

**Marie de France: “Laüstic” (c.1180)
translated by Jack Ross**

Marie from France

Nobody really knows anything much about Marie de France. It’s assumed that her name, “Marie from France,” denotes more than simply a label of convenience for grouping various verse narratives composed in Norman French in the late twelfth century—that she was more of an individual than, say, Mother Goose, or Scheherazade—but it would be hard to prove it definitively.

“Mary from France” does imply that this might have been an *unusual* distinction, though. Hence the assumption that she wrote in England rather than France. Certain dialectal variations in her choices of words would also seem to imply an English rather than a continental point of origin for her tales. As well as her *Lais* (short stories in verse: a tradition associated with Brittany—hence “Breton Lais”), she translated Aesop’s *Fables* from Middle English into French, and may have composed a couple of Saint’s Lives as well.

The *Lais* themselves remain our main source of information about their author—in fact, her name was deduced from a line in one of her own poems: “*Marie ai nun, si sui de France*” [my name is Mary and I come from France] (Ewert, 1978, p.v). From them we can tell that she had a fairly close acquaintanceship with the details of courtly life, was preoccupied with matters of love and (especially) marital relationships, and was by no means entirely in line with Catholic orthodoxy in her view of women’s rights to sexual freedom.

Laüstic

This is the second shortest of her *lais* (after “Chevrefoil”), and, to my mind, one of the most effective. The idea of the nightingale as the symbol of the love between the two protagonists—who remain unnamed throughout—seems strangely modern, as does the pared-down precision of the storytelling.

We have the lady, we have her (we assume, though we’re never directly told) abusive husband, and we have her (again, we assume) somewhat feckless next-door neighbour. The

lovers look at each other through the window and sigh. Finally the husband puts an end to it in a particularly cruel but (one must admit) inventive way.

The only punishment inflicted on any of them is, paradoxically, the most effective one of all: to have their story told by singers and poets. One of these (possibly the last of a long line) is Marie de France.

Translation

There are various ways of approaching Marie de France's *lais*. Perhaps the simplest is simply to translate her precise, supple couplets into modern prose. That is what Paul Tuffrau did in his 1959 book *Les Lais: Transposés en français moderne*. Another technique might be to expand her terse verse narratives into more conventional folktales. This is what James Reeves attempted in his charming 1975 illustrated children's version *The Shadow of the Hawk*.

Having looked at both of these options, and experimented with various ways of recasting her verse into a more contemporary idiom, I was forced to conclude that the essence of her storytelling is bound up with its form. Again and again, it is the neat turn of a couplet that contains the slight ironic charge that sets her apart from other, more pedestrian medieval versifiers.

Rather against my will, I decided that only a translation into tetrameter couplets could possibly convey much of the feeling of "Laüstic" in its original language. The curse of the heroic couplet lies over rhyming pentameter couplets in English, so I decided to stick with Marie's French tetrameters, despite the fact that the prosody of the two languages can never really be made to match: English has its heavy, accent-drive lines (and its unfortunate paucity of rhymes); French its syllable-counting and its smooth line-closing formulas: *ceo m'est vis* [so it seems to me], or *Sulunc l'usage e la manere* [according to usage and custom].

The result of these line-fillers is to make the verse flow evenly and uninterruptedly, but the effect can be a little difficult to reproduce in English. I therefore chose for my model the rather rougher but (to my mind) equally effective tetrameter couplets of John Gower's fourteenth century *Confessio Amantis* (wonderfully pastiched by Shakespeare at the beginning of his late play *Pericles*).

My version has tuned out to be twenty lines shorter than Marie's, but I still felt it was useful to print the two side by side to facilitate comparison. I've also felt it necessary at times to attribute motivations rather more directly than she does, but that (I suspect) is as much a matter of temperament as it is of linguistic bias.

Why?

Why, finally, this poem? Ever since I started to translate them, Marie's verse short stories have given me the feeling of a very individual sensibility and artfulness. As a miniaturist, she perhaps invites comparison with Jane Austen; as a poet of extremities of emotion conveyed in very economical terms, she seems to me more analogous to the lady diarists and romancers of the Japanese Heian court: Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, or Izumi Shikibu.

Like them, she has been forced to find subtle ways of adapting herself to a rigid and authoritarian court system in order to convey her counter-code of intense (yet understated) feeling. The results—like her two lovers—continue to speak to us across the gap of a thousand years.

Marie de France :

Laüstic

*Une aventure vus dirai,
Dunt li bretun firent un lai;
Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,
Si l'apelent en lur païs;
Ceo est russignol en franceis
E nihtegale en dreit engleis.
En seint mallo en la cuntree
Ot une vile renumee.
Deus chevalers ilec manëent
E deus forz maisuns (i) aveient.
Pur la bunté des deus baruns
Fu de la vile bons li nuns.
Li uns aveit femme espusee,
Sage, curteise e acemee;
A merveille se teneit chiere
Sulunc l'usage e la manere.
Li autres fu un bachelers
Bien coneü entre ses pers
De prüesce, de grant valur,
E volenters feseit honur:*

[ll.1-20]

The Nightingale

The story that I'll tell today
the Bretons made into a lay:
Laüstic they called the tale
French *rossignol*—or nightingale.

By Saint Malo there was a town
famed far and wide, of great renown.
Two knights lived there in luxury:
fine houses, servants, horses, money.
One had married a lady fair
wise, discreet and debonair
(she kept her temper wonderfully
considering her company)¹.
The other was a bachelor
well known among the townsfolk there
for his courage and his courtesy
and for treating people honourably.²

¹ The French here conveys more conventional praise of her good manners, but to avoid unnecessary repetition, I thought it might be as well to foreshadow her mistreatment by this “baron.”

² Again, the contrast seems designed to bring out the wealth of the one knight and the somewhat quixotic good deeds and charity of the other.

*Mut turnëot e despendeit
E bien donot ceo qu'il aveit.
La femme sun veisin ama;
Tant la requist, tant la preia
E tant par ot en lui grant bien
Que ele l'ama sur tute rien,
Tant pur le bien quë ele oï,
Tant pur ceo qu'il iert pres de li.
Sagement e bien s'entr'amerent;
Mut se covrirent e garderent
Qu'il ne feussent aparceüz.
Ne desturbez ne mescreüz.
E eus le poeient bien fere,
Kar pres esteient lur repere,
Preceines furent lur maisuns
E lur sales e lur dunguns;
N'i aveit bare ne devise
Fors un haut mur de piere bise.
Des chambres u la dame jut,
Quant a la fenestre s'estut,*

[ll.21-40]

He went to all the tournaments,
(neglecting solider investments)
and loved the wife of his neighbour.
He begged so many boons from her
she felt he *had* to be deserving
and loved him more than anything—
as much for the good he'd done before
as for the fact he lived next door.³

Wisely and well they loved each other
avoiding undue fuss and bother
by keeping everything discreet.
This was the way they managed it:
because their houses stood side by side
there wasn't much they couldn't hide
behind those solid walls of stone.
The lady, when she was alone,
would go to the window of her room

³ The irony in the original is subtle, but unquestionably there. The precise manner of their falling in love could not be said to be unduly romanticised.

*Poeit parler a sun ami
De l'autre part, e il a li,
E lur aveirs entrechangier
E par geter e par lancier.
N'unt gueres rien que lur despleise,
Mut esteient amdui a eise,
Fors tant k'il ne poënt venir
Del tut ensemble a lur pleisir;
Kar la dame ert estreit gardee,
Quant cil esteit en la cuntree.
Mes de tant aveient retur,
U fust par nuit u fust par jur,
Que ensemble poeient parler;
Nul nes poeit de ceo garder
Que a la fenestre n'i venissent
E iloeec (ne) s'entreveïssent.
Lungement se sunt entr'amé,
Tant que ceo vient a un esté,
Que bruil e pre sunt reverdi
E li vergier ierent fluri.*

[ll.41-60]

and lean across to talk to him.
They swapped small tokens of their love:
he from below, she from above.⁴

Nothing interfered with them.
No-one noticed, or poked blame.
However, they could not aspire
to reach the peak of their desire
because there was so strict a guard
on all her movements. It was hard,
but still they had the consolation
of leaning out in any season
to exchange sighs across the gap.
No-one could stop *that* access up.

They loved each other for so long
that summer came—green buds, birdsong:
the orchards waxed into full bloom
bringing amorous airs with them,

⁴ There's nothing in the French to imply that the two windows are not on a level, but I've preferred to imagine them slightly on a slant here, thus lending some small aid to the lady's throwing arm.

*Cil oiselet par grant duçur
Maintent lur joie en sum la flur.
Ki amur ad a sun talent,
N'est merveille s'il i entent.
Del chevaler vus dirai veir:
Il i entent a sun poeir,
E la dame de l'autre part
E de parler e de regart.
Les nuiz, quant la lune luseit
E ses sires cuché esteit,
Dejuste lui sovent levot
E de sun mantel se afulot.
A la fenestre ester veneit
Pur sun ami qu'el i saveit
Que autreteu vie demenot,
(que) le plus de la nuit veillot.
Delit aveient al veer,
Quant plus ne poeient aver.
Tant i estut, tant i leva
Que ses sires s'en curuça*

[ll.61-80]

and little birds carolled their joy
from the tip of every spray.
The knight and lady of whom I speak
felt their resistance growing weak—
when love wafts out from every flower
it's no surprise you feel it more!

At night, when the moon shone outside,
she'd leave her husband sleeping, glide
wrapped only in a mantle, till
she fetched up at the window sill.
Her lover did the selfsame thing,
sat by his window pondering,
and there he'd watch her half the night.
This simple act gave them delight.

So often did she do it that
her husband started to smell a rat.⁵

⁵ *Did* he smell a rat? The French simply says that he got annoyed with her. His subsequent actions make it pretty clear that he had some idea of what was going on, however.

*E meinteifeiz li demanda
 Pur quei levot e u ala.
 «sire,» la dame li respunt,
 «il nen ad joië en cest mund,
 Ki n'ot le laüstic chanter.
 Pur ceo me vois ici ester.
 Tant ducement l'i oi la nuit
 Que mut me semble grant deduit;
 Tant me delit'e tant le voil
 Que jeo ne puis dormir de l'oil.»
 Quant li sires ot que ele dist,
 De ire e (de) maltalent en rist.
 De une chose se purpensa:
 Le laüstic enginnera.
 Il n'ot vallet en sa meisun
 Ne face engin, reis u laçun,
 Puis les mettent par le vergier;
 N'i ot codre ne chastainier
 U il ne mettent laz u glu,
 Tant que pris l'unt e retenu.*

[ll.81-100]

He asked her where she went at night
and why she rose before first light.

“Sir,” the lady said to him,
“It’s more than just a passing whim.
I hear the nightingale sing
and have to sit here listening.
So sweet his voice is in the night
to hear it is supreme delight,
the joy it gives me is so deep
I can’t just close my eyes and sleep.”

Her husband heard this glib reply⁶
and laughed once: coarsely, angrily.
He thought at once of thwarting her
by catching the bird in a snare.
His serving men were rounded up
and put to work on net and trap
to hang on every single tree
in his entire property.

They wove so many strings and glue
the bird was caught without ado.

⁶ “Glib” is my addition, but I think it’s justified by the angry laugh, full of “ill-will” [*maltalent*] he proceeds to give.

*Quant le laüstic eurent pris,
 Al seignur fu rendu tut vis.
 Mut en fu liez quant il le tient;
 As chambres (a) la dame vient.
 «dame,» fet il, «u estes vus?
 Venuz avant! Parlez a nus!
 J'ai le laüstic englué,
 Pur quei vus avez tant veillé.
 Desor poëz gisir en peis:
 Il ne vus esveillerat meis.»
 Quant la dame l'ad entendu,
 Dolente e cureçuse fu.
 A sun seignur l'ad demandé,
 E il l'ocist par engresté;
 Le col li rumpit a ses deus meins –
 De ceo fist il que trop vileins –
 Sur la dame le cors geta,
 Se que sun chainse ensanglanta
 Un poi desur le piz devant.
 De la chambre s'en ist atant.*

[ll.101-120]

When the nightingale was caught
 they brought it living to the knight.
 This exploit pleased him mightily;
 he went at once to see his lady.

“Lady,” said he, “where are you?
 Come here; this concerns you too.
 I’ve snared that little bird, whose song
 has been keeping you awake so long.
 Now you can sleep the whole night
 through,
 Rest easy: he won’t bother you.”

When the lady heard him speak,⁷
 she felt crestfallen and heart-sick.
 She asked a favour of her lord,
 if she could have the little bird.
 At that he did something macabre,⁸
 snapped its neck in front of her,
 and threw the body at her dress
 to bloody it above the breast.
 Then he stalked out of her door.

⁷ The French here shifts into the present tense, but it has seemed too awkward to preserve this feature of the original in my English version.

⁸ In French, what he does is “too bad to tell” (though Marie proceeds to tell it)—he threw the bird’s corpse at her dress and stained it with blood. In English, I’ve shifted the meaning to include the whole act of killing the poor little thing in the first place.

*La dame prent le core petit;
 Durement plure e si maudit
 Ceus ki le laüstic traïrent
 E les engins e laçuns firest;
 Kar mut li unt toleit grant hait.
 «lasse,» fet ele, «mal m'estait!
 Ne purrai mes la nuit lever
 Ne aler a la fenestre ester,
 U jeo suil mun ami veer.
 Une chose sai jeo de veir:
 Il quid(e)ra ke jeo me feigne;
 De ceo m'estuet que cunseil preigne.
 Le laüstic li trametraï,
 L'aventure li manderai.»
 En une piece de samit,
 A or brusdé e tut escrit,
 Ad l'oiselet envelopé.
 Un sun vatlet ad apelé,
 Sun message li ad chargié,
 A sun ami l'ad enveié.*

[ll.121-40]

The lady picked it from the floor, and sobbing, called a living curse on those who'd made her prison worse by hanging nets in every tree to snare the bird who set her free.⁹

“Alas,” said she, “I am undone! I can no longer rise alone and sit by the window every night to watch my lover, my sweet knight. There is one thing I’m certain of: He will believe he’s lost my love unless I tell him what’s occurred. By sending him the little bird I’ll warn him what’s befallen me.”

She wrapped it in embroidery and cloth of gold, and asked a page to deliver this last little package to her friend who lived next door.

⁹ The French contents itself with saying simply that they had “robbed her of a great joy,” but I felt it legitimate to reinforce the idea of the cage the lady has been forced to live in here. It is, after all, implicit in Marie’s choice of the nightingale as a symbol in the first place.

*Cil est al chevalier venuz;
De part sa dame dist saluz,
Tut sun message li cunta,
Le laüstic li presenta.
Quant tut li ad dit e mustré
E il l'aveit bien escuté,
De l'aventure esteit dolenz;
Mes ne fu pas vileins ne lenz.
Un vasselet ad fet forgeér;
Unques n'i ot fer nē acer:
Tut fu de or fin od bones pieres,
Mut preciuses e mut cheres;
Covercle i ot tresbien asis.
Le laüstic ad dedenz mis;
Puis fist la chasse enseeler,
Tuz jurs l'ad fet of lui porter.
Cele aventure fu cuntee,
Ne pot estre lunges celee.
Un lai en firent li bretun:
Le laüstic l'apelë hum.*

[ll.141-60]

The page walked over to their neighbour,
saluted him on her behalf,
and gave what he'd been asked to give:
the bird's body, the lady's message.

When he understood the damage
his love had done to this lady
the young man did not take it lightly.
He had a cup made out of gold,
studded with precious stones, and sealed
against the corrosive outer air.
He put the nightingale in there,
then shut it in its little tomb¹⁰
and took it everywhere with him.

The tale could not be hidden long
so it was made into a song.
Breton poets tell the tale;
they call it "The Nightingale."

¹⁰ French *châsse* translates as "shrine" rather than "tomb". What the knight has constructed is, in fact, a little saint's reliquary. The fact that the bird has ended up in a "gilded cage" just like the lady has persuaded me to darken the image somewhat at this point, however.

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Appendix: Literal Translation

[ll. 1-6]:

I will tell you a story of which the old Bretons made a lay. Its name is *Laüstic*—that's what they call it in their country (that's *rossignol* in French and “nightingale” in English).

[ll. 7-28]:

In the land of Saint Malo there was a famous town. Two knights lived there and had there two strong houses. Such was the goodness of these two barons that the town had a great reputation. One had married a wise wife, courteous and well turned out. It was wonderful to hear the pains she took, according to their manners and customs. The other was a bachelor well known among his peers for his prowess, his great value and his generous welcome. He went to all the tourneys, spent and gave away all he had. He loved the wife of his neighbour. He made her such great requests, begged so much of her, had so much good in him that she loved him more than anything, as much for the good she heard of him as because he lived so close by.

[ll. 29-44]:

They loved each other wisely and well. They kept their love very secret and took care that they weren't found out, disturbed nor suspected. And they could do this easily because their dwellings were very close. Close were their houses, their dungeons and their rooms. There was neither barrier nor separation save a high wall of brown stone. From the room where the

lady lay when she went to the window she could talk to her lover, and he to her from the other side, and they could exchange their signs of love, throwing and catching them.

[ll. 45-56]:

Nothing troubled them. They were both very much at their ease, though they couldn't at all attain to their wish because the lady was tightly guarded when her lover was in town. But they had some comfort both by day and by night in the words they could speak together, since nothing could stop them from going to their windows and there to see each other.

[ll. 57-68]:

For a long time they loved each other until the summer came; the woods and meadows became green again; the orchards flowered. The little birds expressed their joy from the top of the flowers. It's not wonderful if he who's in love gives himself over to it more than. And the knight and lady of whom I've told you gave themselves over to it more and more, both in words and in looks.

[ll. 69-82]:

At night, when the moon shone and her lord was asleep, often she left his side, got up and wrapped herself in her mantle. She went to her window to her lover, whom she knew was there. He did the same, and watched for most of the night. They had great joy from looking at each other, since they could have no more. So often did she get up that her lord got irritated. Many times he wanted to know why she got up and where she went.

[ll. 83-90]:

"Sir," the lady replied, "he has no joy in this world who won't get up to hear the nightingale sing. It's to hear him that I come here. So sweet is his voice in the night that hearing it is a great delight for me and I have such a desire for this joy that I can't close my eyes and sleep."

[ll. 91-100]:

When her lord heard what she said he gave a corrupt and angry laugh. He thought of one thing only: catching the nightingale in a snare. He had no servants in his house who weren't set to making snares, traps and nets. Then they went and put them in the orchard. There wasn't a hazel or a chestnut tree where they didn't put strings and glue. So thus they caught and seized it.

[ll. 101-04]:

When the nightingale was taken they took it alive to the knight. When he held it he was very happy and went to his lady's chamber.

[ll. 105-10]:

"Lady," said he, "where are you? Come here, so I can speak to you! I've caught the nightingale in a trap because you've been kept awake by him. Now you can sleep in peace, he'll keep you awake no more."

[ll. 111-20]:

When the lady hears him, she's sad and heart-sick. She asks it from her husband, and he quickly kills the bird there. He breaks its neck with his two hands. Then he did something too bad to say: he throws the body at his lady so that it bloodies her dress a little above her breast. And he goes out of her room.

[ll. 121-25]:

The lady takes the little body. She cries hard, she curses those who made the snares and the nets and betrayed the nightingale because they have robbed her of a great joy.

[ll. 126-34]:

"Alas," said she, "bad luck is on me! I can no longer get up in the night nor betake myself to the window from which I used to watch my lover. There's one thing I'm sure of: he will believe that I love him no longer, so it's important that I warn him. I'll send him the nightingale. I'll transmit the story to him."

[ll. 135-40]:

In a piece of samite embroidered with gold, on which she wrote all, she wrapped up the little bird. She called one of her servants. She gave him her message; had it carried to her lover.

[ll. 141-48]:

He came to the knight on behalf of the lady. He saluted him, told him all his message and presented him with the nightingale. When he [the servant] had said and shown him everything, and he [the knight] had listened to it all, the latter was very sad about this accident but he acted neither badly nor lightheartedly.

[ll. 149-56]:

He had a little cup made. There was in it neither iron nor steel: it was made entirely of gold and stones, very precious and very expensive. He put a cover on it which was airtight. He put the nightingale inside, then he sealed the shrine and carried it with him always.

[ll. 157-60]:

This event was talked about. It could not be hidden long. The Bretons made a lay of it. They called it "the nightingale."