

Chievrefueil
a lay of
Marie de France
translated into English verse
by
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This Work Is
Dedicated To

Christine Sautter

A friend of Old French Poetry
On which she has assisted me.

INTRODUCTION

We continue our Old French Lais by presenting here the first English verse translation, as far as we are aware, of Marie de France's lay "Chievrefueil," the Lay of the Honeysuckle. As with all of her lays, this is available in English prose, [7], but the prose misses the feeling the poet wished to transmit; a prose translation of such beautiful poetry is like observing a beautiful rose after it has withered. Although Marie's short poem can not tell the entire story of Tristan and Iseult, one is amazed to see that most of the philosophy and feeling are available in her 118 lines.

The beautiful and absorbing story of Tristan and Iseult has long fascinated me. It's a pity that no representative English version exists in verse; one must fall back upon the prose translation, [4], of Bédier's reconstructed French edition, [2]. The origin of the legend seems hard to trace, but apparently had its beginnings in the 780's, [3, p. 107]. By the time Thomas set it into verse, between 1155 and 1185, [10, p. 10], the story became quite developed. Unfortunately, Thomas's (French) verse is available only in eight fragments which comprise about one-sixth of the total poem of about 20,000 lines; Bédier, in a marvelous piece of scholarship has reconstructed the remainder, [2]. A shorter, but somewhat different and slightly later, about 1192, [10, p. 3], version of the story also exists in fragmented form, again in French, [8]. The first portions of Thomas's version have been translated into a beautiful, but unfinished, Old German verse edition by Gottfried von Strassburg, [6], portions of which have been translated into English verse by Zeydel, [10]. An interesting fact here is that Strassburg's work ceases, after 19,548 lines, approximately in the same portion of the story where the Thomas fragments have been preserved. Considering the depth of the legend and its tragedy, it is amazing how little has been done with it. Wagner of course used some ideas in his opera, but such writings as the poem of Matthew Arnold, [1], or especially A. Tennyson's "The Last Tournament," [9], have completely perverted the legend.

The episode treated by Marie is similar to a passage of Thomas, [2, pp. 332-338]; Marie's version actually seems to have been inserted into the English translation of Thomas, [4, p. 157]. Marie de France was apparently contemporary with Thomas, her lays being written, some believe, about 1165, [5, p. 179]. Consequently, it is rather surprising that one seldom meets her name in the source material, especially since her treatment of this one episode differs somewhat from others. It appears to me that the story of Tristan and Iseult was common knowledge around 1150 and that Thomas and Marie independently recorded what they knew. One notes, however, that line 6 says she has previously read of the legend. The Thomas treatment being more extensive, has consequently received more attention. Since Tristan is represented as being fond of singing lays to his harp to Iseult, [5, p. 257], it seems that Marie's version would have been quite pleasing to him.

The translation is again line for line in iambic tetrameter. We believe the prose translation, which is never really precise, is misleading when at line 99 the weight of the banishment is ascribed to Iseult, [7, p. 104]. It seems that line 101, which is ignored in the prose, as well as line 98, force the "li" of line 99 to refer to Mark. One is also faced with the various spellings of the names of which we have chosen representative ones.

The lay assumes some knowledge of the entire story, which in a few words is this:

Tristan, the nephew of king Mark, wins Iseult (la belle Isolt) for the king. During the journey from her home in Ireland to the king at Tintagel, Tristan and Iseult partake of a philtre, "of Passion and Joy most sharp, and Anguish without end, and Death," entrusted to Iseult's maid Brangwaine by Iseult's mother who had prepared it for her daughter's wedding night. After the marriage to Mark, the love of Iseult for Tristan, and he for her, can not be hidden and Tristan is banished from the court. After several reunions with Iseult the Fair, Tristan, wandering in Brittany takes Iseult of the White Hands (Isolt aux Blanches Mains) for wife. The episode related by Marie apparently occurs at this point, when Tristan has returned to Cornwall to seek Iseult the Fair. After several meetings with Iseult, Tristan returns to Brittany where he becomes wounded in an ambush. Iseult the Fair, learning that Tristan is dying, sails to see him; but Iseult of the White Hands betrays him upon learning of his love for the Cornwall Queen. Tristan dies, being told by Iseult aux Blanches Mains that la belle Iseult would not come - at this instant she actually arrives saying, [2, p. 414, lines 3089-3090]

Amis, amis, pur vostre mort

N'avrai jamais de rien confort

She "clasped him closely; and so gave up her soul, and died beside him of grief for her lover" or more precisely, [2, p 415, lines 3115-3124]

Baise li la buche e la face
E molt estreit a li l'enbrace,
Cors a cors, buche a buche estent,
Sun esprit a itant rent,
E murt dejuste lui issi
Pur la dolur de sun ami.
Tristrans murut pur sun desir,
Ysolt, qu'a tens n'i pout venir.
Tristrans murut pur sue amur,
E la bele Ysolt pur tendrur.

References

- [1] M. Arnold, Poems, second edition, Longman, London, 1854, pp. 97-143.
The poem entitled "Tristram and Iseult" has little of the flavor of the original works.
- [2] J. Bédier, Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas, Tome Premier, Société des Anciens Textes Français, Paris, 1901.
This gives a reconstruction of the text of Thomas.
- [3] J. Bédier, Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas, Tome Second, Société des Anciens Textes Français, Paris, 1901.
This presents a study of the text and legend of [2].
- [4] J. Bédier, The Romance of Tristan and Iseult, translated by H. Belloc and P. Rosenfield, Doubleday, New York, 1955.
This is an English prose translation of [2].
- [5] L. Foulet, Marie de France et la Légende de Tristan, Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie, vol. 32, 1908, pp. 161-183 and pp. 257-289.
- [6] Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan und Isold, herausgegeben von Friedrich Ranke, Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin, 1959.
- [7] E. Mason, Lays of Marie de France, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1959 reprint.
The Lay of the Honeysuckle, pp. 101-104, is a prose translation of the poem.
- [8] E. Muret, Le Roman de Tristram par Beroul, Société des Anciens Textes Français, Paris, 1900.
This is a somewhat different but shorter version than treated in [2].
- [9] A. Tennyson, The Last Tournament, James R. Osgood & Co., Boston, 1872.
This portion of the Idylls of the King completely perverts the story.
- [10] E. H. Zeydel, The "Tristan and Isolde" of Gottfried von Strassburg, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1948.
This gives a verse translation of portions of [6].

VERSE TRANSLATION

Chievrefueil

Delight and pleasure come my way
Through Chievrefueil the lay;
The truth of it to you I'll tell
Of how 'twas done and what befell.
5 By several tongues it has been said
And it in words I've also read,
Of Tristan and Iseult the queen,
Their love surpassed all ever seen.
From it they suffered, much were pained;
10 From it their deaths together gained.

In anger was the king, called Mark,
Against his nephew he was stark;
'Twas banishment the fate he dealt
For love toward the queen there felt.
15 To his own land the path then led
To where, South Wales, at birth he fed.
One year entire he there remained
No chance to see that queen who reigned.
Abandonment was felt in him
20 To deaths destruction grim.
No cause for marvel this at all:
For whom in loyal love would fall
The thoughts, and too the griefs, are deep
When wishes will not stay to keep.
25 So sad was Tristan, and pensive,
His country then he vowed to leave.
To Cornwall Tristan set his pace,
The queen there had her dwelling place.
He in the forest stayed alone,
30 His whereabouts were not wished known;
He went about at eventide
When travelers rested from their ride.
With peasants he would spend the night
With paupers he would take respite.
35 The news he oft' enquired to know
Of how the king himself did show.
They told then what of Mark was heard,
The Baron's banishment ordered;
That journey planned to Tintagel,
40 Of Mark's return for feasts they tell.
At Pentecost they'd all be there
Amusement's joy would be their fare.
The queen would be there with the king.

Tristan was glad to hear this thing
45 But he could never seek them out
Since he could not be on their route.
When came the day the king sojourned
Then Tristan to the woods returned.
'Twas known it bordered on the way
50 The crowd would have to pass that day.
The path contained a hazel tree,
A branch was soon from this cut free.
When he prepared this very same
His knife was used to cut his name.
55 The queen the stick would soon there find,
Since she was careful in her mind
To keep some thoughts for him reserved;
She'd know him if the stick's observed.
Another time it had been so
60 As if he would this chance foreknow.
This was the sum of what he said
Of which she'd learn when it was read:
He long had lingered at this spot
With expectation for his lot,
65 He hoped to knowledge of her glean
Of how she could again be seen.
Without her, life was death and pain,
Between the two they were the same
As with the honey-suckle vine
70 Which 'round the hazel does entwine.
As it is caught and tightly wound
And covers all the tree around,
Together they could spend their stay;
But who would wish them split away
75 The hazel tree swift death would bring,
Nor could the vine to its life cling.
"Oh friend of beauty, thus 'twill be
Not I from you, nor you from me!"

The queen came on a horses back.
80 Her eyes she kept upon the track,
She saw the stick and all surmized,
The letters there were recognized.
The knights who served as her guide,
And rode together by her side,
85 Were told to halt on her account;
She wished to rest, to here dismount.
To her command their actions bent.
Far from her people she then went;

Her maid was called along her side,
90 Brengwaine, in whom she could confide.
A little from the path she wound.
Within the wood that one she found
Whom she more loved than any man,
Between themselves much pleasure ran.
95 To him she spoke in all leisure,
And he was told of her pleasure.
She showed him how it could be done
Again the king in friendship won,
And how on Mark the deed had weighed
100 When he with banishment now payed.
With whom his accusation cleft.
She soon must part, her friend she left,
But when the time came to divide
Their tears were shed, oh how they cried.
105 To Wales Tristan again must go
For Mark his uncle bid it so.

From all the joy which he had gained,
This from his friend in sight obtained,
And from the carved stick she read
110 From all the words that she had said,
In order to remember these,
Tristan, who played the harp with ease,
Then made of it a brand-new lay.
I briefly put it down to stay:
115 "Gotelef" 'tis called on English soil,
In France they call it "Chievrefueil"
To you I've told the truth of it,
This lay of which I've here now writ.

Literal Translation

Asez me plest e bien le vueil
Del lai qu'um nume Chievrefueil
Que la verité vus en cunt
Coment fu fez, de quei e dunt.
5 Plusur le m'unt cunté e dit
E jee l'ai trové en escrit
De Tristram e de la reine,
De lur amur ki tant fu fine,
Dunt il ourent meinte dolur;
0 Puis en mururent en un jur.
Le reis Mars esteit curuciez,
Vers Tristram, sun nevu iriez;
De sa terre le cungea
Pur la reine qu'il ama.
5 En sa cuntree en est alez.
En Suhtwales ù il fu nez
Un an demura tut entier,
Ne pot ariere repaire;
Mès puis se mist en abandun
0 De mort e de destructiun.
Ne vus en merveilliez nient:
Kar cil ki eime leialment
Mult est dolenz e trespensez,
Quant il nen a ses volentez.
5 Tristram est dolenz e pensis:
Pur ceo s'esmut de sun pais
En Cornuaille vait tut dreit
Là ù la reine maneit.
En la forest tuz suls se mist,
0 Ne voleit pas qu'um le vèist.
En la vespree s'en eisseit,
Quant tens de herbergier esteit.
Od païsans, od povre gent
Perneit la nuit herbergement.
5 Les noveles lur enquireit
Del rei cum il se cunteneit.
Cil li dient qu'il unt ôi
Que li barun erent bani,
A Tintagel deivant venir,
0 Li reis i vult feste tenir,
A pentecuste i serunt tuit;
Mult i avra joie e deduit,
E la reine od lui sera.
Tristram l'ôï mult s'en haita.
5 Ele n'i purra mie aler
Qu'il ne la veie trespasser.
Le jur que li reis fu meuz
Est Tristam el bois revenu
Sur le chemin que il saveit
0 Que la rute passer deveit.
Une coldre trencha par mi,
Tute quarree la fendi.
Quant il a paré le bastun,
De sun cultel escrit sun nun.

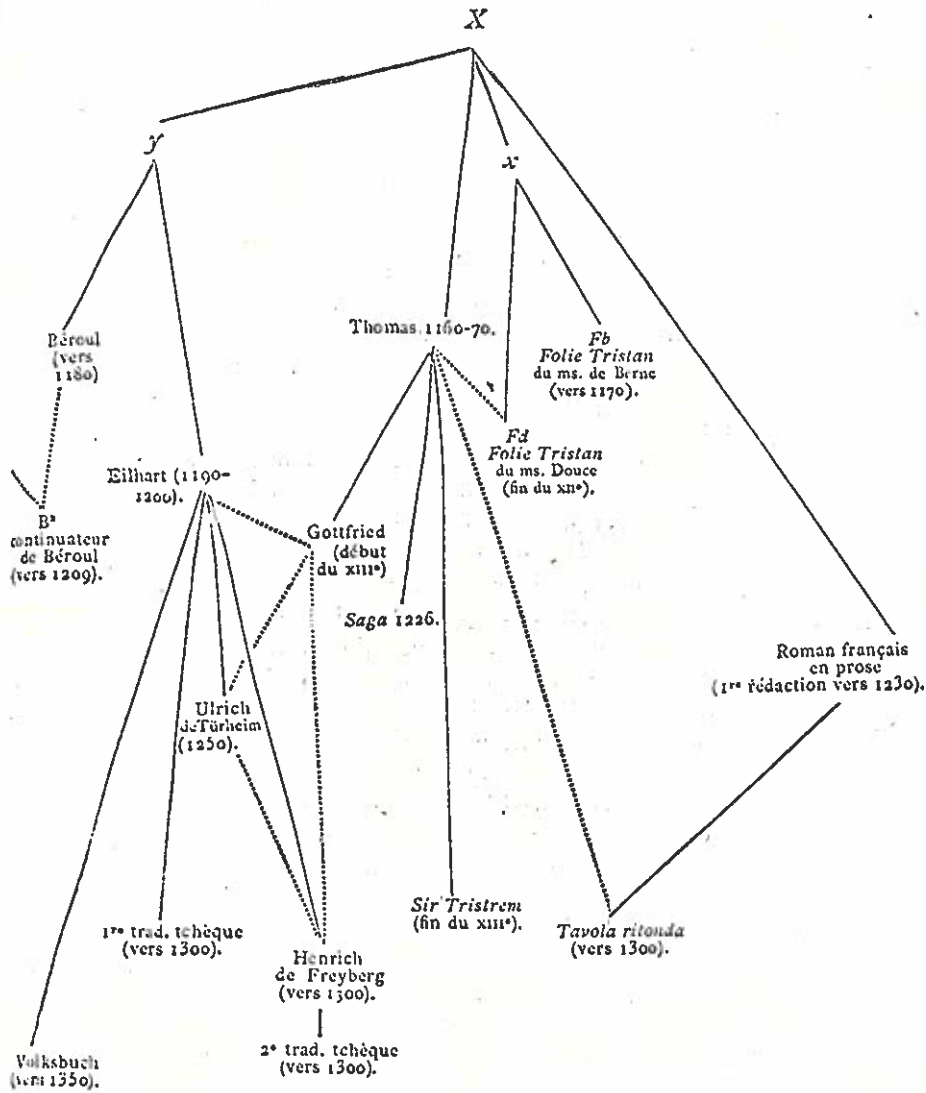
It much pleases me, much I like it,
Thelay which men call Chievrefueil
That in truth I'll tell it to you
How it was done, why and in what way.
Several have told me, and said,
And I have found in writing
Of Tristan and of the queen
Of their love which, above all, found its end,
Over which they had much pain;
Then they died of it one day.
The king, Mark, was angry,
Toward Tristan, his nephew, he was angered;
From his territory he banished him
For the queen which he loved.
From his country he went.
In South Wales where he was born
He remained an entire year,
He could not go back;
Therefore he abandoned himself
To death and destruction.
Don't you marvel at all:
For that which loyally loves
Is much grieved and in deep thought
When he can not have his wishes.
Tristan was sad and pensive:
For this he started to leave his country
To Cornwall he went directly
There where the queen dwelt.
In the forest he put himself alone,
He did not wish for anyone to see him.
In the evening he went out,
When it was time to take up shelter.
With peasants with poor men
He would take his nights rest.
The news he would enquire of them
Of how the king conducted himself.
They told him what they heard of him
That the baron was banished,
To Tintagel they should come
The king would return there to have a feast
At Pentecost they would all be there;
There there would be much pleasure and amusement
And the queen would be with him.
Tristan heard of it and was very glad.
He could not go there
Since he could not pass on the route
The day when the king was moving
Tristan had come back to the wood.
On the path which he knew
That the crowd ought to pass.
A hazel tree cuts across the middle
He quickly cut it there.
When he had prepared the branch,
With his knife he wrote his name.

5 Se la rëine s'aperceit
Ki mult grant garde s'en perneit
De sun ami bien conuistra
Le bastun quant el le verra;
Altre feiz li fu avenu
10 Que si l'aveit apercëu.
Ceo fu la sume de l'escrit
Qu'il li aveit mandé e dit,
Que lunges ot ilec esté
E atendu e surjurné
15 Pur espier e pur saveir
Coment il la pëust veoir
Kar ne pöeit vivre senz li.
D'els dous fu il tut altresí
Cume del chievrefueil esteit
20 Ki a la coldre se perneit:
Quant il s'i est lacies e pres
E tut entour le fust s'est mis,
Ensemble pöent bien durer;
Mès ki puis les vult desevrer,
5 La coldre muert hastivement
E li chievrefueils ensement.
<<Bele amie, si est de nus:
Ne vus senz mei ne jeo senz vus!>>
La rëine vint chevalchant.
30 Ele esguarda un poi avant,
Le bastun vit, bien l'aparceut
Tutes les letres i conut.
Les chevaliers, ki la menöent
E ki ensemble od li erröent,
15 Cumanda tost a arester:
Descendre vult e reposer.
Cil unt fait sun comandement.
Ele s'en vet luinz de sa gent;
Sa meschine apela a sei,
40 Brenguein, ki mult ot bone fei.
Del chemin un poi s'esluigna.
Dedenz le bois celui trova
Que plus amot que rien vivant.
Entre els meinent joie mult grant.
15 A li parla tut a leisir,
E ele li dist sun plaisir;
Puis li mostra cumfaitement
Del rei avra acordement
E que mult li aveit pesé
50 De ceo qu'il l'ot si cungeé,
Par encusement l'aveit fait.
A tant s'en part, sun ami lait;
Mès quant ceo vint al desevrer,
Dunc comencierent a plurer.
05 Tristram en Wales s'en rala,
Tant que sis uncles la manda.
Pur la joie qu'il ot èue
De s'amie qu'il ot vëue
E pur ceo qu'il aveit escrit,

It the queen would perceive
Who very much care was taking
Of her friend, well she would know,
The stick when she would see it;
Another time it had occurred
As if he had perceived.
This was the significance of what he wrote
Which he had informed and told her,
That a long time he had been there
And expected and lingered
By hope and by knowledge
How he would be able to see her
For he could not live without her.
Of the two they were the same
As with the honey-suckle which stood
Fastened to the hazel tree:
As it is there wound and caught
And all around the tree is put
Together they were able to stay;
But who then wishes them to separate,
The hazel tree kills hastily
And the honey-suckle likewise.
"Beautiful friend, thus it is with us:
Neither you without me nor I without you!"
The queen came horse-back riding
She watched a little before,
She saw the stick, well she perceived it,
All the letters there she knew.
The knights who led her
And which together rode along with her
She commanded them to quickly stop:
She wished to descend and rest
They carried out her command.
She went far from her people;
Her lady she called to herself
Brenquein, who very much was faithful.
From the path a little ways she went
Within the wood that one she found
Whom she loved more than any living being.
Between themselves they much rejoiced.
To him she spoke all at her leisure
And she told him of her pleasure;
Then she showed him how
With the king he could have reconciliation
And, that much he was in torment
With that which he had so banished,
By the accusation he had made.
Soon they must part, her friend she left;
But when they came to separate
Then they commenced to cry.
Tristan again went to Wales,
So much had his uncle commanded him.
For the joy which he had had
From his friend which he had seen
And by that which he had written,

.10 Si cum la rëine l'ot dit,
Pur les paroles remembrer,
Tristram, ki bien saveit harper,
En aveit fet un nuvel lai.
Asez briefment le numerai:
.15 <<Goteleuf>> l'apelent Engleis,
<<Chieverfueil>> le nument Franceis.
Dit vus en ai la verité
Del lai que j'ai ici cunté.

So much the queen told him,
In order to remember the words,
Tristan, who well knew how to harp,
Of this he had made a new lay.
Very briefly I have made it known:
"Goteleuf" it's English name
"Chieverfueil" in French.
I have told the truth
Of the lay which I have here told.



N. B. — Les lettres X, x, y, désignent des poèmes perdus. Les lignes continues indiquent des rapports de filiation directe, les lignes discontinues indiquent des influences accessoires.

Alternative Lines, Etc.

6 And of it I have also read
11 In anger was = To anger came
12 Against = Toward, he was = was he
14 there = he
14 To keep the queen whose love he felt.
14 To love the queen who near he felt.
16 South Wales, the land where he was bred.
17 there = thus
17 An entire year that heart did yearn
18 For that unseen queen his heart did burn
18 Unable to return to her who reigned.
19 In him was felt abandonment
20 To death's destructive tournament.
22 in loyal = to royal
23 The thought, and too the grief, is deep
24 When wishes sown results don't reap.
30 whereabouts were = hideaway was
31 went about = ventured out
32 travelers = others
35 From them some news was oft' enquired
36 Of how, and what, the king aspired
41 At Pentecost all would assemble (42=?)
47 The day the king began to move (48=improve)
47 The king began to move one day (48=?)
50 crowd = queen
51 A hazel tree cut through the road (+52)
53 When ornamented was this same (+54)
53 When he had prepared the same
54 With his knife he wrote his name.
55 The queen the stick would soon observe
56 Since she was keeping in reserve (+57,58 changes)
59 Another time it had so been
60 As if he had this chance foreseen
63 He at this spot had long remained (+64)
67 Without her, life was death's spike
68 Between the two they were just like
68 She felt this too, they were the same.
80 upon = along
81 She saw the stick, she it perceived (+82)
85 Received the halt command she gave
86 To here dismount for rest her crave.
85 Commands she gave to quick arrest
86 She wanted to descend and rest
89 Her maid was called to come by she
90 Brenguein, so true and trustworthy.
97-98 Rhymes of gain, attain.
98 Again = Once more = How 'gain
99 had = sure
103 But when they must again divide
103 But when they came to separate (+104)
104 They then commenced their tears to shed (+103)
105 Tristan to Wales again returned (went back) (+106)
106 For this was as his uncle bid.
109 The words he carved and she had read