

YONEC¹

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1993

Now I've taken up the making of lais,
I won't lay it down, though heavy it weighs.
Adventures I've known in my time,
I will retell them all in rhyme.
I've been thinking, and wanting too
To tell the tale of Yonec² to you:
Whence his birth, how his father
First came visiting his mother--
His name who begot Yonec
Was, properly, Muldumarec.

Long ago in Britain there thrived
A rich old man, antique, long-lived.
His power in Caerwent was never denied;
They called him lord in that countryside.
Caerwent's on the river Duellas,
Once deep enough for ships to pass.
Into old age this lord had passed.
In order to make his fortunes last,
He took a wife to get children, heirs;
After him, all this would be theirs.
High-born was this noble maid,
Wise, well-mannered, and lovely indeed,
When to the rich man they gave her.
For her loveliness he loved her--
Her beauty and sweetness roused his ardor,
So he planned carefully how to guard her.
He locked her up in a tower, alone,

¹In my opinion, the darkest of all the lais, the one that most invites a Freudian scalpel. The account of the lady's strange voyage to her lover's city is unique in the Lais; its surreal beauty seems to touch a thread of irrational but profound meaning.

² In the Harley manuscript the name is spelled Yuuenec and Iwenec, as well as Yonec. It is a diminutive of Yvain (Owen), an important name in Arthurian literature. In *Lanval* Yvain is mentioned as Gawain's cousin (the son of King Urien and Arthur's half-sister Morgan le Fay). In Chretien's *Grail Story*, there is a young squire at Arthur's court named Yonez/Yvonet (=Yonec), who helps Perceval to arm himself.

In a big room paved with stone.³
He had an elderly sister,
Widowed, a Mrs. with no Mister,
He put her in there with his wife,
To hold her to a righteous life.
Other women were there, I presume,
Somewhere in a separate room,
But the lady never said even "How do you do?"
Unless the old woman told her to.

He kept her there more than seven years--
They never did engender heirs;
From that tower she didn't descend
Not for a relative, not for a friend.
When the lord came to sleep with her,
No valet nor any porter
Dared to enter the tower room,
Or light a candle in the gloom.
The lady lived in sorrow and pain;
With weeping, sighing, weeping again,

³The situation of the lady, locked in a tower, recalls first of all the classical story of Danae, locked by her father in a brazen tower to prevent her conceiving a child, but visited by Jove who begets Perseus. Ovid in his *Amores* says of this story:

Si nunquam Danaen habuisset aenea turris
non esset Danae de Jove facta parens.

(If the bronze tower had never held Danae, Danae would not have been made a parent by Jove.)

It also recalls the fairy tale of Rapunzel, whose earliest version was written down in French as "Persinette" by Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force, around 1698. In the fairy tale, of course, it is the old lady (the witch), not a husband, who locks the girl up; when her lover is discovered, he leaps from the tower and blinds himself on thorn-bushes, and Rapunzel is banished to a "desert" to bear his offspring (twins), until their eventual reunion. The leap from the tower and the mangling of the prince are both present in *Yonéc*. Another tale which may have its source in *Yonéc* or some analogue is the Comtesse d'Aulnoy's *L'oiseau bleu*, in which a cruel stepmother locks a girl in a tower where she is visited by her erstwhile lover, who has been changed to a bird by a separate spell. Finally, one should consider the story of St. Barbara, who was locked in a tower by her father because she refused to marry, but entertained and was fed by divine messengers until it was time for the next phase of her martyrdom.

She lost her beauty, as a lady would
Who didn't care if she looked good.
For herself, the best wish she could make her
Was for swift death to come soon and take her.

It was the month of April; spring
Set those little birds to sing.
The lord arose in early morning,
Dressed himself to go out hunting.
He roused up, too, the old woman
To lock the door tight behind him.
He gave the order, she'd obey;
The lord and his men rode away.
The old woman took her psalm-book along,
And sat mumbling David's song.
The lady lay awake in distress;
Now she picked out the sun's brightness.
She saw the old woman had gone
Out and left her all alone.
She began to sigh and complain;
Her weeping began all over again:
"Alas! I was born on an evil day!
Hard and cruel is my destiny!
This tower is a prison for me,
And only death will set me free.
What's he afraid of, that jealous
Old man, keeping me in this fortress?
He's a fool, crazy, always afraid
Somehow, somewhere, he'll be betrayed.
I can't even go to church
To hear Mass, do God's works.
If I was able to talk with people,
Go out, enjoy those pleasures peaceable,
I'd be so sweet to him, so good,
Even if I wasn't in the mood.
A curse on my family
And on all those, collectively,
Who gave this jealous man my hand,
Gave me his body for husband!
I pull and pull--naught comes of it:
I wish and wish, but he won't die of it.
Instead of his being baptized,
In Hell's river his boat capsized!

His sinews are tough, his veins tough,
The blood that fills them's alive enough...

"Often I've heard the tale told
How people found, in days of old,
In this same land, adventures bright,
The sad redeemed, the wronged made right.
A knight might find a maiden-lover
Sweet and fair, by thinking of her;⁴
Ladies could find lovers who
Were handsome, gentle, valiant, true--
Nor were they blamed for such affairs:
They alone ever saw their lovers.
If this can be--if it did happen--
If this ever came to any woman--
God, who have power over all,
Please hear, please answer now my call!"

When she'd spoken this sad word,
She picked out the shadow of a great bird
Through a narrow window. She
Didn't know what it might be.
It entered her room flying--
Jesses on its feet--a hawk it seemed,
Moulted five or six times in its life.
It settled there, in front of the wife.
After it had rested a minute,
And she'd closely inspected it,
It became a knight, handsome, gentle.
The lady thought this was a marvel--
Her blood stirred and began to race.
In her fear she hid her face.

The knight was gentle, courteous;

⁴This couplet is clearly a reference to *Lanval*, which Marie must have already written. This lai serves as a pendant to *Lanval*: in each, a lonely young person falls into a reverie which turns into an encounter with a magical lover, who can be evoked at will but who imposes a rule of absolute discretion which is eventually broken. For *Lanval*, there is no final tragedy; his lady comes to save him from accusations of treason, and he returns with her to Avalon, fairyland. For the woman in *Yonec*, her reunion with her lover is far more terrible; he dies, she must return pregnant to her cruel husband, and eventually her own death is occasioned by his.

He addressed her, speaking first, thus:
"Lady," he said, "Fear ye not, no!⁵
The hawk's a gentle bird, you know;
Though how and why remain a mystery,
Still, you see that you may trust me,
And take me for your friend, your dear.
For this," he said, "I came here.
I've loved you for a long time now.
In my heart I yearned for you. I vow,
I never loved any woman but you,
Nor will love any other; I'll be true.
Still, I couldn't come here where you are,
Or come forth out of my own land
Unless you had made that prayer.
Now at last I can be your friend!"
The lady was now reassured;
She uncovered her head and spoke a word
In response to what the knight asked of her;
She told him she would make him her lover
If he believed in God above;
This would make possible their love.
For his beauty was very great:

⁵Muldumarec's first appearance is disturbingly reminiscent of St. Luke's account of the Angelic Salutation: "Fear ye not." The religious footing on which his relationship with the lady is established is disturbing, and surely meant to be so; the reception of *Corpus Christi*, the "body of Christ" under the form of bread, by the bird-man under the form of the lady, is a strange mix of fairy-tale and religious physics. Medieval love-poetry sometimes parodies, blasphemously, religious language; even the song from the *Carmina Burana* (included at the end of Carl Orff's version) borrows from the angel's words to Mary:

Ave, formosissima
Blancheflor et Helena....

One thinks also of Boccaccio's story in which a lustful monk, Frate Alberto, convinces a gullible wife that he is the Angel Gabriel, in love with her (4th day, 2nd tale). Since Gabriel's words (or the accompanying bird-figure of the Holy Spirit) can be seen as the means by which the Virgin Mary becomes pregnant, Gabriel's sexual potency is easily turned into a joke. But Marie's version of the impregnating angel seems to be quite serious, not a parody at all; the notion that Muldumarec was indeed sent by God to this poor woman, who needs his love, is presented in dead seriousness. It is as if he were in fact the invention of a sexual hunger tinged with religious passion--the fantasy of a woman who has read too many saints' lives, too many commentaries on the Song of Songs.

Never in her life, early nor late,
Had she seen a knight so handsome,
Nor will she ever, in days to come.
"Lady," he said, "How well you speak!
Not for anything would I wreak
That wrong, be your occasion of sin--
The guilt, the doubt, the suspicion.
I firmly believe in the Creator,
Who freed us from that sad state where
We'd been thrust by Adam our father
When he bit that apple bitter;
He is and was and will be ever
Light and life to each poor sinner.
If my word you cannot credit,
Ask for your chaplain to visit;
Say you've a sudden ill, an ailment;
For this you want the sacrament
Which God established in this world
So that we sinners may be healed.
Then I'll take on your form and face,
Receive Christ's body in your place.
And so that you'll have no more need
To doubt me, I'll say my whole Creed."
She approved of what he'd said.
He lay beside her on her bed,
But he didn't want to caress her,
Nor embrace her yet, nor kiss her.

Just then the old woman came home,
Found the lady awake in her room,
Told her it was time she rose,
Wanted to bring in the day's clothes.
The lady said she had some disease--
They'd better go alert her priest,
And tell him to come to her, quick,
She feared death, she was so sick.
The old woman said, "Well, suffer away!
My lord has gone to the woods today,
And no-one but me will come in here!"
The lady felt a terrible fear;
She faked a faint, and there she lay.
The old woman saw this with dismay.
She unlocked the door and ran

Off to find the good chaplain.
Soon as he could, the priest came, swiftly,
Bringing with him *Corpus Christi*.
The knight received the sacred bread,
Drank wine from the chalice in her stead.
Now the good chaplain is gone;
The old woman locks up the door again.

The lady lies beside her dear;
You never saw such a lovely pair.
When they've laughed and played enough,
And told each other their hearts' truth,
The knight takes his leave of his dame
To go back to his own land, as he came.
Sweetly, softly she makes her prayer
That he'll return often to see her.
"Lady," he said, "when it's your pleasure!
I won't let slip a single chance;
But in your wishing find some measure,
Or else our ruin you'll advance;
That old woman's a traitor, all right;
She'll spy on us both day and night.
She'll learn of the love between us,
And tell her lord how she's seen us.
If it all happens as I've said,
And we are indeed betrayed,
I will never be able to fly
Away again, except to die."

With this he goes, the lovers part,
She's left alone with a joyful heart.
Next day she gets up, not at all sick.
She was so happy all that week.
She learned she has a precious body,
And she recovers all her beauty.
Now she really prefers to exist
Home alone--other pleasures aren't missed.
She longs often to see her knight
And take from him her own delight.
As soon as her husband leaves the tower,
Night or day, late or early the hour,
She has all she could want of her love.
Long may she rejoice, please God above!

Because of the joy in which she moved,
From seeing so often the man she loved,
Her form and face were quite renewed.
Her husband was a sly man, shrewd;
In his heart he knew that she
Had changed from what she used to be;
He begins to doubt his sister.
One day he begins to ask her,
Isn't it a marvel how
His wife just loves to dress up now?
He wonders why this might be so.
The old woman says she doesn't know--
No-one can have speech or sight of her,
And she has no friend or lover.
There's just one thing: she's gladder when she
Is left alone than she used to be.
This small change is what she's spied.
To this the husband has replied:
"By faith," he says, "I believe you!
Now here's something you must do:
In the morning, I'll rise early,
And, when you've shut the door behind me,
You must pretend to go outside;
Leave her lying in bed by herself.
But really, secretly, you'll hide
Some place you can see by stealth
Where this comes from, what it might be,
That's making my lady so happy."
They parted, agreed upon their plans.
Alas! They are in evil hands,
The couple for whom she lies in wait--
They'll be deceived, yes, and betrayed!

In three days, as I heard the story,
The husband pretended to go on a journey.
For his wife, this story he fed her:
The King has sent for him by letter.
He'll return as fast as he can, for sure.
He leaves the room and shuts the door.
So the old woman got out of bed;
Right there, behind the curtain, she hid.
She'd hear and see, hidden so
Everything she wanted to know.

Wide awake under her bedcover,
The lady's longing for her lover.
He comes--he doesn't hesitate--
He's not an hour or a moment late.
They make each other happy now,
By what their words and faces show,
Until it's time to rise for the day--
Now he must be on his way.
The old woman's watching. She spies
How he comes in, then away he flies.
Indeed, she fears and feels the shock
Of seeing him first man, then hawk.
When the lord returned to his abode
(For he hadn't gone far down the road)
The old woman explained aright
All the truth about the knight,
And in deep thought he is wrapt.
He orders: the knight will be trapped⁶
And killed by deceits his wits
Devise. He has them forge iron spits,
Tips clad with steel; never razor
In this world was ever sharper.
When he has had these made,
Forked and toothed on every side,
He has them fixed around the window,
Fastened tight in close-set row,
Just where the knight passes in
When he comes to his lady friend.
Dear God! Why can't he know the treason
Prepared against him by this felon?

Next day, early in the morn,
The husband gets up before dawn,
And announces he's hunting today.
The old woman sees him on his way,
Then back on her bed she lies,
To sleep; the sun has yet to rise.
The lady's awake, alert to await
The man she loves with loyal faith;

⁶ The trap set by the husband for Muldumarec recalls the traps set by the husband in *Laustic*. In both *lais Marie* dwells on the complex physical constructions meant to snare the bird.

He could come to her now, she says,
And be with her in peace and ease;
As soon as she's prayed such
A prayer he comes, nor delays much;
He comes flying through the window,
But the spits are fixed there now;
One pierces his body, deep;
Scarlet blood begins to seep.
Knowing this wound is his doom,
Freed of the spike, he enters her room.
He alights on the bed beside the lady,
So that her sheets are all bloody.
She sees the blood and the awful gash.
Anguish makes her white as ash.
He tells her, "My sweet love, my friend,
Your love's brought my life to its end.
I told you it would happen thus:
Your form and face have slain us."
Hearing this, she fainted and fell;
She seemed dead for a short spell.
Sweetly he offers her comfort:
Her sorrow and pain aren't worth
It: by him her pregnancy's begun;
She'll bear his strong and valiant son.
This child will heal her ache and shame.
She'll see that Yonec is his name.
Someday he will kill his and her
Enemy, be their avenger.
The knight cannot stay with her longer,
For the wound's bleeding is stronger.
Sadly, sadly, away he goes.
But, with a great cry, she follows.
She gets out through a window--
It's a miracle she's not killed below,
For the wall was twenty feet deep
Right there where she made her leap.
Aside from her shift she was nude
As she set herself to track the blood
Which from the wounded knight was flowing
To mark a path for her going.
She followed this road; it wound
Along until it came to a mound.
There was an entrance to this hill;

All around the door she saw the spill
Of blood, but could see nothing farther.
Then she thought she knew her lover
Had passed this way and gone in here.
She entered, too, this place of fear.
Within, she found no spark of light,
Yet she followed the road aright
Until she came forth from the mound
Where lovely meadows spread around.
The grass here was soaked with blood--
Her fears returned now in full flood.
Across the field she followed the trace.
There was a city near that place
All enclosed by a great wall.
No house there, or tower or hall
Seemed made of anything but silver;
Rich was the work of the city's builder.
Marshes lay at the town's edges,
And the forests and the neat hedges.
Near to the castle, on the other side,
All around flowed a river wide,
Where boats and ships could dock and anchor;
Three hundred sails--more--crowd the bank there.
The lower gate is quite unclosed--
Into the town the lady goes
Still following the blood, fresh red;
Through town and to the keep it led.
No-one spoke to her, no-one;
She saw no living man nor woman.
She came to the palace courtyard;
The stones were bloody, soaked and smeared.
She entered a lovely room in the keep
And found a knight there, fast asleep;
She went on, not knowing him,
Into another, larger room;
A bed, nothing more, came to light,
And, upon it, a sleeping knight.
She's passed through this and come
Into a third great fine room,
And here she finds her lover's bed.
Of purest gold is the bedstead;
I couldn't guess the bedclothes' value;
Candlesticks and chandeliers, too,

Kept aflame both night and day,
Are worth a city's treasury.
The moment that she caught a sight
Of him, she recognized the knight.
Swift and fearful, she goes toward him.
In a faint she falls athwart him.
Her lover takes her in loving arms,
Cries out at how fortune harms
Them both. When her faint has passed,
He comforts her sweetly, at last.
"My lovely love, by God! Hear my plea!
Leave this place! You must flee!
I will die before daybreak,
And here there will be such heartache,
That if my people found you here,
They would torture you, my dear;
My people know what you have cost me--
That it's for your love they've lost me.
I ache with worry for you."
"My love," she says, "I implore you,
I'd much rather die here with you,
Than suffer what my husband will do;
He'll kill me if I return."
The knight can answer this concern.
He gives her a little ring,
And teaches her to use the thing:
As long as she keeps it safe, she'll see
Her lord will have no memory
Of anything that has just passed;
For this she won't be harrassed.
He gives her and commends his sword
To her, forbids her with a strong word
Ever to yield it to any man;
She must keep it for his son's hand.
When he shall be strong, full-grown,
A valiant knight, worth some renown,
To some festival she'll go,
Her husband and her son in tow.
They will come to an abbey;
They'll see a tomb, hear someone say
How he's dying all over again,
And how wrongly he's been slain.
Then she must give him the sword;

He must be told then, word for word,
The adventure of his birth, his father's name.
They'll see how he makes his claim.
When he's told her all this,
He gives her a rich silk dress,
Which he commands her to wear;
Then he sends her away from there.
With the ring, then, she goes,
And the sword to comfort her woes.
She's passed the city gate and door,
And gone half a league, no more,
When she hears the tolling bells,
Mourning cries from the castle halls.
In her sorrow at hearing these chimes
She falls into a faint four times.
When she finally comes around,
She makes her way to the mound,
Enters, passes through to the other side,
And finds herself back in her own countryside.
Together with her husband, her lord,
She dwelt for many a day afterward,
And never did he bring an accusation,
Insult or mock her for what she'd done.
Their son was born;⁷ they did all to rear
Him safe and well; they held him dear.
They gave him Yonec for a name;
No-one could find in that domain
A man so handsome, so valorous,
So worthy, liberal, generous.
When his age was right,
They dubbed him a knight.
After his knighting, that very same year,
What happened--listen now and you'll hear!

At the Feast of Saint Aaron,
Which was celebrated at Caerleon
(As well as at many another town),

⁷ Marie's text calls Yonec the son of the lady and her husband, "their son," "his son." This intensifies a kind of Oedipal family romance in the final lines of the lai: the boy must suddenly kill the man he has known all his life as a generous and loving father, on behalf of his mother and an exotic, better and nobler, "true" father whose existence she has only just now remembered.

A formal order had been sent down
To the lord to go there with his friends,
As the country's custom demands.
He brought along his wife and son;
Rich were his clothes and caparison.
It's time to go, and they go,
But where they're going they don't know.
They took along with them a lad,
Who led them along down the right road,
Till they came to a castle tall,
In this world the fairest of all.
Within the castle stood an abbey
Where deeply pious folks live and pray.
The boy got rooms there for them all
(Their young guide to the festival).
In the abbot's own chamber
They were served well, and with honor.
They go to hear Mass the next day,
Then they're ready to be on their way.
The abbot comes to have his say:
He begs them to prolong their stay;
He'll show them his dormitory,
His chapter-house, his refectory.
Since their lodgings are of the best,
The lord gladly grants this request.

Later, when they'd finished dining,
They set out to tour the buildings.
First they come to the chapter room;
There they found a huge tomb
Draped with silk on which stitched wheels rolled,
And banded across with expensive gold.
At the head, the feet, to left and right,
Were candles, twenty, burning bright.
The candlesticks were of the purest
Gold, the censers of amethyst
In which that day they burned incense
Around the tomb, in reverence.
They inquired now, their demand
Of the natives of that land
Was, whose tomb this might be?
What man lay there so honorably?
Now their tears began to fall,

And weeping they began their tale,
That this was the very best knight,
Strongest, proudest, first in a fight,
Handsomest, most loved, most worthy of love
Of any born here under heaven above.
"He was the king of this country--
Never was any lord so courtly.
At Caerwent he had been taken,
For a lady's love he was slain.
Since then we've never had a lord;
Rather have we awaited some word
Of his son, begotten on that lady;
He commanded us to be ready."
Having heard all this narration,
The lady called out loud to her son:
"Dear son," she said, "Do you hear
How God Himself has led us here?
Here lies your own father, whom
This vile old man murdered, in this tomb.
This sword I give you was his before you;
I have kept it a long time for you."
Everyone heard, as she taught him
Who his father was, how he begot him,
How he used to come to her,
How her husband committed murder;
She told the truth; then on the tomb
She fell fainting in a swoon.
In her faint, she passed on;
She never spoke again to anyone.
When her son saw that she was dead,
He took off his stepfather's head.
So with the sword of his father
He avenged the pain of his mother.
Everyone in the city soon knew
All that had happened, true as true.
They took the lady with great honor
And laid her there beside her lover.
They made Yonec their lord, there and then,
And afterwards went home again.

Some who heard this adventure told
Made a lai, when the tale was already old,
Of pity, of sorrow, of pain, of

All they once suffered for their love.⁸

⁸ Marie frequently speaks of the composition of a lai, a lyric of some kind commemorating an historical event; *Chaitivel* and *Chevrefoil* are in fact her descriptions of the origins of such songs. Dolores Frese has pointed out that Yonec may be the one case where the lyric lai on which Marie's narrative lay was based has survived: the Middle English Corpus Christi Carol (from MS Balliol 354) may be Marie's lyric source. Certainly it is striking that Marie incorporates the Latin phrase Corpus Christi into her own story. This is the entire Carol (may=maiden):

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,
The faucon hath borne my make away.

He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.

In that orchard ther was an hall
That was hanged with purple and pall.

And in that hall there was a bed:
It was hanged with gold so red.

And in that bed ther lith a knight,
His woundes bleeding by day and night.

By that beddes side ther kneeleth a may,
And she weepeth both night and day.

And by that beddes side ther standeth a stoon:
Corpus Christi writen thereon.