

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

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Whose Owl-like stubborn soul*
Inspired us to this very goal

* The story of the stubborn Owl and the
equally stubborn Nightingale, who partici-
pated in a pointless debate which neither
won, is told in [5].

INTRODUCTION

1. The Poem

We present here what we believe to be the first verse translation of one of Marie de France's twelve lays, "l'austic." The poem seems to have been long neglected, but appears to us, by its structure, conciseness and simplicity of plot, to have been one of her early lays. As such it represents one of the first literary lays, [2, p.73], which in fact are considered as precursors to the novel, [4, p.v].

Although one of the shorter lays, this particular one contains most of the elements of the other lays. Thus, it begins with a prologue which tells the origin of the lay, the Bretons according to Marie. The story is then presented, which typically concerns love. "The Austic" is particularly interesting here, since in only 150 lines, love is seen to blossom, burn, and then become thwarted, while still enduring forever. In this short space Marie simply and beautifully handles both the frustrations and idealizations of the Middle Ages: 1) the almost hopelessness of a woman having love in marriage, because of the manner the partner was typically chosen, 2) love is more than an amorous conquest; it truly endures forever, as was later to be expressed by Dante.

Other versions of the story are presented in [6, pp. CXXVII - CXXVIII] with a short discussion, in English, in [5, pp. 165 - 166].

2. The Poet

Not much is known concerning the life of Marie de France; what is available comes from her poems. She was perhaps born in the Ile de France, [2, p.3], in the early part of the twelfth century. It seems likely that she was schooled in a convent, this being one of the few places where she could receive an education, [2, p.3]. It appears that she was married, and that at some time she went to England, [7, p.x], since she speaks of writing while in a foreign land and dedicates the lays to a king, presumably King Henry II, [2, pp. 3 - 4]. The lays seem to have been separately written between 1165 and 1185, probably after her "Fables" and before her "Espurgatoire de Saint Patriz," [2, p.7]. Since the lays were attacked as being profane, [2, p.5], it appears that the lays were abandoned in favor of the "Espurgatoire," the latter being translated as a penance, since it seems she was then living in a convent, [2, pp. 13 - 17].

It has been proposed that Marie de France was Princess Marie, the daughter of Philip Augustus of France, [1]. Although the arguments sound convincing, since their backgrounds were undoubtedly similar, this seems to be easily refuted by looking at dates. Marie de France's lays were popular by 1200, since Denis Piramus mentions her in "Vie Seint Edmunt," which, it seems to be well established, was written before 1200. Princess Marie wasn't born until 1197.

As stated in the Prologue to the lays, they were composed to keep away idleness and sadness, and were undertaken, in place of translating Latin, where all had been done by others, to record the lays minstrels had chanted to her ear. In a personal touch she states, line 42 (Prologue), "Over them I have often been kept awake."

3. Verse Translation

Here we adhere as closely as feasible to the meaning and structure of the original work. We use the typical rhymed pairs of octosyllabic verse of the author; actually we choose almost exclusively iambic tetrameter, with rhymed couplets. The translation follows the original, almost line for line.

In the translation there is one ambiguity worth noting. At line 66, "entent" is usually translated as "acted," [4, p.49], [3, p.58], [5, p.165]; "heard" is another possibility, but we feel "understood" is the most appropriate. The text we take from [7, pp.34 - 38]; it is given for reference in the appendix. The translation was facilitated by [4, pp.7 - 13], which, however, we feel is not quite as accurate as [7, pp.34 - 38].

4. References

Many references are available, the most extensive being in German, [6]. We list only seven necessary for our purposes, others can be obtained from these.

- [1]. C. C. Elwood, Marie of France, 1197 - 1224, Master of Arts Thesis, Stanford University, December, 1957. This attempts an identification of Marie with Princess Marie, daughter of Philip Augustus of France.
- [2]. J. Harris, Marie de France, Publications of French Studies, New York, 1930, A Ph.D. thesis at Columbia exposing one of the manuscripts.
- [3]. E. Mason, French Mediaeval Romances, Everyman's Library, London, 1911. A prose translation of the lays.
- [4]. E. von Richthofen, Vier altfranzösische Lais der Marie der France, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1960. A recent, but edited edition of some of [7].
- [5]. E. G. Stanley, The Owl and the Nightingale, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1960. The Old English text of "The Owl and the Nightingale." The prose translation of "The Austic," led to this work.
- [6]. K. Warnke, Die Lais der Marie de France, Bibliotheca Normannica, III, second edition, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle, 1900. The most thorough study containing the twelve lays and the Prologue.
- [7]. K. Warnke, Vier Lais der Marie de France, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle, 1925. This text appears closest to the originals. Thus, it is the one used here.

VERSE TRANSLATION

The Austic

A tale I'll tell to you this day
Of which the Bretons made a lay.
The Austic named, thus seems to me,
That it they call in their country;
5 In French of "russignol" the tale
In proper English, "nightingale."

In the country is to be found
St. Malo, a village renowned.
Two knights were there maintained
10 And two strong houses they sustained.
By these two barons of good name
The village wide did spread its fame.
The one a wife had married he,
Of knowledge wise and courtly she;
15 In costly clothes her wont to stay
As was the custom of the day.
The other was in bachelorhood.
Among his friends well-known he stood,
For valor great, also prowess,
20 Desired he honor to possess.
He freely spent and much obtained,
He freely gave of what was gained.
This neighbor loved the near by wife.
From prayers and entreaties rife,
25 And hearing much his goodness great,
Above all others he her love did rate,
So much his worth was in her ear,
So much of this that they came near.
Their love was deep and sagely wise..
30 Of constant guard and in disguise
So no one there would soon perceive,
Disturb or act to disbelieve.
This they accomplished very well,
For near their homes in which to dwell,
35 Adjacent two the houses were,
Also their rooms and each cellar.
Of barrier, none to bar the way,
Except that wall of stone dark grey.
From bedrooms where the lady slept,
40 When to the window up she crept,
True words of love to him she'd speak,
And there he could as well her seek,
The messages then interchanged
From writings thrown to gestures ranged.

45 They lacked all things which would displease,
And both remained there quite at ease,
Except they never knew that treasure,
Complete togetherness's pleasure.
For close the guard on this lady,
50 When HE was in the far country.
But soon upon the homeward wend
Be day or night this sojourn's end,
Together spoken words were shared;
No guard to go between them glared,
55 When they to those old windows went,
Themselves were only seen present.

So long continued love this way,
Anew there came a summers day,
Again the shrubs and grass were green
60 And flowers in the orchard seen.
The birds with songs of joy so sweet
Above the flowers sailed their treat.
As even pleasure is in love,
No marvel, they were there heard of.
65 I'll tell the truth about that knight:
He understood with all his might,
The lady on her side heard too,
They gazed and saw all life renew.
The nights in which the moonlight shined,
70 And HE, her sire, in bed reclined,
From next his side she oft arose,
Her frame a mantle would enclose.
The window then, to there she came,
Her love she knew would do the same,
75 Since he was led to see her there;
Of most the night this way they'd stare.
Delightful this refreshing salve,
Of more there was no chance to have.
So much they 'rose, so much this way,
80 Her sire took on an angry ray,
And many times would question ask
To where she went and for what task.
The lady then did "Sire" respond,
"He can of little joy be fond,
85 Who can not hear the austic sing,
For this I stand right here looking.
So sweet I hear it in the night,
To me it seems a pleasant sight;
So much delight and pleasure mine,
90 My eyes won't rest at such a time."

Her sire on hearing thus the sigh
 Began to anger, laughing wry.
 One thought he had of this affair
 To catch the austic in a snare.
 95 Each servant in the house was set
 To making either trap or net;
 In orchards these were placed with glee.
 No hazel bush or chestnut tree
 Of glue or twine or birdlime lacked,
 100 So much that it was caught and sacked.
 The austic, when so taken prey,
 Alive was carried where HE lay;
 The master was quite happy then,
 To madam's rooms his way did wend.
 105 "Now lady where are you," said he,
 "Before us come and speak to me;
 The austic, I have trapped it such,
 For whom you up remained so much.
 In peace hereafter may you sleep;
 110 Awake no longer he'll you keep!"
 And when the lady heard the same
 So sad and angry she became.
 The bird requested from her sire
 Caused quick its death from angry ire.
 115 He wrung its neck at those demands:
 He killed it with his two vile hands,
 The body on the wife then threw,
 Blood on her linen dress did spew,
 A little on the breast before,
 120 Then from the room in such a roar.
 The woman took the small body.
 She cried and cursed them quite harshly,
 All those the austic dear betrayed,
 The traps and nets and snares they made,
 125 For they removed a joy so great.
 "Poor me. Injustice is my fate!"
 Said she, "No longer in the night
 Can I arise to stand upright,
 And as before my lover see.
 130 One thing is known for sure to be,
 My love will think that I deceive.
 Some counsel I could now receive:
 The austic will his present make,
 'Twill serve to information take!"

135 Inside a piece of velvet, gold
Embroidered was the story told,
She wrapped the tiny little bird.
"Valet," she called, and then he heard
The message, telling she was spent,
140 The lover to, then she him sent.
Away he went to meet the knight,
The lady's greetings told on sight,
The message over 'gain was said,
The austic he presented, dead.
145 When all was shown and all was told
And all was heard by him so bold,
Of this adventure he was pained;
But he wasn't vile nor long remained.
He had then forged a coffer small,
150 For iron or steel one did not call,
They used fine gold and precious stone,
These cherished jewels sparkling shone;
The cover was then finished best.
The austic here was put to rest;
155 Then they ensealed the lid to stay,
With him 'twas carried every day.

Such an adventure was soon told,
Since no one could it long withhold.
The Bretons made of it a lay
160 "The Austic" it is called today.

APPENDICES

- I. Original French text with literal translation
- II. Alternate lines

Laustic

The Austic

	Une auenture uus dirai	I will tell you an adventure
	Dunt li bretun firent un lai	Of which the Bretons made a lay.
	Laustic ad nun ceo mest auis	The Austic by name, that is my view,
	Sil apelent en lur pais	Thus they call it in their country;
5	Ceo est russignol en f ^a nçais	That is russignol in French
	E nihtegale en dreit engleis	And nightingale in proper English.
	En seint mallo en la cuntrée	At St. Malo in the country
	Ot une uile renumée	Was a famous village.
	Deus cheuval's ilec manéent	Two knights there dwelt
10	E deus forz maisuns i aueient	And two strong houses they had there.
	Pur la bunte des deus baruns	For the kindness of the two barons
	Fu de la uile bons li nuns	The village made of good (use) their names.
	Li uns aueit fême espusée	The one had married a wife,
	Sage curteise mut acemée	Sage, courteous and well dressed;
15	A m'ueille se teneit chiere	Wondrously she had costly (clothes)
	Sulunc lusage e la manere	According to the custom of the day.
	Li autres fu un bachel's	The other was a bachelor
	Bien conu entre ses pers	Well known among his companions
	De pruesce de g ^a nt ualur	For prowess, grand valor
20	E uolent's feseit honur	And a desire to achieve honor.
	Mut turneot e despendeit	Much he turned over and spent
	E bien donot ceo quil aueit	And well gave what he had.
	La fême sun ueisin ama	The woman this neighbor loved.
	Tant la requist tant la preia	So much he begged, so much he prayed
25	E tant par ot en lui g ^a nt bien	And so much he had in him great good
	Que ele lama sur tute rien	That she came to love him above everything,
	Tant pur le bien q̄ ele en oi	So much of his goodness did she hear
	Tant pur ceo q̄l iert p̄s de li	So much of this that he was near her.
	Sagement e bien sentreamerēt	Sagaciously and well they loved each other.
30	Mut se courirent e esgarderent	Constantly they took cover and were on guard
	Quil ne feussent aparceuz	So that they weren't perceived
	Ne desturbez ne mescreuz	Nor disturbed nor mistrusted.
	E eus le poeient bien fere	And this they were able to do well,
	Kar pres esteient lur repere	For near stood their homes,
35	Preceines furent lur maisuns	Adjacent were their houses,
	E lur sales e lur dunguns	And their rooms and their cellars;
	Ni aueit bare ne deuisse	Nor was there barrier or partition
	Fors un haut mur de pierre bise	Except a firm wall of dark grey stone.
	Des chambres u la dame iut	The bedrooms where she lay,
40	Q ^a nt a la fenestre sestut	When at the window she stood,
	Poeit pler a sun ami	She could speak to her lover,
	Del autre part e il a li	On the other hand, he to her,
	E lur aueirs entre changier	And they had interchanges
	E par geter e par lancier	By gesture and by "throwing"
45	Nunt gueres rien q̄ lur despleise	They scarcely had anything to displease the
	Mut esteient amdui a eise	Both remained quite at ease,
	Fors tant kil ne poent uenir	Except that they couldn't come
	Del tut ensemble a lur pleisir	Completely together for their pleasure.
	Kar la dame ert estreite gardée	For the woman was closely guarded

50 Q^{ant} cil esteit en la cuntrée
 Mes de tant aueient retur
 V fust par nuit u fust par iur
 Que ensemble poeient pler
 Nul nes poeit de ceo garder
 55 Que a la fenestre ne uenissent
 E iloec ne sentreueissent
 Lungement se sunt ent^e ame
 Tant q̄ ceo uient a un este
 Que bruil e pre sunt reuerdi
 60 E li uergier ierent fluri
 Cil oiselet p̄ g^{ant} ducur
 Maintent lur ioie en sum la flur
 Ki am̄ ad a sun talent
 Nest m'ueille sil i entent
 65 Del cheual' v^o dirai ueir
 Il i entent a sun poeir
 E la dame del autre part
 E de parler e de regart
 Les nuiz q^{ant} la lune luseit
 70 E ses sires cuche esteit
 De iuste li souent leuot
 E de sun mantel se afublot
 A la fenestre ester ueneit
 Pur sun ami q̄ li saueit
 75 Que autre teu uie demenot
 Le plus de la nuit en ueillot
 Delit aueient al uéer
 Q^{ant} plus ne poeient auer
 Tant i estut tant i leua
 80 Que ses sires sen curuca
 E meinte feiz li demanda
 Pur q̄i leuot e v ala
 Sire la dame li respunt
 Il nen ad ioie en icest mund
 85 Ki nen ot le laustic chanter
 Pur ceo me uois ici ester
 Tant ducement l'i oi la nuit
 Que mut me semble g^{ant} deduit
 Tant me delit e tant le uoil
 90 Que ieo ne puis dormir del oil
 Q^{ant} li sires ot q̄ ele dist
 De ire e de maltalent en rist
 De une chose se p̄pensa
 Que le laustic enginera
 95 Il not uallet en sa meisun
 Ne face engin reis u larcun
 Puis les mettent p̄ le u'gier
 Ni ot codre ne chastainier
 V il ne mettēt laz u glu

When he was in the country.
 But soon after having returned
 Be it either by night or by day
 They could speak together;
 Nobody could guard them
 When they only went to the window
 And there they only saw one another.
 For a long time they loved one another,
 So much that summer came,
 That shrubs and pasture became green again
 And the orchards became flowery.
 The birds by great sweetness
 Carried their joy above the flowers.
 Since love has its pleasures
 It is no marvel that they were heard there.
 Of the knight I will tell you the truth:
 He understood it there through his power
 And the woman for her part
 And they spoke of it and watched.
 The nights when the moon shone
 And her sire remained in bed,
 From next to him often she arose
 And she dressed in her mantle,
 To come to stand at the window
 For her love whom she knew was there,
 Who in like manner he was led to see;
 Most of the night they watched.
 Delight they had in seeing themselves,
 Since more they could not have.
 So much they were there, so much they arose
 That her sire became angry
 And many times he asked
 Why she arose and where she went.
 "Sire" his wife responded,
 "He has little joy in this world,
 Who can't hear the austic sing;
 For this I stand here looking.
 So sweet I hear it there in the night
 That to me it seems a very great pleasure;
 So much it delights and pleases me
 That then I can't rest my eyes."
 When her sire heard what she said,
 He became angry and angrily laughed.
 His one purpose was
 That the austic would be snared.
 There was not a servant in his house
 Who didn't make a trap, snare or birdnet;
 Then they placed them in the orchard.
 There neither hazel bush nor chestnut
 Had no twine or glue on it.

<p>100 Tant q̄ pse lunt e retenu Q^ant si le laustic eurent pris Al seign fu rendu tut uis Mut en fu liez q^ant il le tient As chambres a la dame uient</p> <p>105 Dame fet il u estes uus Venez auant plez a nus Teo ai le laustic englue Pur q̄i uus auez tant ueille Desore poez gisir en peis</p> <p>110 Il ne uus esueillerat meis Q^ant la dame lad entendu Dolente e curecuse fu A sun seignur lad demande E il locist par engreste</p> <p>115 Le col li rump^t a ses deus meis De ceo fist il ke trop uileins Sur la dame le cors geta Se q̄ sun chainse ensanglanta Vn poi desur le piz deuant</p> <p>120 De la chambre sen ist atant La dame prent le cors petit Durement plure e se maudit Tuz ceus ki le laustic t^airent Les engins e les lacuns firent</p> <p>125 Kar mut li unt toleit g^ant hait Lasse fet ele mal mestait Ne purrai mes la nuit leuer Ne aler a la fenestre ester V ieo suleie mun ami ueer</p> <p>130 Vne chose sai ieo de ueir Il quidra ke ieo me feigne De ceo mestuet q̄ conseil preigne Le laustic or li t^ameterai Laenture li manderai</p> <p>135 En une piece de samit A or brusde e tut escrit Ad loiselet enuolupe Vn sun uatlet ad apele Sun message li ad chargie</p> <p>140 A sun ami lad enueie Cil est al cheualier uenuz De sa dame li dist saluz Tut sun message li cunta E le laustic li p̄senta</p> <p>145 Q^ant tut li ad dit e mustre E il laueit bien escute Del aenture esteit dolenz Mes ne fu pas uileins ne lenz Vn uasselet ad fet forgéer</p>	<p>So much so that it was caught and retained. When the austic had been so captured, To the master it was taken alive. It made him very happy when he took it. To the wifes rooms he went. "Lady" said he, "where are you? Come before me! Speak to us! I have trapped the austic, For whom you have stayed up so much. From now on you can rest in peace; He will no longer keep you awake!" When the lady had heard this She became sad and angry. From her husband she requested it, And he killed it in his rage. The neck he broke in his two hands: He did this who was very vile. At the lady the body he threw, Such that her linen dress became bloodstain A little on the breast before. The chamber he left in a rage. The woman took the small body. Harshly she cried and so cursed All those whom the austic betrayed, The traps and the nets made, For they have removed a very great joy. "Poor me" she said, "injury is done me! I will no longer be able to get up at night Nor go to the window and stand, Or in the customary way my love see. One thing I know for sure, It will appear that I deceive my love. Of this, if only I could take counsel: The austic I will send to him, Of this adventure I will inform him!" In a piece of velvet Gold embroidered, all in writing, She wrapped the little bird. She called her valet, She charged him with her message, To her love she sent him. He went to the knight. From his lady he said greetings, All his message he related And presented him the austic. When he had told and shown all And he had well heard him, Of the adventure he was grieved; But he wasn't vile or slow. A small container he had forged.</p>
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150 Vnc ni ot fer ne acer
Tut fu de or fin od bones pieres
Mut p̄ciuses e mut cheres
Cou'cle i ot tres bien asis
Le laustic ad dedenz mis
155 Puis fist la chasse ensééler
Tuz iurs lad fet od li port'
Cele aventure fu cuntée
Ne pot estre lunges celée
Vn lai en firent li bretun
160 Le laustic lapelent hum.

There one didn't have iron or steel
All was made of fine gold or jewels,
Very precious and very cherished;
The cover exquisitely was finished too.
The austic was put inside;
Then the capsule was sealed,
Every day he had it carried with him.
The adventure was told,
It could not long be concealed.
A lay the Bretons made of it
And people call it The Austic.

Appendix II

- 3 thus = it
-
- 15 Well-robed was she in costly clothes,
16 Those days were such generally chose.
- 15 She was well-robed in clothes costly
16 Those days were such customary
- 19 For prowess there and great valor,
20 He wishèd to achieve honor.
- 21 obtained = gained
22 gained = obtained
- 23 This = the, the = this, near by = next door
- 23 The neighbor loved this wife so staid
24 So much he begged, so much he prayed
- 26 She gave him love more than her mate
- 31 So they would neither be perceived, (neither = never)
32 Nor be disturbed nor disbelieved.
- 38 that = a
- 39 bedrooms = chambers
- 43 The = They
- 49 on this lady = was placed on she
- 62 sailed = sent
- 63 As = Since
- 64 they were = 'twas to be
- 65 I'll tell you of that knight the truth: (that = this)
66 He heard them in his might for sooth,
- *66 understood = acted
- 67 heard = did
- 67 The lady for her part also,
68 They spoke and gazed contented so.
- 71 From next to him she often 'rose,
72 A mantle's dress she often chose
- 73 there = whence

78 They more could never hope to have.
111 the lady = these words she
119 before = full sore
120 Then = He, from = left = out, in = with
130 is known = I know
135 Inside a piece of velvet sewn
136 Embroidered, all the writing shown,
141 Away he = He quickly
143 All again was then resaid,