THE LAY OF THE WERE-WOLF

MARIE de FRANCE

Translated by Eugene Mason

Her Life
Marie de France is the earliest known French woman poet. As with Chrétien de Troyes, little is known about her. In fact, she is known as Marie de France only because the epilogue to her collection of fables states, "Marie ai nun, si sui de France" ("Marie is my name; I come from France"). The dialect of Norman French in which she wrote suggests that she grew up in Brittany, a region in northwestern France just south of Normandy. She seems to have been well educated and to have spent time in England at the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Under Eleanor's influence, this court became a center of learning and literary activity.

Her Poetry
Marie de France earned a place in literary history for a particular type of poem known as the lai (lā). A lai (or lay) is a brief narrative poem about love and adventure. In writing her lais, Marie de France mostly drew on Celtic legends from Brittany. She composed her lais to entertain an aristocratic audience, probably performing them to music. Like the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, her lais reflect 12th-century views about chivalry and courtly love. In all, she wrote twelve lais.
The lais of Marie de France often explore the problems faced by noble women and men who are in love. In “The Lay of the Were-Wolf,” for example, the main character is a noble who suffers from a horrid affliction. Periodically, he flees to the woods where he changes from a human into a wolf. Out of his great love for his wife, he reveals this dark secret to her. You are about to read a prose translation of Marie de France’s narrative poem. As you read, ask yourself these questions:

1. How is the depiction of courtly life in this story similar to that in the excerpt from Perceval: The Story of the Grail?

2. How does the main character in this story compare with werewolves depicted in horror movies?

Amongst the tales I tell you once again, I would not forget the Lay of the Were-Wolf. Such beasts as he are known in every land. Bisclavaret¹ he is named in Brittany; whilst the Norman² calls him Garwal.

It is a certain thing, and within the knowledge of all, that many a christened man has suffered this change, and ran wild in woods, as a Were-Wolf. The Were-Wolf is a fearsome beast. He lurks within the thick forest, mad and horrible to see. All the evil that he may, he does. He goeth to and fro, about the solitary place, seeking man, in order to devour him. Hearken, now, to the adventure of the Were-Wolf, that I have to tell.

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¹ Bisclavaret (bēs-klā-va-rā’).
² Brittany . . . the Norman: Brittany is a region of northwestern France. Normans are people from Normandy, the region just to the northeast of Brittany.
In Brittany there dwelt a baron who was marvellously esteemed of all his fellows. He was a stout knight, and a comely, and a man of office and repute. Right private was he to the mind of his lord, and dear to the counsel of his neighbors. This baron was wedded to a very worthy dame, right fair to see, and sweet of semblance. All his love was set on her, and all her love was given again to him. One only grief had this lady. For three whole days in every week her lord was absent from her side. She knew not where he went, nor on what errand. Neither did any of his house know the business which called him forth.

On a day when this lord was come again to his house, altogether joyous and content, the lady took him to task, right sweetly, in this fashion,

“Husband,” said she, “and fair, sweet friend, I have a certain thing to pray of you. Right willingly would I receive this gift, but I fear to anger you in the asking. It is better for me to have an empty hand, than to gain hard words.”

When the lord heard this matter, he took the lady in his arms, very tenderly, and kissed her.

“Wife,” he answered, “ask what you will. What would you have, for it is yours already?”

“By my faith,” said the lady, “soon shall I be whole. Husband, right long and wearisome are the days that you spend away from your home. I rise from my bed in the morning, sick at heart, I know not why. So fearful am I, lest you do aught to your loss, that I may not find any comfort. Very quickly shall I die for reason of my dread. Tell me now, where you go, and on what business! How may the knowledge of one who loves so closely, bring you to harm?”

“Wife,” made answer the lord, “nothing but evil can come if I tell you this secret. For the mercy of God do not require it of me. If you but knew, you would withdraw yourself from my love, and I should be lost indeed.”

When the lady heard this, she was persuaded that her baron sought to put her by with jesting words. Therefore she prayed and required him the more urgently, with tender looks and speech, till he was overborne, and told her all the story, hiding naught.

“Wife, I become Bisclavaret. I enter in the forest, and live on prey and roots, within the thickest of the wood.”

After she had learned his secret, she prayed and entreated the more as to whether he ran in his raiment, or went spoiled of vesture.

“Wife,” said he, “I go naked as a beast.”

“Tell me, for hope of grace, what you do with your clothing?”

“Fair wife, that will I never. If I should lose my raiment, or even be marked as I quit my vesture, then a Were-Wolf I must go for all the days of my life. Never again should I become man, save in that hour my clothing were given back to me. For this reason never will I show my lair.”

“Husband,” replied the lady to him, “I love you better than all the world. The less cause have you for doubting my faith, or hiding any tittle from me. What savor is here of friendship? How have I made forfeit of your love; for what sin do you mistrust my honor? Open now your heart, and tell what is good to be known.”

3. semblance: outward appearance.
4. put her by with jesting words: put her off or distract her by joking with her.
5. raiment . . . vesture: Both words are old-fashioned terms for clothing.
6. lair: an animal’s den.
7. tittle: very small bit or portion.
So at the end, outworn and overborne by her importunity, she could no longer refrain, but told her all.

"Wife," said he, "within this wood, a little from the path, there is a hidden way, and at the end thereof an ancient chapel, where oftentimes I have bewailed my lot. Near by is a great hollow stone, concealed by a bush, and there is the secret place where I hide my raiment, till I would return to my own home."

On hearing this marvel the lady became sanguine of visage, because of her exceeding fear. She dared no longer to lie at his side, and turned over in her mind, this way and that, how best she could get her from him. Now there was a certain knight of those parts, who, for a great while, had sought and required this lady for her love. This knight had spent long years in her service, but little enough had he got thereby, not even fair words, or a promise. To him the dame wrote a letter, and meeting, made her purpose plain.

"Fair friend," said she, "be happy. That which you have coveted so long a time, I will grant without delay. Never again will I deny your suit. My heart, and all I have to give, are yours, so take me now as love and dame."

Right sweetly the knight thanked her for her grace, and pledged her faith and fealty. When she had confirmed him by an oath, then she told him all this business of her lord—why he went, and what he became, and of his ravening within the wood. So she showed him of the chapel, and of the hollow stone, and of how to spoil the

9. sanguine (sæŋˈgwɪn) of visage: red in the face.
10. fealty: loyalty; allegiance.
11. ravening: seeking prey or plunder.
Were-Wolf of his vesture. Thus, by the kiss of his wife, was Bisclavaret betrayed. Often enough had he ravished his prey in desolate places, but from this journey he never returned. His kinsfolk and acquaintance came together to ask of his tidings, when this absence was noised abroad. Many a man, on many a day, searched the woodland, but none might find him, nor learn where Bisclavaret was gone.

The lady was wedded to the knight who had cherished her for so long a space. More than a year had passed since Bisclavaret disappeared. Then it chanced that the King would hunt in that self-same wood where the Were-Wolf lurked. When the hounds were unleashed they ran this way and that, and swiftly came upon his scent. At the view the huntsman winded on his horn, and the whole pack were at his heels. They followed him from morn to eve, till he was torn and bleeding, and was all adread lest they should pull him down. Now the King was very close to the quarry, and when Bisclavaret looked upon his master, he ran to him for pity and for grace. He took the stirrup within his paws, and fawned upon the prince's foot. The King was very fearful at this sight, but presently he called his courtiers to his aid.

"Lords," cried he, "hasten hither, and see this marvelous thing. Here is a beast who has the sense of man. He abases himself before his foe, and cries for mercy, although he cannot speak. Beat off the hounds, and let no man do him harm. We will hunt no more to-day, but return to our own place, with the wonderful quarry we have taken."

The King turned him about, and rode to his hall, Bisclavaret following at his side. Very near to his master the Were-Wolf went, like any dog, and had no care to seek again the wood. When the King had brought him safely to his own castle, he rejoiced greatly, for the beast was fair and strong, no mightier had any man seen. Much pride had the King in his marvelous beast. He held him so dear, that he bade all those who wished for his love, to cross the Wolf in naught, neither to strike him with a rod, but ever to see that he was richly fed and kenneled warm. This commandment the Court observed willingly. So all the day the Wolf sported with the lords, and at night he lay within the chamber of the King. There was not a man who

12. ravished: seized and carried away by force.
13. abases: lowers or humbles.
did not make much of the beast, so frank was he
and debonair. 14 None had reason to do him
wrong, for ever was he about his master, and for
his part did evil to none. Every day were these
two companions together, and all perceived that
the King loved him as his friend.

Hearken now to that which chanced.
The King held a high Court, and bade his
great vassals and barons, and all the lords of his
venery 15 to the feast. Never was there a goodlier
feast, nor one set forth with sweeter show and
pomp. Amongst those who were bidden, came
that same knight who had the wife of Bisclavaret
for dame. He came to the castle, richly gowned,
with a fair company, but little he deemed whom
he would find so near. Bisclavaret
marked his foe the moment he
stood within the hall. He ran
towards him, and seized him with
his fangs, in the King’s very pres-
ence, and to the view of all.
Doubtless he would have done him
much mischief, had not the King
tailed and chidden him, and
threatened him with a rod. Once,
and twice, again, the Wolf set upon the knight in
the very light of day. All men marveled at his
malice, for sweet and serviceable was the beast,
and to that hour had shewn hatred of none.
With one consent the household deemed that this
deed was done with full reason, and that the
Wolf had suffered at the knight’s hand some bit-
ter wrong. Right wary of his foe was the knight
until the feast had ended, and all the barons had
taken farewell of their lord, and departed, each
to his own house. With these, amongst the very
first, went that lord whom Bisclavaret so fiercely
had assailed. 16 Small was the wonder that he was
glad to go.

No long while after this adventure it came to
pass that the courteous King would hunt in that
forest where Bisclavaret was found. With the
prince came his wolf, and a fair company. Now at
nightfall the King abode within a certain lodge of
that country, and this was known of that dame
who before was the wife of Bisclavaret. In the
morning the lady clothed her in her most dainty
apparel, and hastened to the lodge, since she
desired to speak with the King, and to offer him a
rich present. When the lady entered in the cham-
ber, neither man nor leash might restrain the fury
of the Wolf. He became as a mad dog in his
hatred and malice. Breaking from his bonds he
sprang at the lady’s face, and bit the nose from
her visage. From every side men ran to the succ-
cor 17 of the dame. They beat off the wolf from his
prey, and for a little would have cut him in pieces with their swords. But
a certain wise counselor said to the
King, “Sire, hearken now to me.
This beast is always with you, and
there is not one of us all who has
not known him for long. He goes in
and out amongst us, nor has molested
any man, neither done wrong or
felony to any, save only to this
dame, one only time as we have seen. He has
done evil to this lady, and to that knight, who is
now the husband of the dame. Sire, she was once
the wife of that lord who was so close and private
to your heart, but who went, and none might find
where he had gone. Now, therefore, put the dame
in a sure place, and question her straitly, so that
she may tell—if perchance she knows thereof—for
what reason this Beast holds her in such mortal
hate. For many a strange deed has chanced, as
well we know, in this marvelous land of Brittany.”

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14. debonair (ˈdə-bə-ˈnär): pleasant; carefree and cheerful.
15. the lords of his venery (ˈvɛn-ə-ˈrɛ): the huntsmen of the
king.
16. assailed: attacked repeatedly and violently.
17. succor: help; aid.
HUMANITIES CONNECTION  This 15th-century woodcut from Germany shows a werewolf attacking its victim while a stunned companion looks on. The artist captures the fury of the werewolf, who has lost his humanity and descended to the level of a beast. Notice the contrast between the woods, where the beast dwells, and the house, where humans live.
The King listened to these words, and deemed the counsel good. He laid hands upon the knight, and put the dame in surety in another place. He caused them to be questioned right straitly, so that their torment was very grievous. At the end, partly because of her distress, and partly by reason of her exceeding fear, the lady’s lips were loosed, and she told her tale. She showed them of the betrayal of her lord, and how his raiment was stolen from the hollow stone. Since then she knew not where he went, nor what had befallen him, for he had never come again to his own land. Only, in her heart, well she deemed and was persuaded, that Bisclavaret was he.

Straightway the King demanded the vesture of his baron, whether this were to the wish of the lady, or whether it were against her wish. When the raiment was brought him, he caused it to be spread before Bisclavaret, but the Wolf made as though he had not seen. Then that cunning and crafty counselor took the King apart, that he might give him a fresh rede."

"Sire," said he, "you do not wisely, nor well, to set this raiment before Bisclavaret, in the sight of all. In shame and much tribulation must he lay aside the beast, and again become man. Carry your wolf within your most secret chamber, and put his vestment therein. Then close the door upon him, and leave him alone for a space. So we shall see presently whether the ravening beast may indeed return to human shape."

The King carried the Wolf to his chamber, and shut the doors upon him fast. He delayed for a brief while, and taking two lords of his fellowship with him, came again to the room. Entering therein, all three, softly together, they found the knight sleeping in the King's bed, like a little child. The King ran swiftly to the bed and taking his friend in his arms, embraced and kissed him fondly, above a hundred times. When the man's speech returned once more, he told him of his adventure. Then the King restored to his friend the fief that was stolen from him, and gave such rich gifts, moreover, as I cannot tell. As for the wife who had betrayed Bisclavaret, he bade her avoid his country, and chased her from the realm. So she went forth, she and her second lord together, to seek a more abiding city, and were no more seen.

The adventure that you have heard is no vain fable. Verily and indeed it chanced as I have said. The Lay of the Were-Wolf, truly, was written that it should ever be borne in mind.

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18. surety: custody.
19. rede (rēd): piece of advice or counsel.
20. fief (fēf): piece of land; estate.