermaids
Reminded them how it was made,
So twould be to their lord's liking;
Accustomed to that very thing.
When the bed had been made,
A coverlet was there displayed;
Its fabric being somewhat torn,
The girl thought it old and worn,
It seemed to her, it lacked all art,
Its poverty weighed on her heart;
From a chest, she took, and spread
Her silken shawl, upon the bed.
This she did to honour the pair,
As the archbishop would be there,
So that he, in his holiness,
Might the married couple bless.

The Lay of Le Fresne (The Ash Tree): The daughter is revealed

WHEN all had left the chamber,
The mother led in her daughter,
Wishing to help her into bed,

And first undress her, but instead
She gazed at the silk shawl there,
Had never seen one quite so fair,
Other than that in which she
Had wrapped her child, formerly.
Now remembering her daughter
Her trembling heart beat faster;
She called to the chamberlain:
'Now, by the true faith, explain
Where you found this silk shawl?'
'Madam,' he said, 'I'll tell you all:
The young lady brought it here,
And threw it o'er the bed; I fear,
She thought the other one unfit
This one is hers, I must admit.'
So the mother summoned her,
The girl hastening to serve her,
Doffing her mantle, gracefully.
The mother addressed her kindly:
'Dear friend, hide naught from me.
Where found you this shawl I see?
Whence came it? Or if I assume
It was a gift, then from whom?'
And the girl willingly replied:
'The aunt, with whom I did abide,
The abbess, my lady, gave it me.
And told me to guard it carefully,
For upon me, a poor foundling,
Were found the shawl and a ring.'
'The ring, fair one, may I see it?'
'Yes, madam, for I shall fetch it.'
She brought her mother the ring,
Who gazed intently at the thing,
And recognised it for her own,
As the shawl to her was known.
She could doubt the truth no longer,
The girl before her was her daughter.

She called aloud, could not deny:
‘You are my daughter!’ was her cry.
Thereupon she swooned and fell,
With pity now her heart did swell.
Then rising, as if from the tomb,
She summoned her lord to the room,
And full of fear he came, swiftly.
Once there, she clasped his knee,
Kissed his feet, and made her plea
Begged forgiveness, for her folly.
He could make naught of her plea,
He knew naught of any folly.
‘Love, what mean you?’ he replied,
Let nothing ill twixt us abide.
For I forgive all things with this:
Now tell me what it is you wish?’
‘Sire, since you will pardon me,
I’ll tell you all, so hark to me!
Once, in folly, I did labour
Speaking ill of my neighbour.
I slandered her for bearing two
Unlike twins, yet myself too,
For I gave birth, just as she did
To twins, but girls; so one I hid;
Had her left there at the abbey,
In a silk shawl wrapped tightly,
With the ring that you gave me,
When first you spoke so lovingly.
I can hide naught from you, now,
For ring and shawl are found, I vow.
My daughter’s here, whom you see,
One I thought lost through folly.
This girl, good, wise, and lovely,
Is our daughter, and it is she
Whom the knight loves ever,
Though he is wed to her sister.’
He said: ‘Joy fills me at the sight,

Ne'er have I known such delight.
Our daughter is found, and I say
Great joy God grants us this day,
And before fresh error is made.
Daughter, come here, fair maid.'
The girl was all delighted, truly
Gladdened by this discovery.
Her father vanished from the room;
He ran at once to fetch the groom,
And the archbishop he brought,
To hear the tale, as well he ought.
When he heard the news the knight
Was filled with an equal delight.
The archbishop gave his counsel,
He'd now postpone the ritual,
And tomorrow would divorce
The pair, such was the proper course.
Thus the next day it was done,
Dissolved was their late union.
The knight wed his love that day,
Her father gave the bride away,
And she was in high favour there,
He naming her as his co-heir.
He and his wife stayed and then,
When all was settled, once again,
They journeyed to their country,
The sister, Hazel, in company.
They found a rich match for her,
Thus was wed the other daughter.
And once the true tale was out
Of how all this had come about,
The Lay of *Le Fresne*, they made,
And named it so, for the fair maid.

The End of the Lay of Le Fresne

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): His wife questions his absences

AMONGST them all, there is one lay
I'd not forget; that of Bisclavret.
Bisclavret is the name in Breton,
Garwaf (Werewolf) in Norman.
Many a year such tales men told,
For it had often chanced, of old,
That humans werewolves became;
From the woods, to kill and maim,
They would roam; savage creatures,
When lodged in wolf-like features,
For men they eat, and ill they wreak,
And then again the wild woods seek.
But word of that I must delay,
To tell you first of Bisclavret.
There lived a lord in Brittany,
I've heard him praised handsomely,
A virtuous, a noble knight,
Who sought to act as was right,
His liege-lord, he held him dear,
As did his neighbours far and near.
A worthy woman he had wed,
Fair of seeming, and well-bred,
She loved him and he loved her;
Yet one thing ever troubled her,
That he was lost to her each week
For three whole days, nor would he speak
Of where he went; she knew not then
What befell him, nor did his men.
One day he returned, this knight,
To his house, filled with delight,
Thus she was minded to enquire:
'My sweet friend, my fair sire,
There is something, I declare
I've longed to ask, if I but dare;
I fear you may be angry though,

And there is naught that I fear so.’
On hearing this, he embraced her,
Drew her to him, and kissed her.
‘Now, madam, ask away,’ said he,
‘I’ll hide naught from my lady;
If I can, I’ll ever answer you.’
‘I’faith,’ she said, ‘I breathe anew!
I live in fear every day,
Whenever you are far away,
My heart is filled with pain too,
I’m so afraid of losing you;
If I fail to garner swift relief,
Then I must surely die of grief.
So tell me, for I long to know,
Where you dwell, where you go?
I think you must love elsewhere,
And if you do, I’m in despair.’

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): He reveals that he is a werewolf

‘MERCY, in God’s name, my lady!
If I said aught, ill would befall me,
And I would drive your love away,
And lose myself that very day.’
Now the lady felt, on hearing
This, twas less than convincing.
And oft she would raise the matter,
She would wheedle him and flatter,
Asking whither he did venture,
Till, at last, for fear of censure:
‘A werewolf I become,’ he said,
‘In the forest I make my bed,
Through its depths there I stray,
And there it is I find my prey.’
When he’d told her all his tale,
Then she requested this detail,
Whether he his clothes eschewed.

‘Lady,’ he said, ‘I wander nude.’
‘Where then do your clothes abide?’
‘I must not tell you,’ he replied,
‘For if of them I were relieved,
And my altered state perceived,
A werewolf I should be forever.
And naught could help me ever,
My former being to regain;
And so you question me in vain.’
‘Sire,’ she said, ‘I love you more
Than all the world; you, therefore,
Should not hide a thing from me,
Nor ever doubt my loyalty,
For that is not the way of love.
What is my sin, by heaven above,
That you doubt me in anything?
Do right, and tell me everything.’
She so tormented him withal,
He could do naught but tell her all.
‘Lady, quite near the wood,’ said he,
‘Beside the road, where I journey,
An ancient chapel doth it grace,
That serves me as a hiding-place.
There lies a stone, long and wide,
Beneath a bush, hollow inside;
Under there, my clothes I hide,
Till I return, and there they bide.’

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): He is betrayed by his wife

THE lady wondered at his tale,
While her face grew wan and pale.
Filled with fear at his strange news,
This one thought her mind pursues,
How to make her escape that day,
For with him she would not stay.
A knight who dwelt in that country,

One who had long loved this lady,
Begged and prayed her to be his,
And done much in her service,
Though she had never loved him,
Nor of such had e'er assured him,
She summoned, her news conveyed,
And her heart to him displayed.
'Be glad, she said, 'fair neighbour,
For that for which you've laboured,
I grant you now, without reserve;
You shall receive all you deserve,
I grant my love, my body too,
Make me your love, as I do you!'
He gave her thanks, gratefully,
Accepting her pledge, entirely;
She swore it on the sacrament;
Then all the tale of where he went,
Her lord, what he became, did yield,
His journey to the woods revealed,
And all the paths he took outlined,
Despatching him the clothes to find.
And thus was Bisclavret ill-paid,
And by his own wife now betrayed.
Since he had vanished frequently
All her neighbours now agreed,
Her lord must have left for good.
Though they searched as best they could,
With nary a sign of him, in the end,
Their search they chose to suspend.
The lady's marriage was approved
To one who had, so loyally, loved.

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): The werewolf is hunted

SO things remained a whole year,
Till the king, while hunting deer,
Came to the forest depths, one day,

Where lay the werewolf, Bisclavret.
When the hounds were hallooed,
He was the quarry they pursued.
All that day they chased him hard,
Huntsmen and hounds, yard by yard,
Until they nigh-on cornered him,
And would have torn him limb from limb,
If he'd not seen the king, whom he
Ran towards, in hope of mercy,
Then pawing at the stirrup there,
Licked his foot, while all did stare.
The king who was gripped by fear,
Summoned his companions near.
'My lords, about me now,' he cried,
'Behold this creature, at my side,
And how with strange humility,
In human wise, it begs for mercy.
Drive the hounds away, and go
See that no man strikes a blow!
This beast possesses mind and sense;
Rein in the dogs then let us hence,
And leave the beast in peace, I say,
For I shall hunt no more today.'
And while the king turns to go,
Bisclavret doth seek to follow,
Staying close, cannot depart;
From the king he will not part.
The king leads on to his castle,
Delighted with him, truth to tell,
Never has he seen such before,
Holds him a wonder evermore,
And regards him as a treasure,
Tells his people tis his pleasure
That they show him every care,
None must trouble him or dare
To strike the beast for any reason.
Food and water it shall be given;

And they, most willingly, agree.
Now, every day it lies silently,
Among the knights, near the king,
None there but think it a fine thing;
The beast's well-behaved, so good
It does naught but what it should.
Wherever the king might stray,
It will follow come what may,
Attending on him, constantly;
That it loves him is plain to see.

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): Bisclavret attacks his rival

LISTEN to what next occurred:
All his barons received word
They must attend the king, at court,
So all those who owed him aught,
Might join a feast there, on a day,
And he be thus well-served alway.
There appeared among the rest
Richly adorned, finely dressed,
He who'd wed Bisclavret's wife,
And who could never in his life
Have dreamed he might reappear.
When, at the feast, he drew near.
He was soon known to Bisclavret,
Who leapt and snapped at his prey,
Snatched him, and dragged him out,
And would have slain him, no doubt,
Had the king not called him back,
And seized a stick, foiled his attack.
He tried to bite him twice more,
Amazing all, since ne'er before
Had he acted in that same way
To any man, as he did that day.
And all men said, and held it true,
He must have reason so to do;

He'd been ill-treated, somehow,
To seek revenge as he did now.
But for now, his enmity ceased,
For the king curtailed the feast,
And the barons took their leave,
And off to their homes did weave.
Away rode each and every knight,
The victim first to take his flight,
Whom Bisclavret attacked; no wonder,
He'd sought to tear the man asunder.

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): His wife reveals all

NOT long after this, as I have heard,
For thus I recall it, every word,
To that forest, there rode the king,
Wise and courteous in everything,
Where Bisclavret had been found,
Who now beside his steed did bound.
That night when he sought his rest,
A country house suited him best,
One known to Bisclavret's lady,
Who, dressed in all her finery,
Hastened away, to see the king,
With her many a rich gift bearing.
When Bisclavret saw her coming,
His rage there was no restraining,
Towards her he leapt in anger.
Listen to his vengeance on her!
He bit the nose clean from her face.
What could be a worse disgrace?
He was threatened, men deployed,
Ready to see the beast destroyed.
Wise advice was offered the king:
'Sire,' one cried, 'this poor thing
Has e'er appeared tame near you,
Nor has he, in our humble view,

Who have long observed his ways,
And been about him all these days,
Touched a single human being,
Nor has attempted one ill thing,
Except against this lady now.
By the loyalty we owe, we vow,
He must hold a grudge against her,
And her new lord, along with her.
She is the wife of that knight
Who was dear to your sight,
And was lost to us long ago,
What became of him none know.
Put this lady to the question,
See if she will yield the reason
Why the creature hates her so.
Make her tell if she doth know;
For many a marvel there has been
That we in Brittany have seen.’
The king agreed with this counsel,
The knight was held, she, as well,
Was taken at the lord’s suggestion,
Then they put her to the question.
From distress and fear, she told
Them all, the story did unfold
Of how she had her lord betrayed,
Of his clothes, of how he strayed
Through the woods, of all he’d said
Of where he went, and how he fed,
Of how, since his clothes had gone,
He’d not been seen by anyone.
But she believed, that here today
This creature must be Bisclavret.
The king demanded that she show
The clothes, whether she would or no,
She had them brought forth, and they
Were set down before Bisclavret.
Yet the creature took no notice,

Though they were offered as his.
He who'd given advice before,
Spoke now to the king once more:
'Sire, this thing will never do,
He'll not dress in front of you,
Nor, in changing from a creature,
Display, to all, his true nature.
No, not for aught will he do so,
It is a shame to him, you know.
Have him led to your chamber,
And his clothes to him proffer,
Then leave him be, such is my plan;
We'll see if he becomes a man.'

The Lay of Bisclavret (The Werewolf): He is restored to human form

SO the king led the beast away,
And closed the doors on Bisclavret.
A long while did the king abide;
Then, with two lords at his side,
Entered the chamber; and all three
There, on the royal bed, did see,
The knight restored in every limb.
The king, hastening to embrace him,
Kissed him a hundred times and more,
And then his lands he did restore,
Both granting him his old estate,
And more than I can here relate.
The woman they exiled, swiftly,
Driving her from all that country,
And she went forth beside the man
With whom she'd made her evil plan.
She'd many children, I'm advised,
And they could all be recognised
In their seeming, and their feature;
Many a girl thus marred by nature,
Lacked a nose, in that family,

And lived nose-less; in verity;
For this whole tale you've heard,
Is truth itself; accept my word,
And in memory of Bisclavret,
The Bretons, they made this lay.

The End of the Lay of Bisclavret

The Lay of Lanval: He is neglected by King Arthur

AN adventure I'll now relay,
As it fell out; in another lay.
It tells of a lord, of high degree,
In Breton named Lanval, was he.
Now, at Carduel, the king sojourned,
Arthur the Brave, thither returned,
As the Scots from war ne'er would cease,
Nor the Picts, but marred the peace,
The land of Logres entering there,
And wreaking havoc everywhere.
At Pentecost, in summer season,
He feasted, then, for that reason,
And rich gifts gave to everyone,
Many a count, and many a baron,
All the knights of the Round Table –
None anywhere did show so able –
Estates and marriages he decreed,
For all, except one knight indeed:
That was Lanval, whom he forgot,
For to be ignored such was his lot.
Due to his valour, his largesse,
His rare beauty, and his prowess,
He was envied by many, I fear;
Those who seemed to hold him dear,
If with misfortune he had met
Would scarce their eyes with tears have wet.
A king's son, of high parentage,
Now divorced from that heritage,
He was of the king's household,
Yet all he'd owned he had sold.
And the king granted him naught,
Or a fraction of what he sought.
Many a doleful thought he had,
Was often pensive and ever sad.
My lords at this you need not marvel,

A man estranged, without counsel,
Must prove sad in a foreign land,
When there's no succour to hand.

The Lay of Lanval: He meets with the two maids

THIS knight then, of whom I speak,
Who'd served the king well, did seek,
One day, after mounting his horse,
To let the steed take its own course,
Which exit from the town did yield,
And he came alone to a grassy field.
He dismounted by a flowing brook,
There his horse trembled and shook;
He unharnessed him, and let him go,
To roll on the grass in the meadow.
He doffed his cloak, under his head
He placed it, as both pillow and bed,
And lay thinking of his ill plight,
Seeing naught there to bring delight.
Lying there then, in this manner,
He saw two maidens by the water,
Coming towards him, side by side;
Never such beauty had he espied.
Both of them were richly dressed,
In purple tunics of the very best,
Tightly fastened, with fine lace,
And both of them lovely of face.
One bore a basin, the older maid,
Of pure gold, and finely made,
The truth I tell you, without fail;
While the younger a towel did trail;
Advancing, they made their way,
To that place where Lanval lay,
While he, e'er courteous, to greet
Them, leapt politely to his feet.
They saluted him, first of all,

And then these words they let fall:
‘Lord Lanval, behold, our lady,
Who is noble, wise and lovely,
Has sent us here to speak to you,
And we must bring you to her too.
You will be safe and in our care,
You can see her pavilion’s there.’
The knight granted what they sought,
Left his mount, with scarce a thought,
Grazing, behind him, in the meadow;
They led him where a tent did show;
Twas a beautiful pavilion;
Not Semiramis of Babylon,
At her richest, in her greatest hour,
When, with wisdom, she held power,
Nor the emperor Octavian,
Possessed such a pavilion;
And at its crest an eagle of gold,
Whose value could not be told;
Nor that of each cord and pole,
That there supported the whole.
No king is there, beneath the sky,
Wealthy enough its like to buy.

The Lay of Lanval: The lady of the pavilion

BEFORE the tent he saw a maid.
No lily-flower, or rose new-made,
When they adorn a summer’s day,
Surpassed her with their display.
She lay upon a bed so handsome
Twould be worth a king’s ransom;
She lay there in her shift only;
Her body noble was and shapely;
Of white ermine was her mantle,
Lined with Alexandrine purple,
But she’d doffed it, from the heat,

And thus bared her side complete,
Her face, neck, breast to the day,
All whiter than a hawthorn spray.
The knight advanced towards her,
While she summoned him to her,
Then he sat down upon on the bed.
'Lanval, my dear friend,' she said,
'I came forth from my land for you,
For, from afar, I come, to seek you.
No emperor, no count, or king
Shall have greater joy or blessing,
If you prove noble and courteous,
In everything, for I love you thus.'
He gazed at her, he saw her beauty;
As lightning, love struck instantly,
Such that, his heart ablaze with fire,
He stammered: 'If tis your desire,
And such great joy doth befall me,
That you seek to love me, lady,
Naught is there that you demand
I would not do at your command,
So long as in my power it be,
Whether in wisdom or in folly.
What you ask of me I will do,
And forsake all others for you.
I will seek to leave you never;
No more shall I desire, forever.'
When she heard all his speech,
He whom such love did preach,
She granted her body, lovingly;
Now is Lanval on his journey!
Gift after gift to him she gave,
Till nothing more he did crave,
For all that he might need is his,
He might grant largesse, for this
She will yield, all he may need.
Thus Lanval is well-lodged indeed,

For the more widely he doth spend,
The more on her he may depend
For silver and gold. 'Yet,' said she,
'A warning; this I ask of thee,
Say naught of this to any man!
For this I tell you, break my ban,
And you will lose me forever.
Should our love be learned of ever,
Never again will you have sight
Of me, or win my body, sir knight.'
He replied he would remember,
Every demand he'd duly render;
Lay down beside her on the bed,
And now Lanval was well-requited.
He did not rise up from her side,
Until with day the evening vied.
And he'd have stayed longer still,
Had that been his lover's will.
'Friend, you must arise, I fear,
You can no longer linger here;
Now go,' she said, 'while I remain,
Yet this one thing I would explain,
Whene'er you would speak with me,
There's no place that you might see,
Where a man might have his lover,
Free of blame or shame however,
Where I may not appear like this,
And there fulfil your every wish.
No man except you shall see me,
Nor shall any man there hear me.'
On learning this he rose delighted,
Kissed her, and then left the bed.
The two maids who'd led him there,
Offered him rich clothes to wear,
And when he was dressed, anew,
None handsomer the skies e'er knew.
Nor was he some base fool; they gave,

Him the bowl of water, to lave
His hands, dried them, and then,
Led him to the lady again,
So he might eat with his lover;
Nor might he refuse the offer.
He was served most courteously,
And dined with her full joyously.
He tasted most of one fair dish,
Which satisfied his every wish;
For oft his love kissed him, and she,
In her embrace, clasped him tightly.

The Lay of Lanval: His new-found wealth and happiness

WHEN he rose from the table,
His mount, as from some noble stable
Richly-saddled, did now appear;
Fair service he'd obtained here.
He mounted and took his leave,
To the city his way did weave,
Yet looking behind him ever,
Joy and fear mingled together;
For on his adventure he mused,
His mind now by doubt confused;
That it was real could scarce conceive,
Mazed, knew not what to believe;
At last he to his lodgings came,
And found his men, in his name,
Preparing for a feast that night,
In fresh attire, nor knew the knight
Whence it came. There was, indeed,
No knight dwelt in that town, in need,
Whom he did not bring before him,
And treat nobly when he saw him.
Lanval the richest gifts did give,
Lanval ransomed every captive.
Lanval clothed the poor minstrel,

Lanval, he did the honours well;
To the stranger, and the citizen,
Did Lanval prove the best of men.
And he knew great joy and delight,
For whether by day or by night,
He could have his lover to hand;
Everything was at his command.

The Lay of Lanval: The gathering in the orchard

THEY say, in that same year, after
St John's Day, all at midsummer,
Thirty knights, from thence did go
Forth to amuse themselves below
The castle-keep, in an orchard, where
Queen Guinevere might be; there,
Among the knights was Gawain
With his cousin, the fair Yvain.
And Gawain, the brave and noble,
He that was so beloved by all,
Cried: 'My lords, now we shall
Do ill by our good friend Lanval,
So generous and so courteous,
If we have him not here with us;
His father is a king, and wealthy.'
Thus they turned about, instantly,
And to his lodgings they all went,
And there they sought Lanval's assent.

The Lay of Lanval: His conversation with the queen

AT a window, carved of stone,
There sat the queen, and she alone
Was leaning forth, and saw below
The king's knights as they did go,
And, as she viewed the company,
Lanval among them, then did she

Call one of her three maids there,
Telling her to gather with care
All the loveliest maidens present,
All the most elegant and pleasant;
And with the queen herself, to show
Themselves, in the orchard, below.
Then, down the stairs, at the head
Of thirty maidens or more, she led
The way; there came every knight,
And felt great pleasure at the sight.
All walked together, hand in hand,
And fair speech did they command.
Lanval walked in a place farther
From the others, waiting rather,
To clasp and embrace his lover,
Touch her and kiss, and hold her;
For others' joys seemed but slight
When he had not his true delight.
When the queen saw him there
She went closer, and took care
To sit nearby, and, for her part,
Reveal the workings of her heart:
'Lanval, I honour you, tis clear;
I love you, and I hold you dear;
You might have my love entire;
Tell me then, what you desire!
To you my affection I'd accord,
You should be joyful now, my lord.'
'Lady, he cried, 'now let me be!
I care not for your love of me,
For I have long served the king,
Nor would fail him in anything.
Not for you, nor for your love,
Would I a traitor to him prove.'
The queen with anger did nigh choke,
And furiously, she misspoke:
'Lanval, what's said of you is right,

You care but little for such delight.
For oft to me it has been said,
You like not women, but instead
With young men you spend your leisure,
And among them take your pleasure.
Base coward, ill you do toward
The king, who is indeed my lord,
And lets you linger near him yet,
I deem that God he doth forget!’
Now, all he’d heard he would deny,
And proved not slow in his reply;
He uttered words of discontent,
Of which he’d, later, oft repent:
‘Lady, as doth regard that trade
I know naught of it, I’m afraid,
But I’ve a lover who, to my eyes,
Among all should have the prize,
Above all those that I e’er knew.
And I shall say but this to you,
A thing tis good for you to know,
That maid, the lowest of the low
That serves her, meanest of the mean,
Is worth more than you, my queen,
In beauty, both of form and face,
In goodness, courtesy and grace.’
The queen departed to her chamber,
And there she wept tears of anger,
All the more grieved, made furious,
By behaviour so discourteous.
She lay down straight upon her bed,
And she’d not rise again, she said,
Until the king had made all right,
Supporting her against the knight.

The Lay of Lanval: The King is angered

THE king returned now from the wood,

For the day's hunting had proved good,
He made his way to the queen's chamber;
She called out, on seeing him enter,
Fell at his feet, and sought his pity,
Saying Lanval had shamed her; he
Had asked her to become his lover,
And since she'd replied that never
Would she be his, he'd reviled her,
And boasted then of so fair a lover
So noble, well-bred, in her pride,
The maid who served at her side,
She that was least of all, was worth
More than the queen in looks and birth.
The king was then so grieved, that he
Swore an oath, and cried, angrily:
If the knight proved it not in court,
His death by rope or fire he sought.
From her chamber issued the king,
And called three of his lords to him,
He sent them to bring Lanval there.
To him more ill came of this affair,
For, on returning to his lodgings,
He finds that thither ill he brings,
For he has lost his love, the knight,
By praising her, his lover, outright.
He kept to his lodgings; all alone,
And sad of thought, there made moan;
Called to his lover, time and again,
But every summons proved in vain.
He groaned to himself, and sighed,
And felt so faint he almost died;
Cried a hundred times for mercy,
Seeking a word, from her, of pity.
He cursed his heart, his every breath,
Tis wonder he sought not his death.
Many a cry to her, many a prayer,
Deep remorse, and torment there,

He offered up, if only she might
Relent, appear there, to his sight.
Alas, how can he restore content?
The men whom the king had sent
Now arrived, and to him did say
He must come to court that day,
For the king had so commanded;
His trial the queen had demanded.
Lanval went with them, grieving,
He'd have preferred they slay him.
And thus he came before the king,
And stood there silent, sorrowing,
Displaying his grief, full openly.
The king addressed him, angrily:
'Vassal, much ill you've brought me!
You've played the villain, for tis me
You've shamed, me you demean,
By thus slandering the queen.
Vain you are, and full of folly,
To claim that your love's beauty
Is such her meanest serving maid
With the queen might be weighed.
Lanval denied he'd brought dishonour
Upon his lord, or shame upon her,
And, word for word, in open court,
Denied he'd her affection sought.
But, of all that had been heard,
He said that true was every word
In which he'd boasted of his lover;
He grieved, for thus he'd lost her.
And for that sin, indeed, he must
Suffer what the court thought just.
Now the king's anger was profound
So he gathered his knights around,
To counsel him on what to do,
Lest he inflict more than was due.
They all came, at his command,

For good or ill, all those on hand;
And mutually they judged it right
That he should command the knight,
Who, for the moment, might go free,
To pledge himself, and guarantee,
That he would return for his trial
In his lord's presence, in a while,
Before the full court thus to appear,
Since only the household were here.
All this they presented to the king
To him explained their reasoning.
Thus the king a pledge required
Lanval was alone, there enmired,
Without close relative, or friend;
But then Gawain his aid did lend,
Pledged himself, and his company.
The king said: 'Then let him go free,
But all your fiefdoms and lands,
Shall be his bail, and in my hands.'
They pledged all thus to the king,
And Lanval to his rooms did bring.
The knights now entered in the same,
And were ready to chide and blame
Lanval for grieving, for in their eyes
He was possessed of a love unwise.
And every day they came to see him,
To ensure, when they were with him,
That he drank all his fill, and dined,
Fearing lest he might lose his mind.

The Lay of Lanval: The trial, and verdict

ON the day that they had named,
The barons their court proclaimed.
Both the king and queen were there,
With Lanval, to settle this affair.
The company their pledge redeemed,

Grieving for him and now it seemed
A hundred knights would at that hour,
Have done all that lay in their power,
To free one who'd lacked ill intent.
The king now sought a true judgement,
According to the charge, and reply,
Now the barons must say no or aye.
They to seek a verdict are gone,
But they are pensive and, as one,
Troubled about this foreign knight,
A nobleman, and in such a plight.
Many were embarrassed to fulfil
What seemed to be the royal will.
Thus spoke the Count of Cornwall,
'Let us ever prove strong in all,
Mind not who doth weep or sing,
True justice before everything.
The king speaks against his vassal,
He whom I hear named as Lanval.
He charges him with felony,
And accuses him of villainy,
That he boasted of his lover,
And thus the queen did anger.
None accuses him but the king.
By any known legal reasoning
I say, who ever speak the truth,
He ought not be put to the proof,
Except in that, as in everything,
A man owes honour to his king.
Let Lanval but a true oath swear,
The king will forgive this affair.
For if he can offer a guarantee,
That his lover we all might see,
And can view her thus, and say
No lie he told the queen that day,
Then he should be shown mercy,
Since he spoke all in verity.

But if he can give no guarantee
That she will be revealed, then he
Loses his right to serve the king,
And no more to this court may cling.'

The Lay of Lanval: His faerie lover must appear before the court

TO Lanval they did now convey
The decision of the court that day,
That he must bring his lover there,
In his defence, and so must swear.
Lanval replied that he could not,
Knowing her aid must be forgot.
So back to the judges they went,
But there no other aid was lent.
Judgement, demanded the king,
On such the queen was waiting.
As leave to depart they sought,
Two maidens entered the court,
And on fine palfreys they rode,
Pleasing the forms they showed,
Dressed in purple silk were they,
Else were their bodies on display.
All gazed upon them willingly.
Gawain, with three others, he
Went to Lanval to inform him
Of the maidens, and show him.
Gawain gladly asked moreover,
Which of the two was his lover,
Who they were he did not know,
Whence they came, or where did go.
The pair on horseback passed on
In the same manner, there, as one,
Before the throne dismounting,
Where sat Arthur, the high king.
They were both of greatest beauty,
And they spoke most courteously:

‘O king, fine rooms now prepare,
With silk hangings rendered fair,
The which our lady thus may view;
She wishes now to lodge with you.’
He granted this most willingly,
Summoning two knights swiftly,
To show the pair to rooms above,
And silent now, they so approve.
The king of his lords demanded
That judgement now be handed
Down, much anger he did display,
So great the length of their delay.
‘Sire, we disbanded,’ they replied,
‘To follow these maidens inside,
We have not our judgement made,
The case must be further weighed.’

The Lay of Lanval: The arrival of his lover

SO, pensively, they met together,
But a noisy crowd did gather,
And when they went out to see,
Two fair maids of noble beauty,
In fresh silks of netted tulle,
Each mounted on a Spanish mule,
Came riding there along the road;
A deep delight the knights showed.
For now they said all must go well
With Lanval, the brave and noble.
Yvain, with all his company,
Went to Lanval, and then said he:
‘Now, sir, you may well rejoice!
For love of God, to us give voice!
Two young maidens are arriving,
Both are beautiful and charming,
Surely one must be your friend!’
Yet Lanval hastened to defend

His silence, saying he knew not
Either, and loved them not a jot.
They dismounted at their coming
And stood there before the king;
Many did those beauties favour,
For their form, and face, and colour,
As fine as any seen on earth,
For neither maid was of less worth
Than the queen; wise and courteous
Was the elder, and she spoke thus:
'Grant us now the rooms, O king,
Prepared for our lady's lodging,
She comes here to speak with you.'
He ordered then that they too
Be led to where the others were,
Leaving the mules to nature's care.
When all was as he'd commanded,
He of his lords again demanded
That judgement now be rendered,
This trial was too long extended,
The queen's anger now was great,
In that she'd been forced to wait.
They were about to quit the king,
When through the town came wandering
A lone maid mounted on a horse,
None fair as she in nature's course.
On a white palfrey she did ride,
It bore her gently, with sure stride;
Its head and neck did nobly feature,
Nowhere lived a finer creature;
Richly adorned was this palfrey,
No count or king of any country
Could have acquired its equipage,
Except by land-sale or mortgage.
In this guise the maid is dressed:
Her slip white linen, of the best,
That yet revealing both her sides,

All laced together, her body hides,
That body noble is, and slender,
Her neck white as snow in winter,
Grey her eyes, and pale her face
That well-set nose, sweet lips do grace,
Dun eyebrows, fine forehead there,
Crisp, curling, bright-blond hair;
Gold thread shows not so bright
As doth her hair against the light.
Of scarlet silk her mantle fine,
In folds, about her, it doth twine,
And on her fist a hawk she bears,
And after her a greyhound fares.
There are none, or great or small,
Nor child, nor oldest of them all,
That does not hasten to view her.
When they see her draw nearer,
They know her beauty is no jest.
Riding slowly comes their guest.

The Lay of Lanval: He is set free and she departs with him

THE judges there, who view her,
All do take her for a wonder;
Nary a one who sets eyes on her
But their heart fills with pleasure.
And all those who love the knight
Must run to tell him of the sight,
Of the maiden who, if God please,
Had come to set his mind at ease:
'Dear companion, come and see,
Nor nut-brown nor tawny is she;
No, she's the fairest maid on earth,
Of all to whom it e'er gave birth.'
Lanval heard, and raised his head,
Knew her well and, sighing, said,
The blood mounting to his face,

As he spoke at a headlong pace:
‘I’faith, cried he, ‘it is my friend,
I care not who my life must end,
Would she but show mercy to me;
For I am well, when her face I see.’
The lady entered the palace door,
None so lovely came there before.
She dismounted then, in the hall,
So that she might be seen by all,
Shed her mantle before the king,
The better to show her fair being.
The king, in manners ever polite,
Rose now to meet her, as was right,
And all the rest showed her honour,
And their service to her did offer.
When they’d gazed sufficiently,
And praised her beauty eagerly,
Then she spoke in such a measure
As showed she was not at leisure
To linger there: ‘O King, I shall
Declare my love, tis he, Lanval!
He is arraigned before your court,
I’d not wish him suffer for aught
He said, for you indeed have seen
That she is in the wrong, your queen.
For ne’er did he her love request;
And for that matter, as to the rest,
If his claim is made good, in me,
Then let your barons set him free.’
Those whose judgment twas by right,
He so directed; they freed the knight.
And not a judge but did embrace
The verdict; for he’d proved his case.
He was set free, and for her part,
The maiden was ready to depart.
Nor could the king now detain her,
For to her adhered many a retainer.

Outside the hall where they were met,
A marble mounting-block was set;
So Lanval climbed up there, to wait,
And when she issued from the gate,
He swiftly leapt, himself consigned
To the palfrey, and clung behind.
And he was gone to Avalon,
Or so runs this tale, in Breton,
For the maiden bore him there,
To that isle which is most fair.
No more of this has any heard,
Nor may I add another word.

Note: The name Lanval may be a concatenation of the names Lancelot and Perceval, suggesting, along with the characterisation of the queen, that Marie may have been strongly influenced, in this lay, by the work of Chrétien de Troyes her near contemporary.

The End of the Lay of Lanval

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: The king's daughter

IN times gone by, in Normandy,
There was told an oft-heard story,
Of two who loved one another,
And in that love died together.
A Breton lay told of that same,
The Two Lovers was its name.
For the truth is that in Neustrie,
Which we call now Normandy,
There is a mount, wondrous high,
And there it is the lovers lie.
In a place, near that mountain,
In his wisdom, there a certain
King had founded a fine city,
For the lord of Pîtres was he.
When asked he gave it a name,
Thus Pîtres he called the same.
The name indeed has endured,
Of town and castle, he was lord.
We know that country withal,
The Vale of Pîtres it is called.
The king had a lovely daughter,
Courteous, of gentle character,
And she now cheered his life
After the loss of his dear wife.
Now, many turned to murmuring;
His people unhappy with the king;
And when he heard what men said
He was troubled: she must be wed.
So he mused, and he considered
How she might yet be delivered
From every suitor for her hand.
Far and wide went his command,
That he who'd win his daughter,
Must in his arms transport her,
To the top of that mountain tall,

That lay beyond the city wall,
Must carry her there, to its crest,
Without seeking a moment's rest.

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: The young nobleman

AS soon as the news was known,
And throughout the country sown,
Many a youth sought, as agreed,
To do so, yet could not succeed;
Though they all gave of their best,
Not one could achieve that test.
All failed to win her; finally,
They were obliged to let her be.
Long time she remained unwed,
No man sought her for his bed.
There was a youth in that country,
He a count, handsome and free,
And he resolved to try his hand,
To outdo all others in that land.
He frequented the king's court,
Often lingered there, in short,
Fell in love with the king's daughter,
Thus oftentimes he sought her,
To ask that she grant him her love,
And thus her own affection prove.
Since he was noble, and courteous,
And the king prized him, she was
Inclined to give of herself, freely,
And he thanked her most humbly.
They would often speak together,
Faithfully they loved each other,
And did all in their power to hide
Their love, all trace of it denied.
To endure so was full troubling,
But giving thought to the thing
He thought it better to so suffer,

Than to be hasty, and so lose her.
He waited long thus for her love.

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: A stratagem

ONE day his thoughts did so move
In that direction, he approached her,
Being prudent, and a noble lover,
And revealed to her his distress,
Then, in anguish, made this request,
That she away with him should flee,
That he might not so troubled be.
For if he asked her of her father,
He well-knew that he so loved her,
He would never grant her to him,
Except he please her father's whim,
And bear her up the mountain-side.
Then the maid quietly replied:
'Friend, I know that all must drop
Me, well before they reach the top;
Such deeds lie not in your power.
But if I went with you this hour,
He would rage, and my belief
Is that he'd surely die of grief;
I hold him dear, I love him so,
I would not bring him sorrow.
Some other path we must take,
Since that I cannot, for his sake.
In Salerno an aunt have I,
On whose wealth we may rely.
For more than thirty years therein,
My aunt has practised medicine,
And from long dealing in such lore,
Is wise in herbs and roots, and more.
If you would now but hasten there,
Bear her my letter, in your care,
And tell her of our plight, I'm sure

She'll offer you counsel, and cure.
Electuaries she'll give to you,
And potions that strengthen too,
And they will much increase your power,
And give you courage gainst this hour.
When you return to this country,
Then demand if you may wed me.
And he will take you for a fool,
And so repeat his previous rule,
That he will grant me to no man
Unless he shows him that he can
Bear me to the mountain crest,
In his two arms, and seek no rest.'

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: The strengthening potion

SHE had delighted the young man
With her wise counsel, and her plan,
And he thanked her, in his delight,
And, taking leave of her that night,
He returned to his own country,
And there prepared for the journey.
Gathering rich fabrics, monies,
Beasts of burden and palfreys.
With him went the most worthy
Of the young men of his company.
To Salerno he made his way,
And a visit to the aunt did pay,
With the missive from his lover;
When she'd read all the letter,
She remained with him, till he
Was strengthened remarkably,
By the medicines she proffered,
And then a potion last she offered,
Such that whoever drank of it,
However great a task was set,
It would all his power renew,

Reaching each vein and sinew,
His body strong in every way,
As all fatigue it held at bay.
So he returned to his own land,
The potion, in a flask, to hand.
When the young man alighted
In his country, all delighted,
He lingered not in that place,
But hastened to the king apace,
Seeking to wed his daughter
If to the summit he brought her.
The king did not refuse, yet he
Thought the count full of folly,
Being too young to e'er succeed;
For many a valiant man indeed,
Had now attempted that affair,
And none had carried her there.
On a day the king had named,
To all his friends he proclaimed
His intent, his household too,
All who would his actions view;
So they came from every part,
For the youth and his sweetheart,
Since he would adventure there,
Her to the summit he must bear.
His lover had prepared wisely,
Ate not, fasting most strictly;
For, so as to lighten his load,
She on her love her aid bestowed.

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: He attempts the feat

ON the day, thus it did befall,
The youth was there before them all,
With him the potion brought, and lo,
Beside the Seine, in the meadow,
Before the crowd gathered there,

The king led forth his daughter fair;
She wore naught except her shift.
Now, in his arms, the youth did lift
His love; she held the potion for him,
For he knew that she'd not fail him,
And so she clasped it in her hand,
And yet in vain, you understand,
Since the youth drank not a drop,
But set out for the mountain-top.
And so he climbed the lower slope,
His mind so filled with joy and hope
Of the potion he took no thought.
She felt with tiredness he fought,
'Friend,' she cried, 'you must drink!
You must be weary now, I think.
Drink and renew your strength.'
But he replied to her, at length:
'Fair one, I'm strong enough I find,
Not for aught would I fall behind,
For in the time that I might drink
I could walk three paces I think.
The people shouting out, likewise,
Might deafen me with all their cries;
And all of that would trouble me,
I may not rest here, truthfully.'
When he climbed the final stage
A war with faintness he did wage,
The maid oft crying, with emotion:
'Friend, drink now of the potion.'
He would not hear a single word,
Rather, in pain, his loins did gird.

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: They reach the summit, the youth dies

TO the top he comes now, and sighs,
Falls to the ground, and cannot rise.
The heart is throbbing in his chest,

His lover sees her friend must rest,
He's overcome, in a deep swoon,
She falls to her knees, that soon
She might rouse him with the potion,
But his lips could make no motion,
For there he died, I now relate
While she wept aloud his fate,
Hurling the bottle from her hand,
Careless of where it might land.
Thereafter all the herbs that grew
On that mount, proved healthful to
All of that country far and wide;
Many a fine plant could be spied
Yielding virtue of its root there.

The Lay of Les Deus Amanz: The death of the king's daughter

NOW I'll tell of the maiden fair,
She who had lost her dear lover;
None had grieved so deeply ever.
She lay beside him, touched his face,
Clasped his body in her embrace,
Kissed him on his mouth and eyes;
From her heart's depths rose her sighs.
Alas, the maid too, she died there,
Who was so noble, wise and fair.
The king, and his whole company,
Seeing that they came not, he
Went after them; and there, too late,
He found them; swooning at their fate.
When he could speak, he lamented;
Sorrow his whole court tormented.
Three days later they were interred,
A marble tomb on them conferred;
Within the two young folk were laid,
And, as agreed, their grave was made
Upon the mount; thus it was done,

Then they all departed, one by one.
Thereafter, folk named the mount
The Two Lovers, on their account.
For all of this happened as I say,
And of it the Bretons made a lay.

The End of the Lay of Les Deus Amanz

The Lay of Yonec: The maiden in the tower

NOW I've begun creating lays,
I'll labour on, and every phrase
Of those adventures that I know
Here, in rhyme, to you I'll show.
I think that I, tis my wish of late,
The tale of Yonec should relate,
Where he was born; of his father,
How he first did meet his mother.
He who engendered this Yonec,
Was called by name Muldumarec.
In Britain, long ago, it appears
There lived a rich man, old in years;
He was acknowledged in Caerwent,
And lord of that region, by assent.
That city lies on the Duellas,
Once deep enough for boats to pass.
Now, he was in his ripe old age,
And so to hand on his heritage,
He took a wife, one who might bear
A child to him, to be his heir.
The maid was of noble family,
Prudent, courteous and lovely,
Whom they wed to this rich man.
He loved her for her beauty and,
As she was beautiful and noble,
He immured her in his castle,

Shutting her in a tower, alone,
In a chamber paved with stone.
The rich man had an aged sister,
Widowed, so without a master,
And he placed her with the lady,
To guard her all the more surely.
Other women, I think, were there,
In some other room, elsewhere,
But she spoke not to them, I trow,
Unless the crone did so allow.
For more than seven years was she
Held there in close captivity,
Produced no heir; and for no friend,
Or relative might she descend.
When he came to sleep with her,
No chamberlain or officer
Dared make entry to that tower,
Or light a torch, despite the hour.
The lady lived in great distress,
Wept, and sighed with loneliness,
Of her beauty lost full measure,
Carless of her youthful treasure;
As for herself, she wished dearly
That death might take her nearly.

The Lay of Yonec: The maiden makes a wish

THE changing year did April bring,
When all the birds do sweetly sing,
Thus her lord arose one morning,
For he'd set his heart on hunting;
And so the crone he did arouse,
Who after him would lock the house.
He commanded, and she obeyed,
Then, with his men, he rode away.
The crone had taken her psalter,
To mumble the psalms thereafter,

While the lady sunk in deep distress,
Woke in tears to the sun's brightness.
The old crone, as the lady saw,
Had issued from the chamber door,
And so she sighed and tormented
Herself, and wept as if demented.
'Alas, cried she, my birth was ill!
Harsh and cruel, my destiny still!
In this tower he's imprisoned me,
And only death can set me free.
Old and jealous, what is it though
That he can fear, to treat me so?
So foolish a husband, so afraid,
Well-nigh asks to be betrayed.
I cannot go to church to pray,
Or listen to the Mass this day.
If I could speak with others, go
Outside at times, I would show
Him a far more pleasant seeming,
Though still of freedom dreaming.
Oh, cursed be all my family,
All those folk who longed for me
To marry ancient jealousy,
Forcing me to wed his body!
I tug hard at my leash, and cry:
Oh, will that devil never die!
He was ne'er baptised, instead,
In Hell's flood they dipped his head;
His sinews leathery as reins,
Life's blood still fills his veins.
And yet often folk would tell me,
How, long ago, in this country,
Many a fine adventure befell,
The wretched rescued, all made well;
Knights found lovely maidens where
E'er they wished, noble and fair,
And ladies they found lovers too,

Handsome, courteous, brave and true.
Nor were they blamed for it, what's more,
Since they alone their lovers saw.
If such could be, if such there were,
If such to any maid might occur,
God, who have power over all,
Hear my wish and heed my call!

The Lay of Yonec: The hawk and its transformation

AS she uttered that final word,
Came the shadow of some large bird,
Across the narrow window's light.
She, knowing not what this might
Be, into her room watched it fly,
Jesses on its feet, a hawk to the eye,
Moulted perhaps five times or six.
It settled; on her its gaze did fix.
After the hawk had rested there,
After she had returned its stare,
It became a fine and noble knight.
The lady marvelled as well she might.
Her blood rose, she trembled apace,
And seized by fear, she hid her face.
The knight proved most courteous,
For he addressed her, speaking thus:
'Lady,' said he, 'you need not fear.
A noble bird this hawk; though here
All seems mysterious and obscure,
Be certain you may rest secure,
If you take me for your friend!
For this is the reason I descend
Here; long have I loved you so;
And in my heart desired you; know
That I have loved no other, ever,
And none but you will love forever.
Although I could not fly at will,

Not leave my own country, until
You so requested; yet, in the end,
I may indeed be your true friend!’
Now, in answer to what he’d said,
After first unveiling her head,
The lady, reassured, replied,
Her love would ne’er be denied
If in God he believed, and there
True love might indeed be theirs;
For he was of such great beauty,
Her eyes had never, in verity,
Gazed at so handsome a knight,
None could ever match that sight.
‘Lady,’ said he, ‘you speak well,
Nor would I wish that it befell
That I gave the least occasion
For mistrust or for suspicion.
For I believe in the Creator,
Who from that sin, our begetter,
Adam, caused by his injurious
Bite of the apple, did redeem us.
He was, and is, and will be ever,
Light and life, to every sinner.
Should you not believe me, dear,
Then summon your chaplain here,
Say that you’ve a sudden ailment,
And you’d receive the sacrament,
That God to the world revealed,
By which the sinner may be healed;
Then I’ll assume your form and face,
Receive Christ’s body, in your place,
And speak the Creed for you as bid;
That of all doubt you may be rid!’
He, for she liked all that he said,
Lay down beside her on the bed,
And yet he refused to kiss her,
To embrace her, or caress her.

The Lay of Yonec: The two lovers

THE old crone for home did make.
She found the maiden wide awake,
And, saying twas no time to hide,
Sought to draw the curtains aside.
The maid called out she was unwell
The woman must the chaplain tell,
And bring him swiftly, by and by,
She was afraid that she might die.
The old crone said: 'Suffer away!
My lord's off to the woods today,
There's none here except for me.'
The maid looked at her, fearfully,
And seemed as if about to swoon.
The crone hurried from the room
In dismay, and locked the door,
Went for the priest, did him implore
To bring the Body of Christ, and he
Came as soon as ever might be;
And yet it was the knight was fed
The wafer, and after, in her stead,
Drank of the cup, the chaplain then
Left, and the door was locked again.
The maid lay beside him as before,
And a fairer couple you never saw.
When they had laughed and toyed
Enough, and sweet words enjoyed,
The knight took his leave swiftly,
So as to fly to his own country.
Knowing he could not remain,
She begged him to return again.
'Lady, he said, 'whene'er you please,
Thus may I come to you with ease,
But be sure to take such measures
That none perceive our pleasures.

That old woman may betray us,
For night and day she'll survey us,
She our love, may well discover,
And go and tell all to her master.
If it should happen as I say,
And our love she doth betray
I would not depart from here
Except to my own death, I fear.'

The Lay of Yonec: The husband sets the crone to spy on them

THUS she and the knight must part;
He leaves, yet she feels joy at heart.
Next day she rises, and she is well,
For all that week love casts its spell.
She holds her body dear once more,
Regains her looks, fair as before.
Now she's happy with her chamber,
For now no other place seems fairer.
She often longs to see her knight,
And in him seeks her true delight.
As soon as her lord quits the tower
Then day and night, at any hour,
She has all she wishes, or may;
God grant them many a long day!
From the joy she now possessed
Seeing him often, she was blessed
With altered looks, and by and by,
Her husband, being shrewd and sly,
Knowing at heart that what he saw
Proved her much altered from before,
Began to doubt his aged sister,
And one day put a question to her,
Saying that he was much amazed
At how his wife dressed these days,
And he wondered why this was so;
The crone said she did not know,

For none could speak to the lady,
Neither friend nor lover had she,
Except one thing she might report,
That she her privacy much sought.
This thing alone she had perceived.
From him this answer she received:
'I'faith, I think that well might be!
Now you must do a thing for me.
In the morning, when I've risen
And she is pent up in her prison,
Then make as if to go somewhere,
Leave her alone and sleeping there.
Hide then in some secret quarter
Where you might thus regard her,
And see what and whence is this
That brings her such joy and bliss.'
With this counsel he left the hall.
Alas! What evil must now befall
Those for whom this ambushade
Is set, deceived, and so betrayed!

The Lay of Yonec: The husband plans to slay the knight

THREE days later, or so I heard,
Her lord departed, leaving word
That he must go to see the king
Who, by letter, commanded him;
But that he'd be returning swiftly.
The crone had risen, then did she
Lock the door, and hide behind
A curtain, where she might find
A place to see and hear, and so
Discover all she sought to know.
The lady lay there, unsleeping,
For her lover she was longing,
He comes, the air he doth climb,
Hindered not by space or time.

Together now their joy is great,
Looks and words seal their fate,
And now it is the time to rise,
And he must take to the skies,
Yet the crone espies him so,
Sees how he cometh, and doth go.
Indeed she trembles now with fear
For man and hawk he doth appear.
When her lord returned, then he,
Arriving there more than swiftly,
Heard from her thus, in verity,
Of hawk and knight, the whole story.
Then he pondered, in deep thought,
On how the knight might be caught,
And swiftly slain, and plans he made.
He readied many an iron blade,
And every blade tipped with steel,
Never one sharper did any feel.
Once he'd prepared them all,
He had them fixed to the wall,
About the window; the tips met,
In rows together, closely set,
There where the knight must pass
When he repaired to her. Alas!
If he but knew what was wrought,
What, by this, foul treachery sought!

The Lay of Yonec: The knight-hawk is mortally wounded

ON the morrow, at early morn,
The husband rose ere the dawn,
Saying he would hunt that day,
The old crone saw him on his way,
Then back to her bed she yawned,
Until the day had fully dawned.
The lady lay waiting, anxiously,
For he whom she loved faithfully,

Praying that he might come to her
And be with her then at his leisure.
As soon as she uttered her prayer
He waited not, at once was there.
In at the window he came flying,
But those spikes entry denying,
One now pierced his body deeply,
And from it the blood flowed redly.
Knowing the wound spelt his doom
He freed himself, entered the room,
And fell to the bed beside his lady,
Such that the sheets he did bloody.
She saw the wound, she saw it bleed,
Much anguished was she indeed;
Then he spoke: 'My sweet friend,
Through our love my life doth end;
As I once said, so it comes to pass,
Your beauty's slain us both, alas!'

The Lay of Yonec: The lady enters a faerie hill

ON hearing his words, she fainted,
With death well-nigh acquainted;
Sweetly he comforted her again,
Saying all grief was now in vain;
She'd prove of child before long,
And bear a son, noble and strong,
Who would prove her solace yet,
Kill their foe, and exact the debt;
And she must name him, Yonec,
He who'd avenge Muldumarec,
Her love, who can no longer stay,
For his wound doth bleed away.
In deepest anguish, he did fly;
She followed him, with a great cry,
From the window she leapt in pain,
Twas a wonder she was not slain;

For twenty foot high was the wall
There, where that lady did fall.
She was naked but for her shift,
A trail of blood she followed, swift
Behind her lover, that in flowing,
Had marked the way he was going.
This trail she followed close until
Before her eyes there rose a hill,
And, behold, an entrance therein,
And traces of blood lay within,
Though she could see no further.
Thinking that indeed her lover
Must have entered the hill there,
She followed, trembling like a hare.
Within there was no trace of light,
Yet she pressed onwards, aright,
Until she issued from the mound,
Into a fair field, where she found
His blood had stained the green grass,
Which grieved her, yet she did pass
Through the meadow, in his wake;
Toward a city his trail did make.

The Lay of Yonec: The castle of silver, and the prophecy

HIGH walls did that keep surround,
And not a house or spire she found
But was constructed all of silver;
So richly ordered its every tower.
Marshlands lay before the town,
Forests, and cultivated ground.
Near the keep, on the other side,
There flowed a river deep and wide;
Many a vessel might anchor there,
Three hundred ships it would bear.
The gate lay open to this city,
Through it entered in the lady,

Still following the trail, bright red,
That through it to the castle led.
None spoke to her, in the street,
No man or woman did she meet.
She came thus to the palace yard,
With his bloodstains it was marred.
She found a chamber in the keep
Wherein lay a fair knight asleep.
She knew him not, so on she went,
And in a larger chamber pent,
She found a bed, where as before,
A knight slept, and nothing more.
She passed through, into another,
And entered now a third chamber,
Where she found her lover's bed;
Of finest gold its foot and head;
All priceless did its sheets appear;
The candlesticks, and chandelier,
That were lit both night and day,
Were worth a city's gold, I'd say.
As soon as ever she caught sight
Of him, she recognised the knight.
Swiftly now she went towards him,
And then fell swooning before him.
He clasped her in his arms again,
And cried aloud in deepest pain.
When her fainting fit had passed,
He comforted her, and said: 'Alas,
Sweet friend, may God have mercy!
Now go from here, for you must flee!
I soon must die, before the dawn,
The people here will grieve and mourn,
Such that if e'er they caught you,
To the torture they would put you.
My folk know that, to their cost,
Through love of you am I lost.
It is of you that I am thinking.'

The lady said: 'To you I cling,
For I would rather die with you
Than suffer with my lord anew.
If I return now he will slay me.'
The knight reassured his lady,
By placing in her hand a ring,
And telling her that this thing
Would keep her safe from harm;
Her lord would forget, the charm
Would wipe out every memory,
And thus guarantee her safety.
Then his sword he handed her,
And he begged and conjured her,
That she should yield it to no man,
Ere she set it in their son's hand.
When the lad should be full-grown,
His courage and skill well-known,
Then to a feast, one day, she'd go
Her husband and her son, also,
And to an abbey they would come,
And there they'd behold a tomb,
And hear again of his last breath;
How he was wrongly done to death.
Then she must place it in his hand,
That blade; give him to understand
The tale of his birth, his father too,
Then all will see what he will do.
Once he had finished his address,
He gave to her a fine silk dress,
That he commanded her to wear,
And then he sent her from his care.
With the sword she left the palace,
Bore the ring to grant her solace.
When, but half a league or less
From the city, to her distress,
She heard the mournful passing bell,
And sad cries from the streets as well;

And her heart so drowned with grief,
It made her faint four times at least.
Her faintness caused her brief delay,
Yet to the hill she made her way,
Entered in, through it did journey,
And so regained her native country.

The Lay of Yonec: The abbey and tomb at Caerleon

FOR many a day thenceforward,
She dwelt together with her lord.
And he, concerning what she'd done,
Ne'er reviled her. And so her son
Was born, and cared for lovingly,
Cherished, and so reared in safety.
Yonec, the name they gave him,
Nor was any youth fairer than him,
Or half as noble and courageous,
Or e'er as open and generous.
Now when he was of age, outright,
They chose to dub him a knight.
And what occurred that very year,
I will tell you, and you shall hear!
When the feast-day of Saint Aihran,
Was celebrated at Caerleon,
As in many a place in that land,
The lord received his command,
To attend, with all his company;
Such the custom of the country.
With him went his wife and son,
Rich their apparel, under the sun.
Hence they went, and so did fare,
Yet, knowing not the true way there,
They took with them a youth who knew
The right road, the straight and true,
And he led them to the citadel;
Of none finer could that age tell;

And since a well-endowed abbey,
Of pious folk, lay in that city,
The youth who had been their guide
Now found them lodgings inside.
Within the abbot's own chamber
They were welcomed with honour.
They went to Mass on the morrow,
And took their leave, about to go,
But the abbot did their steps delay,
Asked that they prolong their stay;
He'd show them the refectory,
Chapter-house, and dormitory,
And fair lodgings, of the best,
Thus they accepted his request.
Later that day, after dining,
They set out to view the building,
And to the Chapter-house did come
And there they found a mighty tomb,
With a wheel of silk covering all,
A gold-embroidered banded pall.
At head and foot and all around
Twenty candlesticks they found,
Of gold, their candles all alight.
Of amethyst were the censers bright,
Where the incense burned that day,
All set above, in honoured array.
They enquired and made demand
Of all the folk there of that land,
Whose tomb this tomb might be,
What man lay there, who was he?

The Lay of Yonec: The lovers reunited in death

THEN these folk began to cry,
And weeping thus, by and by,
They told the tale of a fair knight,
The finest, bravest in a fight,

The handsomest, most loved of all
Born in that age, yet born to fall.
Of all that land he had been king,
Most courteous in everything.
At Caerwent had he been ta'en,
And so, for love of a lady, slain.
'Since then we have had no master,
Though, for many a day thereafter,
We have awaited that lady's son,
For twas said that he would come.'
When she had heard all the story,
The lady to her son cried she:
'Dear son, now do you but hear
How God above has led us here!
Here lies your father, and my true
Love, this wretch wrongly slew.
Yet you shall wield his sword anew,
That I have long guarded for you.'
She told the tale, before everyone,
That he was born of him, was his son,
And how her love had come to her,
And how her lord played the traitor.
All the tale she told him, in verity,
Then fainting on the tomb fell she.
And in that swoon she passed on,
And spoke no more ere she was gone.
The son, on seeing she was dead,
Did that vile husband then behead,
Avenging, with the sword, his father,
And the grief that killed his mother.
When all the news was swiftly known
Throughout the city, she was shown
Great respect, and thus they laid her
There, in the tomb, beside her lover.
Ere leaving, Yonec they did afford
All honour, and made him their lord.
Who heard the tale, they made a lay

A long time after, nearer our day,
All the pain and woe to record,
That for love those two endured.

The End of the Lay of Yonec

The Lay of Laüstic (The Nightingale): The two knights

NOW a new adventure I'll relay
Of which the Bretons made a lay;
Laüstic its name, as told to me,
For so tis called in that country;
Rossignol then, in French, this tale,
And, in true English, nightingale.
Near Saint-Malo, there was a town,
In that land, twas of great renown.
And two valiant knights lived there,
Twin strongholds they owned, that pair.
Through these two barons' bounty,
It was famed for its liberality.
Now, one knight had wed a lady,
Sage, well-bred, full of courtesy;
And she thought herself a wonder,
As was oft shown by her manner;
The other, a bachelor it appears,
Was well-known among his peers,
For his great bravery and prowess,
Willingly scattering his largesse,
Found at tourneys, spending freely,
Gave all he had, quite indiscreetly.
Now, he loved his neighbour's wife,
And sought her love, all of his life,
And since he had great good in him,
Above all others, she too loved him,
Partly because of all she did hear,
Partly because he lived so near.
Wisely and well they loved each other,
Yet kept their true love undercover,
Such that they were not perceived,
Nor troubled once, nor misbelieved.
And they could better act this way
Because each lived not far away;
Near together were their houses

Both his manor and her spouse's;
Scarce a barrier between at all,
Except a high brownstone wall.
The lady's chamber it was such
That standing at the window much
Lover to lover could thus relay,
From here to there, across the way;
Sending love-tokens through the air
Tossing and hurling them, that pair.
Naught came to spoil their pleasure,
They could venture at their leisure,
Except they could not be together,
Nor thus delight in one another;
Her spouse a guard did her accord,
Whenever he chose to ride abroad.
Yet one recourse they had alway,
Whether by night or e'en by day,
Whereby they could both converse,
Since no guard, for better or worse
Could keep that wife from the window,
Whence sweet words she might bestow.

The Lay of Laüstic (The Nightingale): The song of the nightingale

AND long they loved each other so,
Till one summer, you should know,
When, woods and fields all green again,
The orchards blossom did sustain,
And little birds in their sweet bowers
Sang their joy, among the flowers.
Who that his lover might desire,
Tis no wonder, then, if he aspire;
And to speak truly of this knight,
His thoughts on loving did alight;
And the lady, with all her heart,
In looks and speech, took love's part.
On nights when the moon shone brightly,

And her husband slept not lightly,
Then she'd oft rise from his side,
And wrapped in a cloak thus hied
To the window, for well she knew
That her lover would be there too,
For each would for the other's sake
Stand there half the night awake.
Delighted to gaze at one another,
Since they could not be together.
She rose so oft, so oft she stood,
That her husband, in anger, would
Many a time question why
She stood there gazing at the sky.
'Sire,' she answered with deceit,
'There's no joy on earth so sweet
As hearing the nightingale sing.
It is for that I stand listening;
So sweetly does it sing at night
It seems to me tis pure delight.'
Tis such joy, I long for it so,
That rest or sleep I thus forgo.'
When he had heard the lady,
He smiled at her maliciously,
One idea possessed his thought,
That the nightingale be caught.
There was not a servant there
That with trap or net or snare
He did not to the orchard send,
Nor chestnut nor hazel stem
That was not dipped in lime,
So he might enact the crime.
When the nightingale was caught,
To the husband it was brought.
Happy to grasp it in his hand
To the lady's chamber he ran,
Calling out: 'Where are you, lady?
Come here now, come speak with me!

For I have trapped the nightingale,
That with his song did you regale.
Now you may safely sleep in peace,
He'll wake you not, his song doth cease.'

The Lay of Laüstic (The Nightingale): The nightingale is slain

NOW when this news she received,
She was angered and sorely grieved.
She demanded the bird, but he
Laughed, and killed it violently,
Twisting its neck in his hands,
As villains do, you understand,
And threw the body at her so
Down her slip the blood did flow,
Across the front, above her heart;
Then, with this act, he did depart.
The lady took up the little body,
Weeping, she cursed those, loudly,
Who the nets and snares had brought,
Who the nightingale had caught,
And robbed her of all delight.
'Alas,' she cried, 'no more at night,
Shall I rise now, ill comes to me;
Nor at my window shall I be,
Where I was wont to see my love.
One thing I fear, by heaven above,
That now he'll think I am untrue;
I must take counsel on what to do.
To him I'll send the nightingale,
And hence relate to him the tale.'
The bird she wrapped in rich samite,
Twas all adorned with gold bright,
With this she enveloped the bird,
And summoned a servant to her,
Charged him with her message
And to her lover sent the package.

The servant bore it to the knight,
Greeted him and speaking aright
The lady's message, every word,
Gave him the nightingale from her.
When he had spoken, and shown all,
And the knight knew what did befall,
He was deeply grieved by the tale.
Filled with goodness, he did not fail
To command a goldsmith to create
A casket, iron nor steel did rate
In its design, twas of pure gold,
With many a precious gem, all told,
And wrought with a tight-fitting lid.
In this the nightingale he hid;
And then the reliquary he sealed,
To carry it ever, so concealed.
And yet the story was sung of old,
It could not long remain untold.
Bretons who made it, call the lay
Laüstic, Nightingale, to this day.

The End of the Lay of Laüstic

The Lay of Milun: He loves a maid and gets her with child

WHO would diverse stories tell,
Must start each separate tale well,
And speak it eloquently, for then
It delights both women and men.
I'll tell you the story of Milun;
Here, in brief, since I've begun,
I'll tell you how and why this lay
Was so wrought, in a former day.
Milun was born in South Wales;
Once he was dubbed, so run the tales,
Nary a knight was to be found
He failed to topple to the ground,
For he was a most worthy knight,
Courteous, strong, good in a fight.
This was he known for in Ireland,
And in Norway too, and in Jutland,
In Logres and in Albany,
Where he did arouse much envy;
Yet was he much loved for valour,
And by princes held in honour.
There lived a baron, in this same
Land, though I know not his name,
And he possessed a daughter fair,
A sweet maid, she'd a courteous air.
Now she heard Milun spoken of,
And would have him as her love;
And sent to say he may have her,
If twould please him, as his lover.
Milun, at this, felt great delight,
And sent to thank the maid, outright;
Gladly he'd take her as his lover,
Nor would he part from her forever.
Thus he framed a courteous reply,
While granting friendship thereby
To her messenger, with a reward.

‘Now,’ said he, ‘I wish, my lord,
To speak, if I may, with my love,
But secret must our meeting prove!
Bear to her this, my ring of gold,
And then, from me, let her be told
When she please to come to me,
Or I could go to her, equally.’
He took his leave without delay,
And the lord to her made his way,
Showed the ring of gold; his task,
He said he’d done as she did ask.
The maid was delighted indeed
That her love was well-received.
In an orchard near her chamber,
Where she walked, she and her lover
Milun, would oft meet together,
And speak there with one another.
He went so oft, love so beguiled,
That the maid was soon with child.
Now when she realised her state,
She summoned Milun, and did berate
Her lover, told him that, to her cost,
Her honour and her rank were lost.
When all was known, what is more,
She’d suffer the weight of the law,
For she’d be put to the sword,
Or sold into service now abroad,
The punishments for such a crime
In olden days as in their time.

The Lay of Milun: The maid bears a son, secretly, who is sent away

MILUN replied that he would do
Whatever she might ask him to.
‘When the child is born,’ said she,
‘Then to my sister, send it swiftly,
Who in Northumberland doth dwell;

Noble and wise, she married well;
Write to her, and so instruct her,
And tell her the tale in your letter;
A child will be born to her sister,
Who for it shall be made to suffer.
See that, whether it is a son or
A daughter, it is well-cared for.
From its neck I'll hang your ring,
And wrap in linen the little thing,
With a note that names its father,
And tells the story of its mother.
When the child is fully-grown,
At that age when, as tis known,
The mind is fit for reasoning,
Let it receive the note and ring,
So that it may guard them well,
And from them its parents tell.'
Thus to this counsel they held firm,
Until the maid came to full term,
And at that time she bore a son,
Aided by an old woman, one
Who, knowing of her secret lover,
So concealed and hid the matter
From all eyes, that none heard,
Of this fair son, a single word.
Then forth the mother did bring,
And hang around his neck, the ring,
And a small silk purse, where she
Placed a note, so none could see.
Then in a cradle he was lain,
Wrapped in linen, clean but plain,
And a soft pillow upon this bed
Placed beneath the infant's head;
And over him then a coverlet,
Bordered all with sable, she set.
This to Milun the crone did bear
Who waited in the orchard there.

He commended his son to those
Loyal to him, whom he so chose.
In the towns along their way,
They rested; seven times a day,
The child was nursed, and then
Bathed and freshly wrapped again.
They followed the route demanded,
And found the sister, as commanded.
She took the child, for he was fair,
Found the note in the silk purse there,
And when she knew who he was,
Cherished him, in a marvellous
Manner; those who brought him she
Sent back to seek their own country.

The Lay of Milun: The lady is wed to another lord

WHILE Milun left that same country,
To seek his fate, as a mercenary,
The maid she remained at home,
Till her father wed her to a known
Man of wealth, a baron, nearby,
Of worth and power, a fine ally.
When she first heard of her sad fate,
Her grief and outrage were great,
And often she longed for Milun;
For she feared what might come;
When her lord found she'd borne a child;
They could ne'er be reconciled.
'Alas,' she said, 'what shall I do?
To wed a lord! Here's grief anew!
The virgin I may act no more,
I'll be his serving maid for sure!
I never dreamed of this, instead,
I thought to my love I'd be wed.
Between us we hid all our affair,
To none may I the truth declare.

Rather than live I long to die,
Though not free so to do, say I,
For I have guardians, for my sins,
Young and old, my chamberlains,
Who, ever, hate the path of love
And of others' misery approve.
This must I suffer here, since I
Cannot achieve the means to die.'
When the time came she was led
To the altar, and her lord did wed.

The Lay of Milun: The swan-messenger

MILUN returned to his own country,
And sorrowful and pensive was he,
For he had heard the news, was led
By sorrow, and yet was comforted
By returning thus to a place where
He had known such love, and there,
He took thought as to how he might
Send the letter he sat down to write,
Such that it might not be revealed
That he'd returned; signed and sealed,
He tied it round the neck of a swan.
This bird he had once chanced upon,
Nurtured, and cherished it thereafter;
Thus in its plumage he hid the letter.
Then Milun he summoned a squire,
And told him what he did desire.
'Go now, change to hunting-dress,
And hasten my lady to address;
Carry this swan to her from me,
And let no maid or servant be
The one to give the swan to her,
Be sure now that she sees the letter.'
The squire then took up the swan,
And, as soon as he could, was gone,

Upon a road, at Milun's command,
He knew like the back of his hand.
Through the town he bore the same,
Until to the castle gate he came,
And summoned the porter, hastily,
'Friend,' he cried, 'now hark to me!
I am a wild-fowler by trade,
And here's a fine catch I've made;
In a water-meadow near Caerleon,
Beside the lake, I took this swan;
To honour her, tis my duty
Thus to present it to your lady,
So that I may hunt quite freely
And untroubled in this country.'
The porter at the gate replied:
'Friend, none speak with her,' he sighed,
'Yet nevertheless I shall go,
And if one may see her, know
That I'll return and then lead you
To her, so you may see her too.'
Into the hall did the porter fare
And found two knights seated there,
At a great table, playing chess,
Who closely did the board address.
Swiftly returning to the squire,
He led him then where he desired;
From all eyes they went concealed,
And so to none were they revealed.
To her chamber they came; a maid
Opened the door as the porter bade;
Before the lady the squire came,
He presented the swan to the same;
She called her own servant to her,
And said to him: 'Now take care,
That this swan is well looked after,
And has sufficient food and water.'
'Lady,' said he who had brought it,

‘None but you have seen such a gift,
Ne’er was there so royal a present,
See how fine this is, and elegant!’
He placed it in her hands, and she
Received the swan most graciously.
She stroked its neck and, as she did,
She found the note where it lay hid.
She blushed, on that you may depend,
Thinking it might be from her friend.
So she rewarded the squire, and then
Commanded him to depart again.

The Lay of Milun: The lady receives Milun’s letter

WHEN the two had left the chamber
At once she called the maiden to her;
So freed the note and, there and then,
They broke the seal on it, and when
They had done so found the name
‘Milun’ was written on the same;
She kissed the letter, and did weep,
A hundred times ere she could speak.
Then she perused the note and saw
That he had written of his dolour,
The trouble that had come his way,
And of his suffering night and day;
Twas in her power, he did sigh,
Whether he should live or die.
If she sought a means whereby
She might send him her reply,
She could write a letter and then
Send the swan back to him again.
First let it be kept from eating,
For three whole days running,
Then to its neck her letter tie,
And let it go, and it would fly
Straight to its first home again.

Once she'd read the letter, when
She'd understood all he had said,
She kept the swan by her, unfed,
In her room, cherishing it well.
You shall hear now what befell!
When by design she had obtained
Ink and parchment she took pains
To frame a letter, as he'd planned,
And hide it in a ring from her hand;
She tied it to the neck of the swan,
Freed it, and swiftly it was gone.
The bird was famished, and it flew
Back to the only home it knew,
To that fair place its wings did beat,
Descending there at Milun's feet.
Seeing the bird he was delighted;
Seizing it swiftly, as it alighted,
He called his steward to his side,
And had it fed the food denied.
He took the letter from his friend
From its neck, read it end to end,
Every word that she had written
And with love again was smitten:
Without him she'd nothing good,
Let him reply whene'er he could,
By means of the swan as before.
This he did, and loved her more.
For twenty years they did so,
Between them the swan did go,
A messenger between the two,
For naught else might they do.
She denied it leaves and grain
Before she freed the bird again,
And those there to whom it flew
Fed the bird whom they well-knew.
Nor was it ever so constrained
Nor e'er in any way detained,

Such that it could not find its way,
But flew between them many a day,

The Lay of Milun: The son of Milun and the lady leaves home

THE sister who had raised her child,
Had taken such good care the while
That he, once he had come of age,
Was dubbed a knight for his courage.
A noble youth he was, and winning.
She gave him the note and the ring,
Then told him about his mother,
And all the story of his father,
And how he was a noble knight,
Both brave and skilful in a fight,
And that there was none better
Than him for worth or valour.
When he had listened to the lady
And understood the tale, then he,
Delighted with her every word,
Rejoiced at all that he had heard.
He thought to himself and said,
Mulling it over in his head:
'That man acquires little praise,
Who, being born to such ways,
With a father of such wide fame,
Does not seek to win the same,
Beyond the shores of his own country.'
He'd not stay; he'd done his duty.
On the morrow, he took his leave,
She gave him her advice, and she
Exhorted him to do good deeds,
Giving him coin enough indeed.
To Southampton he made his way,
And went aboard that very day.
He disembarked next at Barfleur,
And straight to Brittany did spur.

He appeared at many a tourney,
With the rich, broke his journey,
And never fought in any melee
Without him carrying the day.
He befriended the poorest knight;
What he won from the rich, at night
He would give to those without;
He gave freely, there's no doubt.
None but fulfilled his every wish.
Now, in many a land after this,
He won every prize for valour,
Knew every courtesy and honour.
The news of his generosity
And prowess reached his own country,
Saying that one in knightly guise,
Who'd passed the sea to seek a prize,
Had done such deeds through his prowess,
His courtesy and his largesse,
Those who knew not his name, there
Called him The Peerless, everywhere.

The Lay of Milun: Milun hears of the knight's fame

MILUN heard this fulsome praise
And how the knight did all amaze.
He was saddened and complained
That a knight who was so famed,
Was not challenged where'er he went
By others, at every tournament,
And that a native of his country
Was not so blessed with victory.
He determined it should be he;
He'd pass swiftly over the sea,
Joust there with this young knight,
And conquer him in goodly fight.
In his anger he'd lay him low;
If he could work his overthrow,

Then great honour would be won;
And after, he'd go seek his son,
Who had vanished from his place,
For of his son he found no trace.
So he told his love of his intent
And sought her leave ere he went.
His whole heart he exposed to her,
Sending his news in a sealed letter,
By the swan's path; despite her woe,
She commended his wish to go!
For reading thus of his intention
She gave thanks; he'd seek their son;
And he must leave his own country,
To look for him beyond the sea;
For their son's good he must go,
On his account she'd not say no.

The Lay of Milun: The tournament at Mont Saint-Michel

SO, on receiving her permission,
He dressed richly for his mission.
To Normandy he sailed, on a day,
And next to Brittany made his way.
There he spoke to many a knight,
Asking where they planned to fight.
Oft in fine lodgings he did stay,
And gave graciously on his way.
All one winter, or so I'm told,
Milun roamed about of old;
Many a knight he entertained,
Until Easter's moon had waned
And the tourneys started, for then
Many a battle began again.
To Mont Saint-Michel they repaired,
Normans and Bretons were there
And the French, and the Flemish,
But not so many of the English.

Milun, among the bravest alive,
Was among the first to arrive.
He asked for the peerless knight;
Many were there to set him right,
Show the place there in the field,
Point out his banner and his shield.
They showed Milun this, and more,
And he took note of all he saw.
The tournament, it then began;
He who'd joust might find his man;
He who in the ranks would battle,
Might win the prize or lose his all,
In encountering some companion.
This will I tell you of Milun:
That he did bravely in the fight,
And he was much praised at night,
But the peerless youth, say I,
Above all others had the cry,
Nor was there any to compare,
In the jousts or combat there.
Milun saw how he did behave,
Attacked, defended, ever brave;
He was the one he envied most,
A pleasing beauty he did boast.
In the ranks they met together,
Thus they jousting with each other,
Milun so fierce in his advance,
That he shattered his strong lance,
But failed to down his enemy;
The youth struck so well you see,
Milun it was that took the fall.
The youth was troubled by it all;
As Milun fell his head was bared,
Revealing his grey beard and hair.
So seizing the horse by the rein
The youth presented it again,
Saying to him, 'Sire, remount!

For I am grieved on your account,
No man indeed of your ripe age
Should suffer here such outrage.'

The Lay of Milun: He recognises his son

MILUN leapt up; while remounting
He recognised the young man's ring,
And from the saddle he thus replied,
For addressing the knight, he cried:
'My friend, grant me your consent,
For love of God, the omnipotent,
To ask the name of your father!
Who are you! Who is your mother?
For I would know the truth; much
Have I seen, have wandered much,
Through many a land have sought
In many a joust and battle fought,
But ne'er a blow from man, before
Has sent me tumbling to the floor!
You in the joust have bettered me,
And yet I love you wondrously!'
Said the youth: 'This much I gather,
Tis all that I know of my father,
That in South Wales he was born,
Milun that name I would adorn;
My mother a rich man's daughter
Did secretly bear me; thereafter,
To Northumbria I was sent,
There my childhood was spent,
My aunt it was who cared for me.
She raised me most carefully,
Horse and arms she granted me,
And sent me her to this country.
And here it is I long have dwelt.
Yet the one longing I have felt,
Is to sail swiftly o'er the sea

And return to my own country,
So I might learn how my father
Came indeed to know my mother.
To him this gold ring I'd show,
And speak so that he might know
Who I am, and recognise me,
Love me dearly, nor deny me.'
Now, when Milun heard this, he
Spurred forward, unrestrainedly;
Grasping a fold of his mail-shirt:
'God,' he cried, 'heals all my hurt!
Friend, by my faith, you are my son,
It is to seek you I have come
To this land, from my own country,
I sought for you, and tis you I see.'
Both dismounted, and the youth
Ran to kiss his father; in truth,
Such fair seeming twixt the two,
With such fair words spoken too,
Were witnessed there, those who did see
Wept from joy, in sympathy.
When the tournament was done,
Milun departed, for with his son
He was eager to speak at leisure,
And learn what might be his pleasure.
In lodgings then they passed the night,
And all was joy there and delight,
With many a knight in company.
Milun told his son the story
Of his mother and of their love;
And how her father did approve
Her marriage to a lord of that land;
How, with Milun denied her hand,
She yet loved true, as he loved her;
And of the swan their messenger,
Who carried their letters to and fro,
Trusting in none but it did know.

His son replied: 'I'faith, my father,
I'll reunite you with my mother,
The lord she wed I'll slay him too,
And I'll ensure she's wed to you.'

The Lay of Milun: The lovers are reunited

WITH this the conversation ceased.
On the morrow they were pleased
To take leave of all the company,
And so return to their own country.
Swiftly o'er the sea they sailed,
For the fair winds never failed.
As they took to the road, in sooth,
They encountered a fair youth,
One sent there by Milun's lover,
Of her message he was bearer,
And so was bound for Brittany.
Yet now was he set at liberty.
He gave Milun the sealed letter,
From which the knight learnt further
Her spouse was dead; he must away,
She urged: depart without delay!
When he'd read all that she did state,
He marvelled at this turn of fate.
He showed the letter to his son,
Saying that now they must press on;
Thus they, by galloping full swiftly,
Reached the castle, where the lady
Was much delighted with her son,
The noble knight he had become.
No other kin now did they summon;
Nor looked for counsel from anyone,
With their son did simply gather;
He gave his mother to his father.
Thenceforth, blessed in every way,
They lived sweetly, night and day.

And of their love and of their fate,
This lay the Bretons did create,
That I, who now their story write,
In its telling, might find delight.

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): The lady of Nantes

NOW I've a longing to unfold,
For you, a lay I once heard told.
All the adventure and the name
Of the fair city where that same
Was born and its title I will tell.
The lay is known as Chaitivel.
Many the folk though who claim
'The Four Sorrows' as its name.
At Nantes there once dwelt a lady,
Famed throughout all Brittany
For her beauty and learning too,
And every other kind of virtue.
In all the region, never a knight
Of any worth but, at first sight,
He lost his heart to her entire,
And her affection did desire.
She saw no way to satisfy them,
Yet was reluctant to deny them.
More joy's in seeking love from any
Lady in a given country,
Than taking money from a fool,
For he'll resent you, as a rule;
A lady welcomes close attention
More readily than I dare mention;
Though she may long for them to cease,
She ought not to scorn your pleas,
But honour them and hold them dear,
And give you thanks and good cheer.
Now she of whom I wish to speak
Received so many there to seek

Out her worth and beauty bright,
She was pestered day and night.
There were four barons in Brittany,
Whose names are all unknown to me,
But they were of a pleasing age,
All still at the handsome stage,
And all four brave and valorous
Free and open, and courteous;
Men of great worth you understand,
Among the nobles of that land.
All four barons came to woo,
Gave of their best efforts too;
Each for her sake, and her love,
Sought heaven and earth to move;
Each one asked for her affection,
Each gave her his full attention,
And not one of them but thought
That he was the best who sought.

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): Her suitors compete

THE lady, full of common sense,
Sought to know, in her defence,
Who might prove the better lover,
Yet between one and another,
Found each as worthy as the rest;
How then was she to choose the best?
She liked not to lose all for one;
She welcomed fairly every one,
Granted each of them her favours,
Sent them love-notes for their labours;
And no man thought of any other,
For none could forsake her ever;
By deeds, and pleading on his knees,
Each man tried his best to please.
At every gathering of the knights
Each one sought, in the fights,

To win the tourney if he could.
To please her, be it understood,
Each knight claimed her as his love,
Each bore her token so to prove;
With ring, sleeve, or banner came
Each man, calling out her name.

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): The tourney at Nantes

SHE loved all four, and held them dear,
Till after Easter-time that year,
Came the news of a grand tourney,
At Nantes twas held, before the city.
Keen to joust with her four lovers,
Many came there from some other
Region, Frenchmen, and Normans,
And the Flemish and the Brabants,
The Boulognais, the Angevins,
And closer neighbours; for their sins,
Brave knights gladly made the journey.
Long they'd waited for the tourney,
When, on the eve of that event,
They took to fighting with intent.
The four lovers armed, in state,
Issued forth from the city gate;
Their allies the fight contested,
But on these four their hopes rested;
Each man known to all the field,
By his fair banner and his shield.
Against them came to the assault,
Two from Flanders, two, Hainault;
Each well-clad, as became a knight,
None but was eager for the fight.
Now lances, lowered, at full tilt,
Each man picked out a foe at will.
All came together with such force
Each of the foes fell from his horse;

These they cared not to address,
But let the steeds run rider-less,
And over the fallen made a stand
Till their friends were close at hand.
All this prompted a grand melee
Many a sword-blow came their way.
The lady, from a tower, could see
The dispositions of every party,
Saw the aid they granted the four,
But as to the best was still unsure.
Now the true tournament began,
The ranks swelled, man by man,
And oft the tourney turned straight
To a loud brawl before the gate.
The four lovers, they did excel,
And had the upper hand as well,
Till evening came and then the night,
When twas time to end the fight.
Foolishly they were separated
From their allies and so fated
To be slain, at least the three,
And the fourth hurt grievously,
His thigh pierced, so the lance
Through his body did advance.
All were pierced, thus did yield,
And all four fell upon that field.
Those who'd conquered gathered round,
Threw their shields to the ground,
Great their grief, and nary a one
But regretted what he'd done.
They did cry aloud and moan,
Never was such sorrow known.
Those from the city hastened there,
Caring not how they might fare;
There were two thousand knights
Who stood and mourned the sight,
Each did his helmet-mail unlace

Ripping the beard from his face,
Tore his hair, in communal grief.
Upon his shield then, in disbelief,
They laid each knight, thus they bore
Them to the lady they'd longed for.

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): The lady mourns

AS soon as the lady was acquaint
With their fate, she fell in a faint;
And when she rose from the same
Then she mourned each by name.
'What shall I do?' she cried in pain,
'For I shall ne'er know joy again!
I loved these four knights ere now,
And loved each for himself, I vow,
In each great good I did discover;
Each loved me above all others.
Given their beauty and prowess,
Given their valour and largesse,
I turned all their thoughts on me;
If I'd sought one, to forgo three,
Who was he I'd most grieve for?
But I can feign and hide no more,
One is wounded, slain are three,
Naught in the world can comfort me.
The dead knights now I shall inter,
And if the wounded knight with care
May yet be healed, his nurse I'll be,
And the best doctors he shall see.'

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): The last of the four

SHE had him borne to her chambers,
And then had them lay out the others;
She lovingly, nobly, to rich effect,
Adorning them in every respect.

Then to a wealthy abbey she gave
A handsome gift, for each grave
Prompted an act of giving there.
May God have them in his care!
Wise doctors she summoned outright,
Sending them to treat the knight,
Who lay wounded in her chamber,
Till his hurt was somewhat better.
She went to see him frequently,
And then much comforted was he.
But she mourned the other three,
And grieved for them continually.
After dinner, one summer evening,
The lady to the knight was speaking,
When, remembering her great sorrow,
Her head veiled, her face in shadow,
She fell into deep contemplation,
And while musing in this fashion,
He, seeing her so deep in thought,
Sought to address her, as he ought:
'Lady, you seem troubled,' said he,
'What is't you think of? Tell it me!
You should let your sorrow go
And be comforted, this I know.'
'My friend,' she said, 'all my thought
Is with those other three who fought;
None of such lineage as mine,
However noble, wise or fine,
Has loved four such men I say,
And lost more in a single day;
All but you, so wounded that I
Feared indeed that you would die.
Since I've loved you all, as I say,
I wish to recall my grief alway.
I'll weave a lay of all that same;
'The Four Sorrows' shall be its name.'

The Lay of Chaitivel (or The Unfortunate One): The naming of the lay

AS soon as he heard, the knight
Replied, as swiftly as he might:
'Ah, Lady, let it, when tis done,
Be called 'The Unfortunate One,'
('Chaitivel' in Breton), that same,
Here's why it should bear that name:
The others died some time ago,
Their day is gone, as we all know,
With all the pain each did suffer
In seeking to become your lover.
Yet I, escaping with my life,
All wretched there amid the strife,
Who at this time can still love so,
Now must see you come and go,
And hear you speak morn and eve,
Yet may no pleasure here receive,
Never a kiss, nor an embrace,
But only words to take their place.
Worse is all that I now suffer,
Death indeed would serve me better:
And so 'The Unfortunate One'
I'd call the lay when it is done.
They who'd call it 'The Four Sorrows'
May learn a truer name tomorrow.'
'I'faith' she said, 'I deem that well,
And we shall call it 'Chaitivel'.
And thus the lay was first begun
And ended, and when it was done,
Some folk who carried it abroad
'The Four Sorrows' did afford
It as a name, though both names fit,
And since the story so requires it,
'Chaitivel,' is the one you'll hear.
Now it ends, there's naught else, I fear;
No more heard I of what befell,

Thus I no more to you may tell.

The End of the Lay of Chaitivel

The Lay of Chevrefoil (or Woodbine): Tristan and the Queen

Of 'Chevrefoil' the lay I'd tell,
For indeed it pleases me well,
And all the truth relay to you
Of why twas made; twas sung too.
Many a one has told it me,
And in books too one may see
The tale of Tristan and the queen,
Of their love so true, I mean,
Which many a sorrow did provide,
And how that, on a day, they died.
Now King Mark was angered by
His nephew Tristan and by and by
Sent him from his realm, for he
Loved the queen; to his own country
He made his way and, one fine morn
Reached South Wales where he was born.
There he lived for one whole year,
Could no longer venture near;
Then upon his own instruction
Chose to face death and destruction.
By that none should be surprised,
Those who true love have realised,
Must suffer great grief and anguish,
When they cannot have their wish.
Tristan, aggrieved, in his agony,
Tore himself from his own country,
Deep into Cornwall he did stray,
There where the queen lived away.
Concealed there in the forest, alone,
Not wishing to be seen or known,
He would but issue forth at evening,
When men return to their dwelling;
With peasants, or some poor knight,
He'd find his lodging for the night;
While from them forever seeking

All they might tell him of the king.

The Lay of Chevrefoil (or Woodbine): The road to Tintagel

THUS did he learn what they had heard;
That summoned by the king's own word,
Tintagel now the barons sought,
Where King Mark must hold his court;
At Pentecost, all would there alight,
And take their pleasure and delight;
Queen Iseult too would play her part.
Tristan heard, joy filled his heart;
For whichever way she chose to go,
The road she journeyed he would know.
The day on which the king did ride,
Tristan sought out a grove beside
The road where they all, en masse,
In all their glory, must surely pass.
Once there, a hazel he cut in two,
And then he trimmed it squarely too,
And when he'd prepared this same,
There with his knife he cut his name.
If the queen but saw his hazel stick,
She'd take great notice of this trick,
Which she had seen him use before,
And know he was there, what's more.
For her lover waits among the trees,
Whene'er the hazel stick she sees.

The Lay of Chevrefoil (or Woodbine): The meaning

HERE'S the sum of what it meant,
For he had told her of its intent:
That he has long lingered there,
Long waited and sojourned there,
Watching, seeking for some way
To gaze upon her, as on this day,

Since he cannot live without her;
For the pair of them tis no other
Wise than tis with the woodbine,
That honeysuckle that doth twine
About the hazel, that when set fast,
Laced all about the hazel, will last,
Such that both survive together.
Yet should any the pair dissever,
The hazel tree will fade away
With the woodbine, all in a day.
'And so it is, love, with us two,
No you sans me, no me sans you!'

The Lay of Chevrefoil (or Woodbine): The lovers meet

THE Queen she came riding by,
Toward the trees she cast an eye,
Saw the hazel staff, all he wrote,
Knew the writing, and took note.
All the knights that did escort her,
She called out to, gave the order
That all might halt, twould be best,
And dismount, for she would rest.
They carried out her whole command,
While she strayed as she'd planned;
Then to her she summons her maid,
Brangwyn, who is her faithful aide.
She leaves the path a little, and sees
Her Tristan there, among the trees,
Who loves her more than any alive;
True joy it is they there contrive.
He can speak to her, at leisure,
She can tell him all her pleasure.
Then she tells him in what manner
He might his own place recover
With the king, for it weighs on him
That he has banished him at whim,

Based on mere claims about the pair.
And now she goes, leaves him there.
But when it comes time to depart
They weep sorely, grieved at heart.
Tristan returns to Wales once more,
Till his uncle doth his place restore.

The Lay of Chevrefoil (or Woodbine): The making of the lay

BECAUSE of all the joy he found,
In seeing her, on hallowed ground,
Because of what he once did write,
And because she'd asked outright,
So the words she might remember,
Since of the harp he was master,
Tristan now made for her a lay,
Brief enough is its name to say,
'Goat-leaf' in English, or 'Woodbine',
Or 'Chevrefoil', in French, is fine.
Now I've said all, and all is true,
Of this whole lay I retold for you.

The End of the Lay of Chevrefoil

The Lay of Eliduc: His wife and his mistress

TIS of an ancient Breton lay,
As I once heard it on a day,
I'd tell you, on truth intent
In matter, and in argument.
In Britain lived a brave knight,
Courteous, skilful in a fight,
Eliduc the name told to me,
Without peer in his country.
He had a wife, noble and sage,
Well-born, of high parentage.
When a girl, she did him marry,
And they loved most faithfully;
But it so befell he went to war
To seek wealth on a foreign shore.
There he loved a girl he'd seen,
Daughter of the king and queen;
Guilliadun she was named,
For her beauty she was famed;
While Guildelüec was, you see,
His wife's name in his country,
After the lay was made and sung
Guildelüec and Guilliadun
It was called, though Eliduc
Was the first name that it took;
Before it was then named anew,
As I have said, after these two.
The story, that formed the lay,
Truthfully, I shall now relay.

The Lay of Eliduc: He is denounced

NOW Eliduc had a lord had he,
Who was the King of Brittany,
Who loved and cherished him, for he
Had served this king most loyally.

When the king was on a journey,
Eliduc governed the land wisely.
For these skills he was retained,
But scant was the reward he gained.
He would often hunt the forest,
Ne'er a forester would contest
That he did hunt there as of right,
Or murmur against the knight,
Yet, because of his power, he
Oft in others stirred deep envy,
So was denounced to the king,
Who accused him of ill-doing,
And then did banish him from court,
Without a case being brought,
And nor did Eliduc know why.
He often begged the king to try
Him, and grant him his defence,
Give no credence to the offence,
And he'd serve him till he die,
And yet the king made no reply.
On failing thus to win a hearing
He was then intent on leaving;
To his own place he returned,
And then to his friends he turned,
Of the king his lord and master
He spoke, and of the king's anger;
Yet he'd served with all his might,
To scorn him so was hardly right.
The common folk say, for their part,
As well go quarrel with your cart,
No prince's love is guaranteed.
He's wise and prudent indeed,
Who's ever loyal to his master
And doth love his good neighbour.

The Lay of Eliduc: He sails to Logres

HE would not stay in that country
But he would journey o'er the sea,
To the realm of Logres he would go,
And, while he was absent, know
His wife would rule all his estate,
And he'd command his men to wait
On her, and guard her faithfully
As all his friends would, equally.
And this counsel he now shared,
And therefore was well-prepared.
His friends were grieved withal,
To see him parting from them all;
Ten knights went with him that day,
And his wife saw him on his way.
And his whole household did grieve
As they watched his company leave.
But he assured his wife that he
Would keep faith most loyally.
He parted from her, there and then,
And took to the road with his men,
Reached the sea, crossed the same,
And thence to Totnes they came.
Several kings ruled all that shore,
And among themselves waged war.

The Lay of Eliduc: He aids a king who rules near Exeter

NEAR Exeter in that country
Dwelt a powerful king and he
Was aged, without male heir,
And none would inherit there
But a marriageable daughter.
Because he would not wed her
To his peer, they were at war,
And his whole realm now insecure.
At first indeed he was besieged,
Nor was the castle soon relieved

For no man dared to venture out,
Lest some melee become a rout.
Now Eliduc heard of this war,
And so he halted near the shore,
Thinking indeed that he ought
To remain where princes fought.
He would aid with all his might
The king most threatened in the fight,
The one least sure of victory,
Who'd pay him as a mercenary.
He sent messages to the king
In those letters boldly stating
That he'd left his own country
And might aid him presently;
Thus he waited on his pleasure,
And, if he endorsed the measure,
Then he asked safe-conduct there,
And sought the means to prepare.
Now when the messages appeared
The king indeed was greatly cheered,
He called his constable to him
And swiftly he commanded him,
At once, safe-conduct to afford
To this most fine and worthy lord
And to make fair lodgings ready
And to produce, as necessary,
All the monies that he might need
And send them to him, with speed.
The safe-conduct he did prepare
And despatched to Eliduc there,
Who welcomed it, glad was he,
And to the king he came swiftly,
Who lodged them with a dignitary,
Wise and courteous, of that city,
And stayed in the best chamber
That his host could there deliver.
Eliduc lived most honourably,

Invited to dine a goodly many
Of all those knights in sad case,
Who were lodged in that place.
He impressed on all his company
That none should be so foolhardy
As to behave in predatory ways,
At least for the first forty days.

The Lay of Eliduc: The castle is attacked

NOW, on the third day he was there,
Cries and shouts made all aware
That the enemy had advanced
And about them were ensconced,
To besiege the citadel as before;
Beating at the gates once more.
Eliduc, hearing the cry raised,
And of the foe's attack appraised,
Armed himself, without delay.
He had in company that day
But fourteen mounted knights.
The rest were in various plights,
Either wounded, or a prisoner;
Eliduc armed some few, and after,
For he was not inclined to wait,
They issued forth from the gate.
'Sire', they cried, 'we go with you,
And all that you do, we will do.'
'My thanks then,' was his reply,
'Yet are there any here, say I,
Who know of some stratagem,
Whereby we might come at them?
If we await the enemy here
We may fight them, yet I fear
The honour it will bring is small,
Is better counsel here at all?'
'Sire, i'faith,' the men replied,

‘Not far along the near hillside,
Within the wood, in that ravine,
There is a narrow path, unseen,
Through which the enemy retreat,
And there they gather, in defeat
Or, having mounted an attack,
Tis there they quietly pull back.
On their palfreys, oft unarmed,
They can vanish free from harm;
If we were to adventure then,
We might slay a host of men.’
And thus his force might run amok,
Wounding, killing, wreaking havoc.

The Lay of Eliduc: The ambush

ELIDUC said: ‘Take care, my friends,
On thoroughness a plan depends;
Who often in such places fights,
Where he might lose his knights
He will scarcely win the game,
Nor will the greatest prize attain.
You who are now the king’s men,
Ought to serve him loyally; then
Come with me where I do go,
And what I do, there do also!
I assure you most faithfully
That you’ll incur no penalty,
For I will aid you in every way,
And if we cannot win the day
Then twill be granted us at least
That on our enemies we feast.’
They were near the trail indeed
That through the wood did lead,
To which the foe would repair,
And so did an ambush prepare.
Eliduc devised his plan, and then

Showed and instructed his men
The manner in which to attack,
Raise the cry, obstruct the track,
And called on all the company
Upon his summons to do as he.
They were to lay on furiously
And must not spare the enemy.
The foe were taken by surprise,
Routed ere they could realise,
And, their force much depleted,
In less than an hour were defeated.
Their constable was seized, on sight,
As was many another knight,
And given into their squires' care;
Twenty-five captured thirty there.
Arms and armour thus they gained,
Wondrous spoils they obtained;
And back they rode, full of delight,
Having gained greatly by the fight.
The king gazed from a high tower,
All fearful for his men that hour,
Complaining there of Eliduc,
Who he credited, in his book,
With abandoning them, the knight
Turned traitor, once out of sight.
Yet there came this throng of men,
All weighed down, returned again.
And there were more coming back
Than issued forth to the attack.
Thus the king he knew them not,
And doubted then what was what.
He ordered the gates closed to all,
And had the soldiers man the wall,
To shoot upon them if required.
Yet not one bolt need be fired;
Eliduc had sent a squire ahead
To give the news in his stead.

He told now the whole adventure
And the result of all their labour,
How Eliduc had attacked the foe,
And had contrived their overthrow,
That never was there such a knight;
The constable taken in the fight,
And a further twenty-nine, he said,
Not counting the wounded and dead.

The Lay of Eliduc: The king promotes Eliduc

THE king, on hearing this did joy,
His pleasure was without alloy,
From the tower he did descend
So to welcome his new friend.
He thanked him for what he'd done,
Granting him each man's ransom.
Eliduc shared what had been gained,
Three fine steeds alone retained
Which he'd heard praised mightily.
After sharing the spoils out, he
Distributed coins to the prisoners
In lordly fashion, and aided others.
After these deeds, I'm told, the king
Loved him much and cherished him.
He retained him for one whole year,
Along with all those who were near
To him, had them all swear loyalty,
And made him guardian of the country.

The Lay of Eliduc: The king's daughter, Guilliadun

ELIDUC was sage and courteous,
Noble, handsome, and generous;
The king's daughter heard his name,
And of the deeds that brought him fame.
Through her own private chamberlain

She requested that he would fain
Come visit her, so that she might
Become acquainted with the knight.
And expressed surprise, what's more,
That he'd not visited her before.
Eliduc replied he'd like to know
Her far better, and would do so.
He mounted then on his charger,
And off he went to speak with her,
Accompanied there by her knight.
When of her chamber he had sight,
He sent this chamberlain ahead,
Who returned without delay and said
That he should follow him at once.
With fair and noble countenance,
Eliduc came before the lady,
And, speaking to her most politely,
For she was lovely, he thanked her,
Guilliadun, the king's daughter,
In that she'd sent her man to seek
For him, that the two might speak.
She then took him by the hand,
And, begging him not to stand,
Set him to talking, by her side.
And, as they talked, him she eyed,
His face, his body, all was fair,
And seeing naught unseemly there,
His whole being seized her heart;
Amor, summoning her by his art,
Launched his sharp arrow, let it fly;
Love made her pale, and she did sigh.
Yet she would not enamoured seem,
Lest she was lowered in his esteem.
For a long while he chose to stay,
Then took his leave, and went his way.
There was much in her to desire,
Yet nonetheless he did retire,

And so to his lodgings went he
As yet still musing thoughtfully,
Afraid of her beauty, shy of her,
Since she was the king's daughter;
Yet at the sweetness of her voice,
And that she'd sighed, he rejoiced.
He'd been so frequently in action;
He might have seen her more often,
While he had been in that country;
Yet repented of the thought, for he
His wife did only now remember,
And then of how he'd assured her
That he'd e'er act with loyalty,
And comport himself decently.
But this girl, this fair daughter,
Now desired him as her lover.
None had she so prized, she knew;
And if she could, she'd hold him too.

The Lay of Eliduc: She sends Eliduc gifts

All that night she lay awake,
Not a moment's rest did take,
On the morrow when it was day
To a window she made her way
Called then, to her chamberlain,
And to him she made all plain.
'I'faith,' she cried, 'ill went the night!
For I am now in grievous plight,
I love that soldier, newly here,
Eliduc, the 'bon chevalier'.
All last night I could not keep
My bed, nor close my eyes in sleep.
If for love he wished to have me,
And of his heart could assure me,
I would do then all his pleasure;
Good twould bring him in full measure,

For he'd become king over us;
He is so wise and courteous,
If out of love he'll not have me,
Then I shall die of misery.'
When she'd told her longing all,
The chamberlain she had called
Gave her counsel good and true:
'Let no man bring ill on you!
Lady, if you love him,' said he,
'Then go send to him, presently,
A belt, a ribbon, or a ring;
If he should receive the thing
Full gladly, and doth it approve,
Then you'll be certain of his love;
And handsome let him be, say I,
For no emperor neath the sky
Could but be filled with delight
If you chose him as your knight.'
When he'd uttered these words,
She replied to what she'd heard,
'Yet, how can I know from this
That he doth my love truly wish?
No knight have I seen, I believe,
Who such an approach did receive
Whether he loved, or he did hate,
Would not accept, sooner or late,
Any fair thing that he might gain.
And I fear to be met with disdain.
For how may we through the outer
Know of any man the inner?
Prepare all that you need, then go.'
'Madame,' he said, 'I shall do so.'
'Bear this gold ring to him gladly,
Give him my belt that here you see,
Greet him a thousand times from me.'
So the Chamberlain turned swiftly,
Leaving her there in such a bind

She'd readily have changed her mind.
Nevertheless she let him depart,
And then to lament she did start:

The Lay of Eliduc: Her chamberlain returns

'ALAS, my heart is stolen from me,
Lost to a man from a far country!
I know not if he be a nobleman,
Or whether he'll soon leave this land;
For then I'd be left in misery;
I've set my heart on him foolishly.
I spoke to him but this very day,
Yet already for his love I pray.
He may scorn me for doing so,
If he is kind he will not, though,
For I in this have ventured all,
And if he loves me not at all
Then sorrow shall be my employ,
Ne'er in my life shall I know joy.'
While she thus lamented there
The chamberlain did onward fare.
To Eliduc at last he came,
Greeted him, in his lady's name,
And forth the gifts he did bring,
Gave Eliduc the fine gold ring
Gave him her belt, soft and light,
And was thanked by the knight,
Who placed the ring on his finger,
And round his waist the cincture.
Now, Eliduc said nothing more,
Except for offering some reward,
But naught he said had he earned,
And to his lady he thus returned.
Finding her within her chamber,
In Eliduc's name he did greet her,
And gave her thanks graciously.

‘Well,’ she cried, ‘hide naught from me!
Will he have me, think you, for love?’
He said: ‘I think so, by all above;
He is serious, I’d say, this knight,
Courteous, prudent, able quite
To show restraint, and on his part,
He doth know how to hide his heart.
On your behalf I gave him greeting,
And offered him your belt and ring.
Round his waist he tied the cincture,
And set the ring upon his finger.
Yet he said no further word to me.’
‘Did he receive them for love of me?
For if he did not, then it may be
I am betrayed, and woe is me.’
‘In truth, I know not,’ he replied,
‘Know only what I have surmised:
If he did not affect your cause,
He’d have accepted naught of yours.’
‘You speak lightly of it,’ said she,
‘But I believe he’ll not have me.
Nonetheless I wish him no ill,
And, I say, I will love him still.
And if he bears hatred for me,
Then I’ll die the more worthily.
Never through you or any other
Would I ere seek to discover
Aught from him, of all I say.
Myself I’d show him, from this day,
How this love of mine torments me,
If he but remained in this country.’
The chamberlain at once replied:
‘The king will keep him at his side,
Lady, a year, most certainly,
That he may serve him loyally.
And thus you will be at leisure
To show him all your pleasure.’

Knowing Eliduc would remain,
She felt a lessening of her pain,
She was delighted with his stay.

The Lay of Eliduc: An honest conversation

YET she knew naught of his dismay,
Since he'd seen her; all his fretting;
No joy, no pleasure could life bring,
Except, it seems, his thoughts of her.
Much grief they brought him rather,
For he had promised his wife, to be
Loyal, when far from their country,
That, but for her, he would love none.
Yet now his heart was held in prison.
Now he'd preserve his loyalty,
Yet could not deny indeed that he
Loved and longed for this lady,
Guilliadun, who was so lovely;
To see her, and to speak with her,
To embrace her, and to kiss her,
But so to love her that never
Would it bring on her dishonour;
As much to keep faith with his wife,
As the king he served with his life.
Eliduc was in much distress,
So he mounted and, weapon-less,
Called his companions to him;
He'd go to the castle, see the king.
And the lady, if there he might;
Such he longed for did the knight.
The king had risen from his dinner,
His daughter's room he did enter,
In a game of chess he did engage
With a knight fresh from voyage.
By the board his daughter came
To sit, so she might learn the game.

Eliduc entering at that moment,
The king appeared most content,
And had the knight sit by his side.
Then to his fair daughter, he cried:
‘See here, you should become better
Acquainted with this knight, daughter;
Great honour you may show him then,
The bravest among five hundred men.’
Now, his daughter upon hearing
This instruction from the king,
Was much pleased, and with delight
She rose, and summoned the knight,
Seating herself far from the rest.
Both by love were now oppressed;
She dared not conversation seek,
While he doubted if he should speak,
Until, at last, he thanked her for
Both her presents he now bore;
He held no other gifts so dear.
She replied to the chevalier
That indeed his thanks were pleasing,
For in that hope she’d sent the ring,
And with the cincture did she part,
Hoping it too might win his heart;
A knight she loved, she so adored,
She would have him for her lord.
And if she could not, then she knew
That this one thing indeed was true
That she would have no living man.
Then he spoke his mind, thus began:
‘Lady, great thanks I render you
For your love; I have joy in you.
Since you so love this poor knight,
He cannot but be filled with delight;
But if you think to possess me so,
Then I must be truly bound, I know.
Yet I may not stay for anything;

One year only I serve the king,
For I swore an oath to him that I
Would not depart from his side,
Till the war was over, then anon
To my own country must be gone.
An I would not wish to linger so,
If you but give me leave to go.'
Then the princess, to all she heard,
Said: 'Friend, I thank you for this word,
You prove both wise and courteous,
In taking thought, for both of us,
Of how you should behave to me.
Yet, above all things, I'll love thee.'
Thus they each other did reassure,
And at that time they spoke no more.
To his lodgings Eliduc went,
Filled with joy at her consent,
For he could speak with her often;
And great was the love between them.

The Lay of Eliduc: He is summoned home

NOW, such were the fortunes of war,
That the king, who had before
Begun the conflict, he overcame,
And Eliduc thus ended the same.
He was much prized for his prowess,
His judgement too, and his largesse,
Much good indeed had come to him.
During this time his own lord sent
For him, and three messengers went
To seek for him beyond the sea,
For greatly endangered was he,
That lord, all his strongholds lost,
His lands wasted, and dire the cost.
And he, his lord, now repented sore
Of how he'd parted from him before;

For evil counsel had he received,
And evilly had he been deceived.
The traitors who'd accused him he
Had banished now from his country,
For their meddling, for their vile
Deed, had sent them into exile.
In his great need, he commanded
Summoned, conjured and demanded,
By the allegiance owed since he'd
Paid homage, that he, of loyalty,
Come now to bring his master aid;
The need was great he portrayed.
When Eliduc heard the news, he
Was much grieved for the lady;
He loved her deeply, as before,
And she could not have loved him more.
But they'd not entered into folly,
Or villainy, or falsity;
Exchanging gifts and speech,
And making vows each to each,
That was all they did, you see,
When in each other's company.
That was his hope and his intent,
And to all this she did consent,
Hoping to win him, if she might;
But knew not he was wed, her knight.
'Alas!' said he, 'I work ill, I fear!
Too long have I been lodging here!
And ill goes all in this country!
Now this lady is in love with me,
Guilliadun, the king's daughter,
And loves me deeply, as I do her.
When she must part from me, say I,
One of the two of us must die,
Or both, if that should come to be,
Yet nonetheless I must go,' said he,
'My lord has so commanded me,

And by my oath has conjured me,
As does my wife for her own part.
Now indeed I should guard my heart!
For here I should no more remain;
But rather leave at once, tis plain.
I cannot wed my lover, I vow,
For that the Church doth not allow.
On every side I do meet with ill,
Yet, Lord, how hard the parting still!
But whoever holds her to blame,
I shall hold her free of the same;
All that she wishes I shall do,
Be guided by her counsel too.
The king, her father, rules in peace,
All attacks upon him do cease.
Due to the needs of my own lord,
I will seek leave, and well before
The term of my employment ends,
To go, for I my way must wend.
To the lady I shall go and, there,
Reveal to her all of this affair,
And what she wishes she will say,
And for her I'll do all I may.'

The Lay of Eliduc: He takes his leave

THE knight, right soon you may believe,
Went to the king, and sought his leave.
The matter on hand he made plain,
Showed his orders, and did explain,
That his lord who'd asked him to go,
Was in such need he must do so.
The king read that lord's command,
That he must go, he did understand;
Thoughtful he was and sorrowing.
He made him an offer did the king,
One third of his whole inheritance,

And treasure too he would advance,
If he would depart from him never;
And he would have his favour ever.
'I'faith, at this time, I do confess,
That since my lord is in distress,'
Said Eliduc, 'and asks aid indeed
Of me afar, I must serve his need;
There is no way that I may remain,
Yet if you have need of me again,
I'll return to you, most willingly,
And bring a host of knights with me.'
The king's thanks he did receive,
Who generously gave him leave,
And offered him his choice of all
The rich possessions at his call,
Dogs and horses, gold and silver,
Silk fabrics and many another
Thing of which he took good measure;
Eliduc said if twas his pleasure
He'd go speak to the king's daughter,
And pay his respects thus to her.
The king replied: 'Tis well with me,'
And he sent a maid to go swiftly
And ope the door of the chamber.
Eliduc followed to speak with her,
His love, who, upon seeing him,
Called to him, and welcomed him.
He sought her counsel ere he went,
And briefly he spoke of his intent,
But ere he had revealed all to her,
Or had sought his leave from her,
She was overcome with dolour.
And her face lost all its colour.
Eliduc, seeing her in this state,
Commenced to lament their fate,
Kissed her mouth, now and then,
And then wept tenderly again.

In his embrace he held her tight,
Till her faint was over quite.
'I'faith,' cried he, 'my sweet friend,
Hark to me, and let me defend
Myself, you are my life and death,
And all my comfort, in a breath!
That is why I take counsel of you,
So all betwixt us is good and true.
I must needs visit my country;
And your father grants leave to me;
But I would yet serve your wish,
Whate'er else may come from this.'
'Then take me with you,' she cried,
'Now you'd leave my father's side;
If you will not, then I shall die,
Since if you go, no joy have I.'
Eliduc answered, most tenderly,
That he loved her, and did so truly:
'Fair lady, I am under oath
To your father; if we were both
To go, if I took you away,
I'd be foresworn, and I may
Not break my oath or the term set.
But I may swear, and loyally yet,
That if you let me have my way,
And set a term, and name a day,
And would have me here again,
Naught on earth shall me detain,
As long as I live, you understand;
My fate is wholly in your hands.'
Her love was such, without delay
She set a term, and named a day
For him to come and be with her.
Pain, at parting from each other,
Felt they, gold rings exchanging,
Sweetly kissing, and embracing.
Soon at the shore arrived was he,

And, with a fair wind, crossed the sea,

The Lay of Eliduc: He ends the war in his own country

WHEN he returned to his country
His lord rejoiced most fulsomely,
His kith and kin and his friends,
And all who on him did depend,
And his wife, indeed, above all,
Both fair and wise, as you'll recall.
But he was pensive all day long,
For the love in him was strong,
And naught that he now saw there
Seemed pleasant to him or fair.
No joy would he have, twas plain,
Till he could see his love again.
Much was concealed secretly,
While his wife grieved inwardly,
Not knowing what all this meant,
But sighing, where'er she went.
Often she begged of him to say
If any accused her, in any way,
Of doing aught that proved ill,
While he was yet absent still;
Willingly, she would make redress,
Yet there was naught to confess.
'Lady,' said he, 'none doth accuse
You of aught, nor brought ill news.
But in the country where I was
I swore to the king that, as he was
In great need, I would soon return,
And serve him there again in turn.
Once my lord wins peace with honour,
I'll not remain a week longer;
And great worry, must I suffer,
Before I may return, moreover.
And until I may return,' said he,

‘No joy do I have in aught I see.
For I would serve both loyally.’
Henceforth his wife she let him be.
Eliduc went now to serve his lord,
His best counsel did him afford,
Aided him greatly in command,
Bravely defended all the land;
And when the time appointed came
The day that the lady had named,
He ensured that there was peace,
And war with his foes had ceased;
Thus was ready to sheathe his sword,
And lead his company abroad.
Two nephews he greatly loved,
And his chamberlain would remove
With him – he’d given him counsel
And been his messenger as well –
But none else, only his squires.
This number met all his desires.
And he made them swear to hide
All his affairs from those outside.

The Lay of Eliduc: He returns to the lady

HE now took ship, without delay,
And over the sea it made its way.
Soon he’d arrived in that country
Where he had most longed to be.
Eliduc was most circumspect,
Far from the port he did elect
To lodge, so he would not be seen,
And so be recognised, I mean.
He summoned his chamberlain,
And sent him to his love again,
To say that he was there, and tell
Her that he’d kept faith as well.
That night, when all were asleep,

She must secretly leave the keep;
His chamberlain would go to her
And bring her to meet him there.
The chamberlain changed his dress,
On foot he hastened, to address
His mission, heading to the keep
Where the king and all did sleep.
He found her chamber readily,
And within he sought the lady.
He gave her greetings and then
Said her love had returned again.
When she had heard his news
She was happy, and confused,
Most tenderly she shed a tear
Of joy, and kissed the messenger.
He told her the whole scheme as well,
How she must leave when evening fell;
Then he stayed with her all that day,
Planning how they might slip away;
And that night, when all were asleep,
He and the lady fled the keep,
They kept together, went silently,
And all they did, did cautiously,
For they feared lest any man see.
Under a short mantle, she
Wore a silk dress, so I am told,
Lightly embroidered in gold,
Far from the gate, all in the dark,
They reached a wood, near the park
Below the palace, where her lover
Waited for her, on his charger.

The Lay of Eliduc: The lovers sail for his country; the truth is exposed

TO him the chamberlain now led her,
Eliduc dismounted, and kissed her.
Great joy was there at this meeting.

Then they mounted and took wing;
Thus, grasping tightly to the reins,
They spurred on o'er hill and plain,
Came to the harbour at Totness,
And so embarked, without distress.
There sailed in that vessel none
But himself, his men, and Guiliadun.
Theirs was a good wind and tide,
And all was clear weather beside,
But when they were nigh his country,
A gale blew up from out the sea,
And in the wind they did labour,
As it drove them far from harbour;
The spars were shattered and fell,
Their sails it ripped apart as well.
They called on God most fervently,
And to the Virgin, to Our Lady,
From whose Son they sought aid,
And to Saint Nicholas they prayed,
And Saint Clement, that he favour
The ship, and bring it safe to harbour;
But the vessel, now far from cover
Was driven thus hither and thither.
Much pressed were they by the gale.
One of the squires now gave a hail,
To the bridge, crying: 'What use?
Sire, this gale you have let loose,
It is through you that we must die,
And never come to shore, say I!
You, my lord, have a loyal wife
Yet love this other, upon my life,
Against God, and against the law,
Against right and faith, and more.
Then let us drown her in the sea,
That we might reach our own country!'
Eliduc heard what he did cry,
And was much angered thereby.

'Foul traitor, mad son of a whore,
Wretched fool, not one word more!
If I could leave my love,' he hissed,
'I'd make you pay dearly for this.'
But he held her tight in his arms,
And sought to keep her from harm,
From the storm that wildly stirred,
And the words that she had heard,
That a wife her lover possessed
In that land, as his man confessed.
She fainted there in his embrace,
Full pale, the colour fled her face.
In her faint she sighed not a breath,
But only lay there as if in death.
They helped to lay her down so,
To seek if she were dead or no.
Eliduc, torn by grief, arose
Ran to the squire, with him did close,
Then seized an oar and with a blow
Struck the man and laid him low.
Then taking by the feet the knave
Slung his corpse into the wave.
After throwing him into the sea,
He took to the rudder, hurriedly,
And so governed the ship that he,
Brought them all to port in safety,
And once he was truly at anchor
Lowered a gangway to the shore.
Yet his love as one dead still lay,
And all her state did him dismay.
Eliduc was now filled with grief;
He'd caused her death, twas his belief.
Of his companions he demanded
To know where, as they'd landed,
They advised she should be borne;
For from her side he'd not be torn.
Hereabouts, she must be interred,

With much honour, and holy word,
In a cemetery, declared the knight;
As a king's daughter, twas her right.

The Lay of Eliduc: Guilliadun appears dead

HIS friends were as yet dismayed,
Not one suggestion had they made;
So Eliduc set himself to consider
To what place they should bear her.
His stronghold was near to the sea,
Thus they might reach it easily;
There was a forest round the keep
That was a good twenty leagues deep,
And a saintly hermit lived there,
With a small chapel in his care.
He'd lived there forty years or more,
Eliduc had talked with him before.
To him, he said, they'd carry her,
And in that chapel would her inter.
And he would donate much land,
On which an abbey there should stand,
With it a convent for the nuns,
A monastery, a group of canons,
Who for her soul would pray daily,
That God might show her mercy!
He had the horses brought, and he
Mounted then with his company,
But an oath he made them swear,
That they would hide this affair.
Before him there on his palfrey
He bore his love, most tenderly;
And thus, taking the direct road,
They soon reached the forest abode.
Before the chapel thus they came,
And he called out the hermit's name.
But there was neither answer nor

Did any come to unlock the door.
One of his men climbed the wall,
And opened the door for them all.
Eight days before, the holy man
Had died, and Eliduc now found
A new built-tomb on that ground.
His friends sought to dig a grave
For his love, but he first did crave
To know if such a place was right.
'Not yet, my friends,' said the knight,
'Not before I have counsel to hand,
And that of the wisest in this land,
To know if here the grave should be,
Or in some church, or some abbey.
We'll lay her down before the altar,
And so to God we'll commend her.'
To him he had his cloak brought,
With it a bier for her he wrought,
He laid her down upon this bed,
And left her there, as if for dead.

The Lay of Eliduc: He frequents the chapel where her body lies

YET, on preparing to depart,
The grief did almost stop his heart.
His gaze fell, his head did bow,
'Fair one,' said he, 'to God I vow
That I shall not bear arms again,
Nor in such life as mine remain!
Fair friend, ill your first sight of me;
And to ill, love, you've followed me!
You may not now be queen, tis true,
Nor I show that faithful love to you,
With which you loved so loyally.
My heart sorrows for you greatly.
When I have interred you, I say,
I'll become a monk, and so do pray.

And every day by your sepulchre,
I will refresh my grief, in prayer.’
Thus he parted from his amour,
And shut again the chapel door.
From his lodgings now he sent
A message that his way he bent
Towards his wife soon, though he
Was tired and weary from the sea.
When she heard, she was joyful,
And she prepared for his arrival;
A fair welcome she would give.
But little pleasure she did receive,
For he showed her no fair seeming,
Nor did he speak her fair greeting.
She dared not ask him the reason;
Two days he was there and gone;
He’d hear mass each day at morn
And then to the road he was sworn;
To the forest chapel took his way,
Where the body of his lover lay.
In seeming death still she did lie,
Without a waking breath or sigh.
And yet it seemed to him a wonder
White and red was yet her colour;
Through them a faint pallor ranged,
Else her complexion was unchanged.
He wept with anguish so to see her,
While for her soul he said a prayer;
And when all his prayers were done,
He returned thence to his mansion.

The Lay of Eliduc: His secret is discovered

ONE day his wife sent forth a squire,
To whom she told all her desire,
That he must watch as Eliduc
Left home, and see which way he took;

She promised the squire a reward;
Far he must go, and watch his lord,
And tell her where twas he went;
Horse and arms to him did present.
He then her orders did follow,
To the wood after his lord did go,
Who indeed perceived him not.
To the chapel now they had got,
Which he saw his master enter,
And heard the grief he did suffer.
As soon as Eliduc was through,
The squire sped to his lady too,
And told her all that he had heard,
The noise, the grief, every word
That arose from the hermitage.
Curiosity through her did rage.
The lady said: 'Soon we shall go
And search the hermitage; know
That my lord must be on his way
To speak with the king this day.
The hermit has died, such is true,
And my husband loved him too,
But he would ne'er show such grief
For him alone, tis my belief.'
Awhile, she let the squire go.
That day, after noontide, though,
Eliduc went to see the king,
And so, with the squire leading,
To the chapel she made her way,
And, before the altar, there lay
The bier and the lady, in repose,
As lovely as a fresh-blown rose;
Uncovering the drape about her,
Finding she was long and slender,
Slim the arms, white the hands,
And the fingers thin and elegant,
Here then lay the truth; in brief,

Here was the object of his grief.

The Lay of Eliduc: Guilliadun is revived

SHE called the squire to her side,
‘See you now this lady,’ she cried,
Showing him the wondrous sight,
‘Her beauty as a gemstone bright?
She must be some friend of my lord,
She for whom such tears are poured.
I’faith I cannot wonder at all his
Grief, when one so fair has perished.
I love so, and regret, this treasure,
Nevermore shall I seek pleasure.’
And her eyes shed tears of pity
As she began to mourn the lady.
As she sat weeping by the bier,
A little weasel did appear,
From behind the altar it ran;
At which the squire, stick in hand,
As it passed by the lady’s head,
Dealt a blow, and left it for dead.
Into a corner the weasel he cast.
Only a few moments had passed,
When its companion came that way,
And, seeing where the creature lay,
Round head and feet it then began
To glide, and so in circles ran
Until on finding it did not rise,
Driven by sorrow, away did hie;
Out of the chapel, it was gone,
By the wood, the herbs among,
And seized a flower in its teeth,
Scarlet coloured, from the heath.
Swiftly returning, now the creature
Set the flower in such a manner
In the mouth of its companion,

Which the squire had but stunned,
That soon its mate revived again.
The lady saw; to her squire cried:
'Seize the flower!' His stick he plied,
Threw it so that the creatures fled,
Leaving the flower of brightest red.
She carried the flower to the bier,
And swiftly then, bending near,
Set it between the lady's teeth;
That fairest flower of the heath.
She waited then and, by and by,
The lady, reviving, gave a sigh,
Her eyes opened then she spoke:
'Lord, she said, when she awoke,
'How I have slept!' Then the wife
Gave thanks for her return to life.
On asking the lady for her name,
This then was the reply that came:
'Lady, Logres my birth did see,
A king's daughter, of that country,
Am I, and there I loved a knight,
Eliduc, a man of great might;
Together with him, I came here.
He sinned, deceiving me, I fear,
For he has a wife, and did never,
Tell me of her, or reveal it ever.
When of his wife I heard tell,
Into a deathly faint I fell;
And he hath left me villainously
All alone in a strange country.
He betrayed me, you understand,
A fool, she who believes a man!'
'Lady,' was Guidelüec's retort,
'In all this world there is naught
That now grants him the least joy,
Go and ask any in his employ.
He thinks indeed you are as dead,

And wondrously is discomforted.
Every day he views you though,
Yet thinks each day to find it so.
I am his wife, betrayed tis true,
But my heart doth pity him too.
Because of the grief he did show,
I wished to see where he did go,
I followed him, yet you I find;
You live, and joy fills my mind.
Together with me shall you go,
And find again your dear love, so.
Upon him I would make no claim,
But take the veil, in God's name.'

The Lay of Eliduc: He returns to find her alive

THUS was the lady comforted,
And to the castle she was led.
The squire now was sent abroad,
And commanded to seek his lord,
He rode swiftly till he was found;
And once before him did sound
The news, telling Eliduc all.
For his horse did Eliduc call;
Waiting for none other beside,
That night to his keep he did ride.
When he found his love in life,
Tenderly he thanked his wife.
He felt pleasure without alloy
Never had he known such joy.
Full often did he kiss the lady,
And she too kissed him sweetly;
They felt great joy in one another.
When she saw them both together,
Guildelüec addressed her husband,
And his leave did now demand,
That she might go, from him part,

So to serve God, with all her heart.
Land he should grant her where she
Might in his realm found an abbey.
And he could then marry his love,
For the Church did no way approve
That he should maintain two wives,
Nor was the law there so devised.
Eliduc agreed to her intent,
And willingly gave his consent.
He would do all that she required,
And grant the land that she desired.
In the woodland near the castle,
By the hermitage and the chapel,
There he built her a nunnery,
And he edified it, variously,
Endowing it with lands galore,
All that was needed and more.
When all was done without fail,
Guildelüec then took the veil.
And established her new order,
With thirty nuns there beside her.

The Lay of Eliduc: He weds his love; later they enter the religious life

ELIDUC now wed his lover,
With much grace and honour,
And fine was the feast, I say,
When he married her on a day.
They lived in peace, many a year,
In perfect love, she his most dear.
Alms and grants did they afford,
Wealth consecrated to the Lord.
Near the castle on the other side,
On taking counsel did he decide
There to build a monastery.
All the rest of his land gave he,
All his gold, and all his silver,

And there he set, to be together,
A group of men of true religion,
To found an order, as was done.
When all was ready, then the two,
Once there was naught left to do,
Fulfilled, jointly, their intent,
To serve the Lord Omnipotent.
Beside his first wife he now set
The wife he loved dearly as yet,
And she received her as a sister
And held her in deepest honour;
To serve God she implored her,
Teaching the rule of her order.
They prayed to God, to defend
And grant mercy to their friend.
And he prayed for them in turn.
They sent fair messages, to learn
How things went in either place,
And to their hearts to bring solace.
And all strove as best they might
To love God, both day and night;
So made an end there, passing fine,
Thanks be to God; the Truth Divine.
Of the adventure of these three,
The Bretons, of their courtesy,
In remembrance, wrought a lay;
That none forget, to our own day.

Note: It may be that the reviving flower intended here was that of the Scarlet Pimpernel (Anagallis Arvensis), a cure-all in herbal lore, of which the old rhyme says: 'No heart can think, nor tongue can tell, the virtues of the pimpernel.' A plant of cleared land, it also grows on wastes, on sandy heaths, and in lightly cultivated areas.

The End of the Lais

The End of the Lay of Milun

