

PROLOGUE TO THE *LAI*S

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1992

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In your honor, noble king,⁵

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

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

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

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

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