
*The Lais of
Marie de France*

TRANSLATED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby

*Second Edition with two further lais
in the original Old French*

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VII

YONEC

Now that I have begun to compose lays, I shall not cease my effort but shall relate fully in rhyme the adventures that I know. It is my intention and desire henceforth to tell you about Yonec, under what circumstances he was born and how his father, whose name was Muldumarec, first met his mother. [1-10]

In Britain there once lived a rich old man who held the fief of Caerwent and was acknowledged lord of the land.¹ The city lay on the River Duellas and formerly ships could reach it. This man was very old and, because his inheritance would be large, he took a wife in order to have children, who would be his heirs. The maiden who was given to the rich man was from a noble family, wise, courtly and extremely beautiful. He loved her greatly on account of her beauty, but because she was so fair and noble, he took good care to watch over her and locked her in his tower in a large paved chamber. He had a sister, old and widowed, without a husband, and he placed her with the lady to keep her from going astray. There were other women, I believe, in a separate room, but the lady would never have spoken to them without the old woman's permission. [11-36]

Thus he held her for seven years – they never had any children – and she did not leave the tower either for family or friend. When the lord went to bed, there was neither chamberlain nor door-keeper who would have dared enter the chamber to light a candle before him. The lady was in great distress, and she wept and sighed so much that she lost her beauty, as happens to any woman who fails to take care of herself. She would herself have preferred death to take her quickly.

It was the beginning of the month of April, when the birds sing their songs, that the lord arose in the early morning and prepared to set out for the woods. He had made the old woman get up and lock the doors after him. When she had done his bidding, he left

with his men. The old woman carried her psalter from which she intended to recite psalms. [37-59] The lady lay awake weeping and looking at the sunlight. She noticed that the old woman had left the room and grieved, sighed and lamented tearfully: 'Alas,' she said, 'that ever I was born! My destiny is hard indeed. I am a prisoner in this tower and death alone will free me. What is this jealous old man afraid of, to keep me so securely imprisoned? He is extremely stupid and foolish, always fearing that he will be betrayed. I can neither go to church nor hear God's service. I could put on a friendly mien for him, even without any desire to do so, if I could talk to people and join them in amusement. Cursed be my parents and all those who gave me to this jealous man and married me to his person! I pull and tug on a strong rope! He will never die. When he should have been baptized, he was plunged into the river of Hell, for his sinews are hard, and so are his veins which are full of living blood. I have often heard tell that in this country one used to encounter adventures which relieved those afflicted by care: knights discovered maidens to their liking, noble and fair, and ladies found handsome and courtly lovers, worthy and valiant men. There was no fear of reproach and they alone could see them. If this can be and ever was, if it ever did happen to anyone, may almighty God grant my wish!' [60-104]

Having lamented thus, she noticed the shadow of a large bird through a narrow window, but did not know what it could be. The bird flew into the room: it had straps on its feet and looked like a hawk of five or six moultings. It landed before the lady, and after it had been there for a while for her to see, it turned into a fair and noble knight. The lady was astounded by this. Her face became flushed, and she trembled and covered her head, being very afraid. The knight was extremely courtly and spoke to her first: 'Lady, do not be afraid! The hawk is a noble bird. Even if its secrets remain a mystery to you, be assured that you are safe, and make me your beloved! This is the reason I came here. I have loved you for a long time and desired you greatly in my heart. I never loved any woman but you, nor shall I ever love another. Yet I could not come to you, nor leave my country, unless you had wished for me; but now I can be your beloved!' The lady, now assured, uncovered her head and spoke. She answered the knight,

saying that she would make him her lover, provided he believed in God, which would make their love possible. He was very handsome and never in her life had she seen such a handsome knight, nor would she ever again. [105-44] 'Lady,' he said, 'you are right. I would not on any account want guilt, distrust or suspicion to attach to me. I do believe in the Creator who set us free from the sorrow in which our ancestor Adam put us by biting the bitter apple. He is, will be and always has been life and light to sinners. If you do not believe this of me, send for your chaplain. Tell him that an illness has come upon you and that you want to hear the service that God has established in this world for the redemption of sinners. I shall assume your appearance, receive the body of Christ, and recite all of my credo for you. Never doubt me on this count.' She replied that he had spoken well. He lay down next to her on the bed, but did not intend to touch, embrace or kiss her. Then the old woman returned, and when she found the lady awake she told her it was time to get up and that she would bring her clothes. The lady said that she was ill and she must ensure that the chaplain came quickly to her, for she was very much afraid of dying. The old woman said: 'Be patient now! My lord has gone to the woods. No one but me may enter here.' The lady was very afraid and pretended to faint, and when the old woman saw her she was greatly alarmed. She opened the door of the chamber and sent for the priest, who came as quickly as possible, bringing the *corpus domini*. The knight received it and drank the wine from the chalice, whereupon the chaplain left and the old woman closed the doors. [145-90]

The lady lay next to her beloved: I never saw so fair a couple. When they had laughed and sported and exchanged confidences, the knight took his leave, for he wanted to return to his own country. She begged him gently to come back and see her often. 'Lady,' he said, 'whenever it pleases you, I shall be with you within the hour, but observe moderation so that we are not discomfited. This old woman will betray us and keep watch over us night and day. When she notices our love, she will tell her lord about it. If this should happen as I say and we are betrayed in this way, I shall have no way of preventing my death.' [191-210]

Thereupon the knight departed and left his beloved in great joy. The next day she arose quite recovered and was very happy

that week. She looked after herself well and her beauty was quite restored. Now she was more content just to remain where she was than to amuse herself in any other way, for she wanted to see her beloved often and to take her pleasure with him as soon as her lord left. Night and day, early or late, he was hers whenever she wanted. Now may she, with God's grace, long enjoy her love! The great joy she often experienced on seeing her lover caused her appearance to alter. Her husband was very cunning and noticed that she was different from her usual self. He was suspicious of his sister, but spoke to her one day and said that he was astonished that the lady attired herself thus, asking what this might mean. The old woman replied that she did not know, for no one could speak to her nor did she have a friend or beloved, except that she had noticed that she remained alone more willingly than before. The lord then replied: 'In faith, that I believe! Now you must do something: in the morning when I have got up and you have locked the doors, pretend to go outside and leave her to lie alone. Stay in a secret place and watch to see what it can be that keeps her so joyful.' With this plan they parted. Alas! how ill-served were they on whom he wanted to spy in order to betray and trap them. [211-56]

Three days later, I heard tell, the lord pretended to leave, telling his wife that the king had summoned him by letter, but that he would soon be back. He then left the chamber and closed the door. The old woman arose and hid behind a curtain from where it was easy for her to hear and satisfy her curiosity. The lady lay there without sleeping, for she greatly desired her beloved who came without delay, in no time at all. They were full of joy to be with each other, to talk and exchange glances, until it was time to get up, for then the knight had to go. The old woman saw and took note of how he came and went, but was very much afraid because she saw him one moment a man and another a hawk. When the lord, who had not been far away, returned, she explained the truth about the knight. He was most distressed by this and quickly made traps to kill the knight. He had large iron spikes forged and the tips more sharply pointed than any razor. When he had prepared and cut barbs in them, he set them on the window, close together and well-positioned, in the place through which the knight passed whenever he came to see the lady. Oh God! if only

he had known the treachery that the villain was preparing. [257-96]

The next morning the lord arose before daybreak and said that he intended to go hunting. The old woman went to see him off and then returned to bed, for dawn was not yet visible. The lady was awake, waiting for the man she loved faithfully, and said that he could now come and be with her quite at leisure. When she summoned him, he left without delay and flew through the window, but the spikes were in front of it. One of them pierced his body and the red blood flowed out. When he realized that he was mortally wounded, he freed himself from the prongs and entered. He sat down on the bed beside the lady, covering all the sheets in blood, and when she saw the blood and the wound she was grievously alarmed. He said to her: 'My sweet beloved, for love of you I am losing my life. I told you what would come of it: your appearance would slay us.' When she heard this, she fell into a swoon, and for a while seemed dead. He comforted her tenderly, saying that grief was of no avail, and telling her she was with child by him and would have a worthy and valiant son to comfort her. She was to call him Yonec, and he would avenge both of them and kill his enemy. [297-332]

He could remain no longer, for his wound was bleeding continuously, and he left in great pain, with her following him with loud cries. She escaped through a window, but it was a wonder she did not kill herself, for she had to jump a good twenty feet. Naked but for her shift, she followed the trail of blood which flowed from the knight on to the path she was taking and to which she kept until she came to a hill. In this hill there was an opening, all covered in his blood, but she could see nothing beyond and therefore assumed that her beloved had entered there. She hurriedly went in, but finding no light, followed the straight path until she emerged on the other side of the hill, in a beautiful meadow. She found the grass wet with blood, which alarmed her greatly, and followed the trail through the meadow. [333-59] There was a city nearby, completely enclosed by a wall, where there was not a house, hall or tower which did not seem to be made of solid silver. The state rooms were especially rich. Over towards the town were the marshes, the forests and the enclosures, and in the other direction, towards the keep, a stream flowed all around, where the ships used

to arrive, and there were more than three hundred sails. Downstream the gate was unlocked, and so the lady entered the town, still following the fresh blood through the centre of the town up to the castle. No one at all spoke to her, for she encountered neither man nor woman. She came to the paved entrance of the palace and found it covered in blood, and when she went into a beautiful chamber she found a knight sleeping, but did not recognize him and continued into another, larger, room. There, finding nothing but a bed with a knight sleeping on it, she passed through. She entered the third room and found her beloved's bed. The bedposts were of pure gold, and I cannot estimate the worth of the bedclothes. The candles and the candelabra, lit by both night and day, were worth all the gold in an entire city. [360-92] As soon as she saw the knight she recognized him, and approached in alarm, falling over him in a swoon. He who loved her deeply took her in his arms and lamented his misfortune repeatedly. When she had recovered, he comforted her gently: 'Fair beloved, in God's name, have mercy! Go away! Flee from here! I shall die soon, before daybreak. There would be such grief here if you were found, and you would be tormented, for my people would know that they had lost me because of my love for you. I am sad and troubled for your sake.' The lady said to him: 'Beloved, I should rather die together with you than suffer with my husband. If I go back to him, he will kill me.' The knight reassured her, gave her a ring, and told her that as long as she kept it her husband would remember nothing that had happened and would not keep her in custody. He gave and commended to her his sword, then enjoined her to prevent any man from ever taking possession of it, but to keep it for the use of her son. [393-424] When he had grown up and become a worthy and valiant knight, she should take him and her husband to a feast. They would come to an abbey and at a tomb they would visit, they would again hear about his death and how he was unjustly killed. There she would give the sword to his son who was to be told the story of his birth and who his father was. Then they would see what he would do. When he had explained everything to her, he gave her a costly tunic, and ordered her to put it on. Then he made her leave him, and she went away wearing the ring and carrying the sword that comforted her. She had not gone half a league from the city when she heard the bells ringing

and the lamentation in the castle. She swooned four times with grief and, when she recovered, made her way towards the hill, which she passed through and arrived back in her own region. She remained afterwards a long time together with her husband, who made no accusations against her, and neither slandered nor mocked her. [425-56]

Their son was born and well brought up, well protected and well loved. They called him Yonec and in the whole kingdom there was not a fairer, worthier, more valiant or more generous man to be found. When he had come of age, they had him dubbed a knight, but now listen to what happened that same year!

As was the custom of the country the lord had been summoned with his friends to the feast of St Aaron, which was celebrated in Caerleon and in several other cities. He took his wife and son and dressed himself richly; so it was that they set out, not knowing exactly where they were going. With them was a young lad who led them along the straight road until they came to a castle, fairer than any other in the whole world. Inside there was an abbey with very holy people, where the squire who was taking them to the feast found them lodgings. They were well served and honoured in the abbot's chamber, and next morning went to hear mass. Then they intended to leave, but the abbot came to talk to them and begged them to stay, for he wanted to show them his dormitory, his chapter-house and his refectory, and since they were well-lodged, the lord consented to stay. [457-92]

That day after dinner they visited the various rooms. First they came to the chapter-house where they found a great tomb covered with a cloth of striped brocade with a band of rich gold material running through it. At the head, feet and sides, there were twenty lighted candles. The candelabra were of fine gold, and the censers which were used by day to honour the tomb with fragrance, of amethyst. They inquired of the inhabitants whose tomb it was and who lay there. At this, the inhabitants began to weep and said amidst their tears that it was the best knight, the strongest and the fiercest, the fairest and the most beloved, who had ever been born. He had been king of that land and none had ever been as courtly. He had been destroyed at Caerwent and killed for the love of a lady [493-520]: 'We have never since had a lord, but, just as he said and commanded, we have waited long for a son he gave the

lady.' When the lady heard this news, she called aloud to her son: 'Fair son, you have heard how God has brought us here! It is your father who lies here, whom this old man unjustly killed. Now I commend and hand over to you his sword, for I have kept it long enough.' For all to hear, she revealed to him that this was his father and he his son, how he used to come to her and how her husband had betrayed him. She told him the truth, fell into a faint on the tomb, and, while unconscious, died. She never spoke again, but when her son saw she was dead, he struck off his stepfather's head, and thus with his father's sword avenged his mother's grief. When what had happened became known throughout the city, they took the lady in great honour and laid her in the tomb. Before leaving this place they made Yonec their lord. [521-50]

Those who heard this story long afterwards composed a lay from it, about the sorrow and grief that they suffered for love. [551-4]