

CHEVREFOIL

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1993

It's my pleasure and I want truly
For the lai men call Chevrefoil¹
(Honeysuckle), the truth to tell:
Why it was made, how it all befell.
More than one has told me or spoken,
And I've found it also written
About the Queen and Sir Tristram,
Their love so true, so pure, from
Which their sorrows multiplied--
Then, in a single day, both died.²
King Mark was angry and then some--
Angry at his nephew Tristram;
He banished him beyond his border,

¹The title consists of the French word "chevrefeuille," (pronounced sheh-vruh-FUH-yeh, though I've had some fun with the rhyme in the first couplet) which is the common name of the honeysuckle or woodbine. It's not clear whether "gotelefe," "goat-leaf," was a current English name for the flower, or a translation of the French (the two words that make up "chevrefoil," are chevre, "goat," and feuille, "leaf"). The Anglo-Saxon word was weoden-binde. Patrick Roper, in a post on the Arthurnet email list (11 Jan. 2000) noted that "the term "Goat's Leaf" is recorded from Somerset and is also used as one of the English names for the plant in *A Modern Herbal* by Mrs M. Grieve (1931). [...] The name Goat's Leaf, which is widespread in European languages, derives from the fact that goats are said to be very fond of honeysuckle leaves." And the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites two 1861 books on flowers as identifying woodbine or honeysuckle as Goat's Leaf. On 18 Jan. 2002, however, Mr. Roper suggested that perhaps the name derived not from nibbling goats but from the diabolically strangling effects of the woodbine on its host: "I think it is possible that in Marie de France's day people saw honeysuckle as a rather destructive plant as it twisted into hazel wands spoiling their shape and utility." It does seem that Marie might have had a choice among a name that referred to binding vines, a name that referred to suckable flowers, or a name that referred to goats (with their evocation of the Devil and sexuality), and that she kept to the latter.

² The story of Tristram (or Tristan) and Isolde (Iseut) is one of the greatest of Western love-stories. It's thought--partly because of the details of Marie's lai--that the story grew out of Celtic legends related to the Irish "Diarmid and Grainne." There are two major French verse romances dating from about the time Marie wrote, and German, Old Norse, and English works based on the French.

Marie seems to assume her audience, like her, has heard the Tristram story from several sources; she doesn't mention Iseut's name (she just calls her the Queen, as she does Guinevere in *Lanval*) or the potion, though she brings in Brengvein's name as if to show she's familiar with that lady's role as confidante. The story she tells and the honeysuckle-hazel image, while they resemble episodes and motifs in the longer romances, are not to be found in any other surviving text. See the end of the lai for a summary.

Because of the Queen, for he loved her.
He goes home to whence he hails--
He was born in South Wales.³
He lives there for one whole year.
He could not go back to see her.
But then he's ready to risk it all--
Death, destruction, any downfall.
Don't be too surprised, really:
Any true love who loves loyally
Suffers, and depression haunts
Him when he can't have what he wants.
Tristram suffers, his thoughts roam,
So he slips himself away from home.
He goes straight into Cornwall,
There where the Queen is known to dwell.
He hid himself in the forest alone,
Wanting to be seen by none.
But he crept forth in the evening light
When men seek shelter for the night.
With peasants and the poorest folk
That night he his lodgings took.
He asked the news--just anything
About the doings of the King?
They told him then what they had heard:
The barons, summoned by the King's word,
Must come to Tintagel castle, where
The King wishes to hold court; there
At Pentecost, at Whitsunday,
They'll gather for joy, sport, and play.
The Queen, of course, will take part.

Tristram hears, joy fills his heart.
No way she can go to Tintagel
Without his seeing how she'll travel.
The day the king was on the move,
Sir Tristram came into a grove
Through which, he knew, the road lay

³ Tristram is usually, in the romances, the son of a Breton lord, though the original material is thought to be perhaps Scots. Marie, however, claims he is from South Wales; moreover, she gives the lai a French title and an English one, but no Breton name (compare *Laustic*, which gives the correct word in all three languages). In this case, her Celtic material probably came via intermediate French texts and storytellers.

The crowd must use to pass this way.
He cut a hazel in half there,
Shaped and trimmed it, neatly square.
When he had prepared this staff,
He autographed it with his knife.
If the Queen saw this invention,
She would pay it great attention;
For this had all happened before--
She'd realized thus that he was there.
She'll recognize it, easy, quick,
As soon as she sees her lover's stick.
This is the gist of what he wrote,
The message he sent her, as he spoke:
That he'd stayed there for quite a while,
Waiting, lingering in exile,
Spying, trying to learn or hear
How he could find a way to see her,
For without her he cannot live.
For those two, it's just like with
The sweet honeysuckle vine
That on the hazel tree will twine:
When it fastens, slips itself right
Around the trunk, ties itself tight,
Then the two survive together.
But should anyone try to sever
Them, the hazel dies right away,
And the honeysuckle, the same day.
"Dear love, that's our story, too:
Never you without me, me without you!"

The Queen was riding through the wood.
She looked around, as far as she could;
She saw the staff, paid heed to it,
And, by the letters on it, knew it.
The knights who led the cavalcade
Accompanying her--quite a parade--
She commands to halt their progress;
She wants to dismount, take a rest.
What the Queen commands, they do.
She wanders far from her retinue.
She calls out to her own maiden
To come to her--good, true Brengvein.
She leaves the path, a step or two;

In the woods she finds that man who
Loves her more than any other.
They show their joy, to be together--
He can talk to her at leisure,
She speaks to him all her pleasure.
Then she outlines every little thing
Needed to make peace with the King,
For it weighs heavy on her husband
Thus to have sent him from the land--
Accusers forced him, it wasn't fair.

Now she goes, she leaves her friend there.
But when it's time for them to sever,
Each begins weeping for such a lover.
Tristram goes back to Wales as before.
Till his uncle commands that he be sent for.

Because of the joy, the delight
He found in his beloved's sight,
And because of what he'd written,
Exactly as the Queen had spoken,
To keep those words in memory sharp,
Tristram, who played so well the harp,
Made of this a brand-new lai.⁴
The name is easy for me to say:
English folk call it "Goatleaf,"

⁴ Marie is above all interested in Tristram's artistic abilities, particularly as a musician, which are important in all the romances. This lai describes a bewildering complex of literary forms: there is the "truth" Marie "tells," a story which she has heard from several oral sources and found written; there is the lai Tristram composes, a musical piece which allows him to remember words--both the words he himself wrote and his conversation with the Queen; there is the image of the honeysuckle and hazel, which Tristram wrote for the Queen; there is Tristram's own name written on the hazel staff, which seems to have almost magical powers to stop her (this recalls Irish tales in which a staff with magic Ogham letters on it actually puts a lady's attendants to sleep and allows her to meet with her lover).

As a translator, I found this confusion focused on the word "dit," used five times in the poem (lines 5, 62, 96, 110, 117) which I have rendered in every case as part of the verb "to speak." But "dit" can also indicate "compose poetry"; in three of the five uses of the word, it rhymes with "escrit," "written," and seems to provide a contrast between the oral forms, rhythmic and related to music but ephemeral, and the authoritative, powerful written forms. Words, the end of the lai tells us, need music to be remembered--just being written down isn't enough. But the oral poems, what is "dit," need writing to make them endure, too--not the magic writing of a name, but the "summe" and "verité," "the whole truth," Marie provides.

Note that this lai and *Chaitivel* are the only ones which describe the composition of the original "Breton lai" on which Marie's own lai is based.

French "Chevrefoil" ("Honeysuckle," in brief).
I've spoken for you the whole truth of the lai
Which I recounted for you today.

Summary of the story of Tristram and Iseut.

Iseut is the wife of Tristram's uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. Tristram, by slaying a dragon, won this bride for his uncle; but the two young people mistakenly drank a love potion prepared for the wedding night by Iseut's mother. These three form the perfect, agonized triangle, for they all love each other and are bound by complex ties of marital, family, and feudal loyalty. A fourth important character is Iseut's lady-in-waiting Brengvein, who gave the potion to the lovers and remains with Iseut to the end. The full cast includes plenty of nasty courtiers who arouse Mark's suspicions and try to trap the lovers, and, later (after the moment represented in *Chevrefoil*), Tristram's own wife Iseut of the White Hands and his brother-in-law.