

love, it proves to be excellent plant food, and causes new, efficacious herbs to grow in the region where it is spilled. (In Ovid's version, Thisbe, before committing suicide over Pyramus's body, prays that the mulberry tree's fruit may become dark red to memorialize the double death; her prayer is granted.) The *lai* ends as it began, in a transparently allusive and euphemistic relationship to literary tradition.

The ostensible message of *Les Deus Amanz* is that love, by inspiring in lovers transcendent joy and daring—the hero forgets the potion in his joy at his beloved—forces them beyond the limits imposed on them by the exigencies of social and familial relationships, and thus destroys them. More persistently, the *lai* urges the fragility of the literary tradition of ennobling, tragic love by hedging the love affair about with details and stratagems that curb its flight toward heroism or even pathos. The potion, intended within the story to bridge the gap between the hero's love aspirations and human limitations, is also a symbol of love's inability to thrive without recourse to trickery and art. The refusal of the potion is at once the triumph and the death of childhood's exalted vision—but the acceptance of the potion would spell the end of the illusion from another point of view. In illustrating the limits of the courtly love vision, Marie demonstrates artistic *démésure*—the use of too many conflicting story models, too tamely retold in too little space—analogous to that of her hero. As a result, the story staggers, as it were, under the weight of its borrowings, and falls repeatedly from the heights of intensity into the valley of anticlimax. Nowhere does Marie show her artistic mastery more clearly than in this joke she plays on herself.

## Yonec

Now that I've begun these *lais*  
the effort will not stop me;  
every adventure that I know  
I shall relate in rhyme.

- 5 My intention and my desire  
is to tell you next of Yonec,  
how he was born and how his father  
first came to his mother.  
The man who fathered Yonec  
10 was called Muldumarec.

There once lived in Brittany  
a rich man, old and ancient.  
At Caerwent, he was acknowledged  
and accepted as lord of the land.

- 15 The city sits on the Duellas,  
which at one time was open to boats.  
The man was very far along in years  
but because he possessed a large fortune  
he took a wife in order to have children,  
20 who would come after him and be his heirs.  
The girl who was given to the rich man  
came from a good family;  
she was wise and gracious<sup>1</sup> and very beautiful—  
for her beauty he loved her very much.  
25 Because she was beautiful and noble  
he made every effort to guard her.  
He locked her inside his tower  
in a great paved chamber.  
A sister of his,  
30 who was also old and a widow, without her own lord,  
he stationed with his lady  
to guard her even more closely.

1. *curteise*: courtly.

There were other women, I believe,  
 in another chamber by themselves,  
 35 but the lady never spoke to them  
 unless the old woman gave her permission.  
 So he kept her more than seven years—  
 they never had any children;  
 she never left that tower,  
 40 neither for family nor for friends.  
 When the lord came to sleep there  
 no chamberlain or porter  
 dared enter that room,  
 not even to carry a candle before the lord.  
 45 The lady lived in great sorrow,  
 with tears and sighs and weeping;  
 she lost her beauty,  
 as one does who cares nothing for it.  
 She would have preferred  
 50 death to take her quickly.

It was the beginning of April  
 when the birds begin their songs.  
 The lord arose in the morning  
 and made ready to go to the woods.  
 55 He had the old woman get up  
 and close the door behind him—  
 she followed his command.  
 The lord went off with his men.  
 The old woman carried a psalter  
 60 from which she intended to read the psalms.  
 The lady, awake and in tears,  
 saw the light of the sun.  
 She noticed that the old woman  
 had left the chamber.  
 65 She grieved and sighed  
 and wept and raged:  
 "I should never have been born!

My fate is very harsh.  
 I'm imprisoned in this tower  
 70 and I'll never leave it unless I die.  
 What is this jealous old man afraid of  
 that he keeps me so imprisoned?  
 He's mad, out of his senses;  
 always afraid of being deceived.  
 75 I can't even go to church  
 or hear God's service.  
 If I could speak to people  
 and enjoy myself with them  
 I'd be very gracious to my lord  
 80 even if I didn't want to be.  
 A curse on my family,  
 and on all the others  
 who gave me to this jealous man,  
 who married me to his body.  
 85 It's a rough rope that I pull and draw.  
 He'll never die—  
 when he should have been baptized  
 he was plunged instead in the river of hell;  
 his sinews are hard, his veins are hard,  
 90 filled with living blood.  
 I've often heard  
 that one could once find  
 adventures in this land  
 that brought relief to the unhappy.  
 95 Knights might find young girls  
 to their desire, noble and lovely;  
 and ladies find lovers  
 so handsome, courtly, brave, and valiant  
 that they could not be blamed,  
 100 and no one else would see them.  
 If that might be or ever was,  
 if that has ever happened to anyone,  
 God, who has power over everything,  
 grant me my wish in this."

- 105 When she'd finished her lament,  
 she saw, through a narrow window,  
 the shadow of a great bird.  
 She didn't know what it was.  
 It flew into the chamber;  
 110 its feet were banded; it looked like a hawk  
 of five or six moultings.  
 It alighted before the lady.  
 When it had been there awhile  
 and she'd stared hard at it,  
 115 it became a handsome and noble knight.  
 The lady was astonished;  
 her blood went cold, she trembled,  
 she was frightened—she covered her head.  
 The knight was very courteous,  
 120 he spoke first:  
 "Lady," he said, "don't be afraid.  
 The hawk is a noble bird,  
 although its secrets are unknown to you.  
 Be reassured  
 125 and accept me as your love.  
 That," he said, "is why I came here.  
 I have loved you for a long time,  
 I've desired you in my heart.  
 Never have I loved any woman but you  
 130 nor shall I ever love another,  
 yet I couldn't have come to you  
 or left my own land  
 had you not asked for me.  
 But now I can be your love."  
 135 The lady was reassured;  
 she uncovered her head and spoke.  
 She answered the knight,  
 saying she would take him as her lover  
 if he believed in God,  
 140 and if their love was really possible.

- For he was of great beauty.  
 Never in her life  
 had she seen so handsome a knight—  
 nor would she ever.  
 145 "My lady," he said, "you are right.  
 I wouldn't want you to feel  
 guilt because of me,  
 or doubt or suspicion.  
 I do believe in the creator  
 150 who freed us from the grief  
 that Adam, our father, led us into  
 when he bit into the bitter apple.  
 He is, will be, and always was  
 the life and light of sinners.  
 155 If you don't believe me  
 send for your chaplain.  
 Say that you've suddenly been taken ill  
 and that you desire the service  
 that God established in this world  
 160 for the healing of sinners.  
 I shall take on your appearance  
 to receive the body of our lord God,  
 and I'll recite my whole credo for you.  
 You will never doubt my faith again."  
 165 She answered that she was satisfied.  
 He lay beside her on the bed  
 but he didn't try to touch her,  
 to embrace her or to kiss her.  
 Meanwhile, the old woman had returned.  
 170 She found the lady awake  
 and told her it was time to get up,  
 she would bring her clothes.  
 The lady said she was ill,  
 that the old woman should send for the chaplain  
 175 and bring him to her quickly—  
 she very much feared she was dying.

The old woman said, "Be patient,  
my lord has gone to the woods.  
No one may come in here but me."  
180 The lady was very upset;  
she pretended to faint.  
When the other saw her, she was frightened;  
she unlocked the door of the chamber  
and sent for the priest.  
185 He came as quickly as he could,  
bringing the *corpus domini*.<sup>2</sup>  
The knight received it,  
drank the wine from the chalice.  
Then the chaplain left  
190 and the old woman closed the doors.  
The lady lay beside her love—  
there was never a more beautiful couple.  
When they had laughed and played  
and spoken intimately,  
195 the knight took his leave  
to return to his land.  
She gently begged him  
to come back often.  
"Lady," he said, "whenever you please,  
200 I will be here within the hour.  
But you must make certain  
that we're not discovered.  
This old woman will betray us,  
night and day she will spy on us.  
205 She will perceive our love,  
and tell her lord about it.  
If that happens,  
if we are betrayed,  
I won't be able to escape.  
210 I shall die."

2. The body of the Lord, the eucharistic host.

With that the knight departed,  
leaving his love in great joy.  
In the morning she rose restored;  
she was happy all week.  
215 Her body had now become precious to her,  
she completely recovered her beauty.  
Now she would rather remain here  
than look for pleasure elsewhere.  
She wanted to see her love all the time  
220 and enjoy herself with him.  
As soon as her lord departed,  
night or day, early or late,  
she had him all to her pleasure.  
God, let their joy endure!  
225 Because of the great joy she felt,  
because she could see her love so often,  
her whole appearance changed.  
But her lord was clever.  
In his heart he sensed  
230 that she was not what she had been.  
He suspected his sister.  
He questioned her one day,  
saying he was astonished  
that the lady now dressed with care.  
235 He asked her what it meant.  
The old woman said she didn't know—  
no one could have spoken to her,  
she had no lover or friend—  
it was only that she was now more willing  
240 to be alone than before.  
His sister, too, had noticed the change.  
Her lord answered:  
"By my faith," he said, "I think that's so.  
But you must do something for me.  
245 In the morning, when I've gotten up  
and you have shut the doors,

pretend you are going out  
and leave her lying there alone.  
Then hide yourself in a safe place,  
250 watch her and find out  
what it is, and where it comes from,  
that gives her such great joy."  
With that plan they separated.  
Alas, how hard it is to protect yourself  
255 from someone who wants to trap you,  
to betray and deceive you!

Three days later, as I heard the story,  
the lord pretended to go away.  
He told his wife the story  
260 that the king had sent for him by letter  
but that he would return quickly.  
He left the chamber and shut the door.  
The old woman got up,  
went behind a curtain;  
265 from there she could hear and see  
whatever she wanted to know.  
The lady lay in bed but did not sleep,  
she longed for her love.  
He came without delay,  
270 before any time had passed.  
They gave each other great joy  
with word and look  
until it was time to rise—  
he had to go.  
275 But the old woman watched him,  
saw how he came and went.  
She was quite frightened  
when she saw him first a man and then a bird.  
When the lord returned—  
280 he hadn't gone very far—  
she told him and revealed  
the truth about the knight

and the lord was troubled by it.  
But he was quick to invent  
285 a way to kill the knight.  
He had great spikes of iron forged,  
their tips sharpened—  
no razor on earth could cut better.  
When he had them all prepared  
290 and pronged on all sides,  
he set them in the window—  
close together and firmly placed—  
through which the knight passed  
when he visited the lady.  
295 God, he doesn't know what treachery  
the villains are preparing.  
The next day in the morning  
the lord rose before dawn  
and said he was going hunting.  
300 The old woman saw him to the door  
and then went back to bed  
for day was not yet visible.  
The lady awoke and waited  
for the one she loved faithfully;  
305 she said he might well come now  
and be with her at leisure.  
As soon as she asked,  
he came without delay.  
He flew into the window,  
310 but the spikes were there.  
One wounded him in his breast—  
out rushed the red blood.  
He knew he was fatally wounded;  
he pulled himself free and entered the room.  
315 He alighted on the bed, in front of the lady,  
staining the bedclothes with blood.  
She saw the blood and the wound  
in anguish and horror.  
He said, "My sweet love,



- 320 I lose my life for love of you.  
 I told you it would happen,  
 that your appearance would kill us."  
 When she heard that, she fainted;  
 for a short while she lay as if dead.
- 325 He comforted her gently,  
 said that grief would do no good,  
 but that she was pregnant with his child.  
 She would have a son, brave and strong,  
 who would comfort her;
- 330 she would call him Yonec.  
 He would avenge both of them  
 and kill their enemy.  
 But he could remain no longer  
 for his wound was bleeding badly.
- 335 He left in great sorrow.  
 She followed him with loud cries.  
 She leapt out a window—  
 it's a wonder that she wasn't killed,  
 for it was at least twenty feet high
- 340 where she made her leap,  
 naked beneath her gown.  
 She followed the traces of blood  
 that flowed from the knight  
 onto the road.
- 345 She followed that road and kept to it  
 until she came to a hill.  
 In the hill there was an opening,  
 red with his blood.  
 She couldn't see anything beyond it
- 350 but she was sure  
 that her love had gone in there.  
 She entered quickly.  
 She found no light  
 but she kept to the right road
- 355 until it emerged from the hill

- into a beautiful meadow.  
 When she found the grass there wet with blood,  
 she was frightened.  
 She followed the traces through the meadow  
 and saw a city not far away.
- 360 The city was completely surrounded by walls.  
 There was no house, no hall or tower,  
 that didn't seem entirely of silver.  
 The buildings were very rich.
- 365 Going toward the town there were marshes,  
 forests, and enclosed fields.  
 On the other side, toward the castle,  
 a stream flowed all around,  
 where ships arrived—
- 370 there were more than three hundred sails.  
 The lower gate was open;  
 the lady entered the city,  
 still following the fresh blood  
 through the town to the castle.
- 375 No one spoke to her,  
 she met neither man nor woman.  
 When she came to the palace courtyard,  
 she found it covered with blood.  
 She entered a lovely chamber
- 380 where she found a knight sleeping.  
 She did not know him, so she went on  
 into another larger chamber.  
 There she found nothing but a bed  
 with a knight sleeping on it;
- 385 she kept going.  
 She entered the third chamber  
 and on that bed she found her love.  
 The feet of the bed were all of polished gold,  
 I couldn't guess the value of the bedclothes;
- 390 the candles and the chandeliers,  
 which were lit night and day,

were worth the gold of an entire city.  
 As soon as she saw him  
 she recognized the knight.  
 395 She approached, frightened,  
 and fell fainting over him.  
 He, who greatly loved her, embraced her,  
 lamenting his misfortune again and again.  
 When she recovered from her faint  
 400 he comforted her gently.  
 "Sweet friend, for God's sake, I beg you,  
 go away! Leave this place!  
 I shall die within<sup>3</sup> the day,  
 there will be great sorrow here,  
 405 and if you are found  
 you will be hurt.  
 Among my people it will be well known  
 that they have lost me because of my love for you.  
 I am disturbed and troubled for you."  
 410 The lady answered: "Love,  
 I would rather die with you  
 than suffer with my lord.  
 If I go back to him he'll kill me."  
 The knight reassured her,  
 415 gave her a ring,  
 and explained to her  
 that, as long as she kept it,  
 her lord would not remember  
 anything that had happened—  
 420 he would imprison her no longer.  
 He gave her his sword  
 and then made her swear  
 no man would ever possess it,  
 that she'd keep it for their son.  
 425 When the son had grown and become

3. Rychner, following (P) and (Q), gives *en mi*, "in the middle of the day"; Ewert, with (H) and (S), gives *devant*, "before."

a brave and valiant knight,  
 she would go to a festival,  
 taking him and her lord with her.  
 They would come to an abbey.  
 430 There, beside a tomb,  
 they would hear the story of his death,  
 how he was wrongfully killed.  
 There she would give her son the sword.  
 The adventure would be recited to him,  
 435 how he was born and who his father was;  
 then they'd see what he would do.  
 When he'd told her and shown her everything,  
 he gave her a precious robe  
 and told her to put it on.  
 440 Then he sent her away.  
 She left carrying the ring  
 and the sword—they comforted her.  
 She had not gone half a mile  
 from the gate of the city  
 445 when she heard the bells ring  
 and the mourning begin in the castle,  
 and in her sorrow  
 she fainted four times.  
 When she recovered from the faints  
 450 she made her way to the hill.  
 She entered it, passed through it,  
 and returned to her country.  
 There with her lord  
 she lived many days and years.  
 455 He never accused her of that deed,  
 never insulted or abused her.  
 Her son was born and nourished,  
 protected and cherished.  
 They named him Yonec.  
 460 In all the kingdom you couldn't find  
 one so handsome, brave, or strong,  
 so generous, so munificent.

When he reached the proper age,  
 he was made a knight.  
 465 Hear now what happened  
 in that very year.  
 To the feast of St. Aaron,  
 celebrated in Caerleon  
 and in many other cities,  
 470 the lord had been summoned  
 to come with his friends,  
 according to the custom of the land,  
 and to bring his wife and his son,  
 all richly attired.  
 475 So it was; they went.  
 But they didn't know the way;  
 they had a boy with them  
 who guided them along the right road  
 until they came to a castle—  
 480 none more beautiful in all the world.  
 Inside, there was an abbey  
 of very religious people.  
 The boy who was guiding them to the festival  
 housed them there.  
 485 In the abbot's chamber  
 they were well served and honored.  
 Next day they went to hear Mass  
 before they departed,  
 but the abbot went to speak to them  
 490 to beg them to stay  
 so he could show them the dormitory,  
 the chapter house, and the refectory.  
 And since they were comfortable there,  
 the lord agreed to stay.  
 495 That day, after they had dined,  
 they went to the workshops.  
 On their way, they passed the chapter house,  
 where they found a huge tomb  
 covered with a cloth of embroidered silk,

500 a band of precious gold running from one side to the other.  
 At the head, the feet, and at the sides  
 burned twenty candles.  
 The chandeliers were pure gold,  
 the censers amethyst,  
 505 which through the day perfumed  
 that tomb, to its great honor.  
 They asked and inquired  
 of people from that land  
 whose tomb it was,  
 510 what man lay there.  
 The people began to weep  
 and, weeping, to recount  
 that it was the best knight  
 the strongest, the most fierce,  
 515 the most handsome and the best loved,  
 that had ever lived.  
 "He was king of this land;  
 no one was ever so courtly.  
 At Caerwent he was discovered  
 520 and killed for the love of a lady.  
 Since then we have had no lord,  
 but have waited many days,  
 just as he told and commanded us,  
 for the son the lady bore him."  
 525 When the lady heard that news,  
 she called aloud to her son.  
 "Fair son," she said, "you hear  
 how God has led us to this spot.  
 Your father, whom this old man murdered,  
 530 lies here in this tomb.  
 Now I give and commend his sword to you.  
 I have kept it a long time for you."  
 Then she revealed, for all to hear,  
 that the man in the tomb was the father and this was his son,  
 535 and how he used to come to her,  
 how her lord had betrayed him—



she told the truth.  
 Then she fainted over the tomb  
 and, in her faint, she died.  
 540 She never spoke again.  
 When her son saw that she had died,  
 he cut off his stepfather's head.  
 Thus with his father's sword  
 he avenged his mother's sorrow.  
 545 When all this had happened,  
 when it became known through the city,  
 they took the lady with great honor  
 and placed her in the coffin.  
 Before they departed  
 550 they made Yonec their lord.

Long after, those who heard this adventure  
 composed a lay about it,  
 about the pain and the grief  
 that they suffered for love.

## YONEC

YONEC begins with what appears to be a conventional literary situation, an old and jealous husband keeping his young wife under close guard. The audience expects a plot to deceive the husband and smuggle in a young lover. A young lover does indeed make his way to the wife, but otherwise, in all the details and in the overall tone of the story, the treatment is quite unusual. The lovers do not use their wits to deceive the husband—it is the husband who plots to trap and kill the lover, while the wife uses her imagination to create the kind of love she needs.

The wife is young and lovely, with all the social graces, but these are wasted in the tower in which she is imprisoned; the

husband, wanting to keep her charms all to himself, only destroys them. He is too old, a point underlined in the French by the repetition of the word *trespas* (l. 16) in *trespassez* (l. 17): the river of his city once offered a *trespas*, "passage," to boats, that is, it has since dried up; and the husband is *mult trespassez*, "very far along in years," presumably also dried up. Furthermore, his love is possessive, life-denying—he married supposedly to have heirs, but the marriage is childless—and ultimately evil. He will not allow his wife even to go to church and she accuses her family of committing a grave sin in marrying her to this man; she suspects that he was baptized in the waters of hell. As if to emphasize the husband's evil, the lover's first act when he comes to the lady is to ask for a priest and take the host.

The love, in other words, is not a sin. In fact, it restores the lady's beauty and joy (joy is the dominant theme in the love scenes, the word *joie* is constantly repeated), so that even the husband notices the change. That is what drives him to search out and destroy the lover who is the source of it. The husband is a hunter—he is always leaving to go off to the forest—and he sets a particularly vicious trap for his prey, the lover who comes to the lady in the shape of a bird. The bird, a hawk, is at once the only creature who could gain entrance to the tower and a symbol of the lover in lyric poetry. He is also, by nature, a predator, a hunter, but the bird-knight of this story, in another reversal of expectation, is a gentle, tame creature who comes at the lady's call to bring her love and joy.

The lady, forced inward on herself by the lack of love in her marriage and the absence of family or friends to console her, escapes into her imagination. She thinks of adventures, which she associates with blameless love between knights and ladies; she prays for one to come to her, and the bird appears. As she stares at it, it becomes a handsome man. That is, her will brings him, and her look gives him form. But when the reality of her world intrudes on her fantasy, when the husband discovers the existence of the bird, the dream is shattered, destroyed by his envy. The bird, wounded by the husband's trap, withdraws

forever. But love has given the lady the power to overcome the problems of her life. She is able to leave her prison (she leaps from a window of the tower without injury), follow her dying lover to his land, and then return to her husband, but she is never again to be imprisoned by him.

The lover's land is a kind of dream world, a city of silver that she reaches by making her way through a long, dark tunnel. When she enters his palace, she goes through room after room of sleeping knights. Her own life is in danger here, as her lover's was in her husband's tower; when her dream is taken from her, she loses the desire to live. But her lover tells her that she will have a son and gives her a sword to keep for him, so that he can one day avenge them and their love. It is the child who gives reality to the love; it is through him that the love can endure.

What Marie seems to be saying in this *lai*, as in several others, is that the world can imprison the body but not the mind, once the mind wills itself free. Love gives the lady the power, by giving her the will, to free herself.

## Laustic (*The Nightingale*)

I shall tell you an adventure  
about which the Bretons made a *lai*.

*Laüstic* was the name, I think,  
they gave it in their land.

5 In French it is *rossignol*,  
and *nightingale* in proper English.

At Saint-Malo, in that country,  
there was a famous city.

Two knights lived there,  
10 they both had strong houses.  
From the goodness of the two barons  
the city acquired a good name.

One had married a woman  
wise, courtly, and handsome;  
15 she set a wonderfully high value on herself,  
within the bounds of custom and usage.

The other was a bachelor,  
well known among his peers  
for bravery and great valor;  
20 he delighted in living well.

He jousted often, spent widely  
and gave out what he had.  
He also loved his neighbor's wife;  
he asked her, begged her so persistently,

25 and there was such good in him,  
that she loved him more than anything,  
as much for the good that she heard of him  
as because he was close by.

They loved each other discreetly and well,  
30 concealed themselves and took care  
that they weren't seen  
or disturbed or suspected.

And they could do this well enough  
since their dwellings were close,