

LAUSTIC

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1991

The adventure in my next tale
The Bretons made into a lai
Called "Laustic," I've heard them say,
In Brittany; in French they call
The "laustic" a "rossignol"
And in good English, "nightingale."

Near St. Malo there was a town
(Somewhere thereabouts) of great renown.
Two knights lived there, no lowly vassals,
In houses that were built like castles.
These barons were so good, their fame
Gave their village goodness's own name.
One of them had married lately:
Polite and polished, such a lady!
She was wise to her own worth
(--Normal in ladies of high birth).
The other lord was a bachelor,
Famed for prowess and for valor,
Loved by all, for he knew how to live:
Joust a lot, spend a lot, what you have give
Away freely. He loved the wife of his neighbor.
He begged so much, and prayed yet more
--And goodness was his striking feature--
So she loved him more than any creature,
Because of the deeds he was famous for,
And because he lived in the castle next door.¹
Wisely and well they loved, these lovers;
They guarded their love under various covers
And hid it from general sight,

¹ Like the women in *Equitan* and *Chaitivel*, the lady in this story loves "by the book," following what seem to be set proprieties for honorable adultery. She takes into account propinquity, and this was supposed to be part of the formal considerations in love, along with nobility of character. Andreas Capellanus, in his famous *De arte honeste amandi* (*The Art of Courtly Love*), written in Latin around the same time Marie composed her lais, includes a dialogue in which a woman tries to put off a would-be lover by appealing to a general rule that lovers should live close to each other, to maximize opportunities for intimacy; the man, on the other hand, says that (a) proximity breeds contempt, and (b) those frequent opportunities to meet are also occasions for discovery (7th dialogue). Here in Marie's poem, proximity brings about disaster, just as Andreas' gentleman predicted.

Lest anyone think it not right.
But who'd suspect? Who would suppose...?
Their two houses were built so close,
Together they stood, side-by-side,
No bar, no fencing to divide
Tower from tower, hall from hall--
Nothing but one high dark stone wall.
At the window of her bedroom suite
The lady would stand, and, oh! how sweet!
Talking thence with her loving friend
On the other side. They'd often send
Love-gifts flying through the air--
Toss and catch. Those evenings were fair:
Nothing's missing from their pleasure!
They had all they wanted, at their leisure,
Except coming together alone, you know,
And going as far as they'd like to go.
For her man used to guard and restrict
Her when he rode out in the district.
Still, day or night, if either lover
Longed to set eyes upon the other,
They had their hope and their refuge:
No-one detected their subterfuge,
No-one could tell her not to stare
Out her own window--and he'd be there.
Long had they loved each other dear
When there came the summer of one year.
Now woods and meadows are green again,
Orchards in blossom are seen again,
The birdie all his sweet notes showers
In joyous play on the sweet flowers.²
A man or woman who loves someone--
Where else would their sweet thoughts run?
To tell the truth about this knight:
That's where his thoughts run, all right;

² The role of the nightingale as singer and symbol of love stretches from Sappho to nearly the present day (a group of folksingers here in Gainesville sing a song about a lad and a lass who pause frequently in their travels "to hear the nightingale sing"). A particularly brilliant tale is Boccaccio's story of Caterina (*Decameron*, 5th day, 4th story), who tells her father virtually the same "poetic truth" as Marie's lady tells her husband, but whose young lover "made the nightingale sing" six or eight times during their night together; it's hard to say whether Boccaccio and Marie had a common source. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet contrast the nightingale, whose song extends their wedding night, with the lark's warning voice.

And the lady, at her window, higher,
Speaks, and looks, only desire.
Nights, when the moon her pale light shed,
When her husband had gone to bed,
The lady rose up from his side,
Wrapped herself in a mantle wide,
Went to stand at the window, true
To her friend waiting there, she knew;
For both their lives were just the same,
They waked all night till morning came.
The rapture of looking made them so glad
(That rapture the only one they had).

She stood there so often, so often got up,
That her lord and master got all het up;
Then he'd ask her to represent
Why she got up and where she went.
"Lord," she said, "That girl or boy
Has never known this good world's joy
Who never heard the laustic's song.
That's why I stand here all night long.
I hear him sing so sweet at night,
It seems to me just pure delight;
I feel pleasure, such longing--I
Need to listen--I can't shut my eye."
He listened to her, every word,
Laughed, cruel, angry, at what he heard.³
He made his plan, which must not fail:
He would trap the nightingale.
For every house-servant one task he set,
To fashion a snare, or a trap, or a net.
In the orchard they spread them; no big

³ I like to read "Laustic" recalling the story of the "Snow-Child," a naughty tale which appears in a number of medieval works, including the Cambridge Songs (#14) and Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*. This is the story: A husband returns from a long business trip to find his adulterous wife has given birth to a boy; she claims the snow engendered it. They are both deceptive--for he cautiously restrains his anger. He carries the child off and sells it; when she asks about her baby, he tells her the sun melted him:

"Baby was conceived by Snow."
Wife tells dear Husband this story.
He takes Baby, sells it. "You know,
Baby melted." Now it's his story.

Strong chestnut tree nor hazel twig
Lacked some snare or sticky lime.
Of course, they caught the bird, in time.
They took it to their lord, the husband.
Glad to be holding in his hand
The laustic, still full of life,
He went to show it to his wife.
"Lady, where are you? Speak some word
to us! Look! I caught this bird--
Come here, now! See how my lime glue
Got him! This nightingale kept you
Awake so often, night-long, when
You should sleep in peace. Well, never again!"
The lady listened to her master
Hurt and angry at this disaster.
--Could she have the bird? If her lord willed it?
In a fit of temper her lord killed it.
With both hands the neck he broke
(A vile deed, worthy of churlish folk!)
And at the lady he threw the body,
Getting her chemise all bloody
A little, in front, on the breast.⁴
He left, not waiting to see the rest.

The lady took up the body small.
Weeping hard, she cursed them all,
Those traitors to the laustic
Who made the traps and snares to sneak
Away her joy forever more!
"Alas," she said, "my love next door!
Never again I'll rise up at night
To stand at the window, to catch a sight
of my friend as oft I used to do!
I know one thing, as true as true:

⁴ In considering the denouement of this tale, one should look at another Boccaccio story (*Decameron*, 4th day, 9th story), based on the *vida* (biography) of the Provençal troubadour Guilhem de Cabestanh. The husband of Guilhem's mistress killed him and served her his heart for dinner; when told what she had eaten, she declared that this food was so excellent she would never eat again, and jumped out the window to her own death. Marie might well have known a version of this story; "at the lady he threw the body" suggests the kind of vengeance that adultery merits in the eyes of such a husband. The extreme of adulterous, and vengeful, passion implied in Guilhem's story contrasts with the more delicate manipulation of symbols (the gifts, the living bird, the dead bird) by all three principals in Marie's lai.

When I'm not there, my faith he'll doubt.
This is a problem I must think out.
I'll send my friend this nightingale.
All that's happened, he'll hear the tale."
The birdie she covered with a fold
Of samite, all in precious gold
Embroidered and inscribed.
She called her servant and described
The message and package she wanted to send.
He took both next door to her friend.
The servant came to the knight next door
And greeted him with his lady's favor.
He spoke his piece as she'd bade him speak
And handed over the laustic.
When he'd told the story and shown the bird
The knight, who'd listened to every word,
Was sad as could be at how things had turned out.
No vile churl he, though, no lazy lout:
He ordered the best smith to mold
A tiny vessel, all pure gold
(No iron or steel), and good stones,
Precious ones, expensive ones,
And make a good tight-fitting lid.
Inside, the laustic he hid.
Then he sealed up this reliquary
To ever after with him carry.

This adventure was widely known:
They couldn't hide it for more than a week.
It was sung as a lai by some Breton
And men call it "Laustic."