

YONEC (12th century)

by Marie de France

trans. by Judith P. Shoaf

It was the month of April; spring
 Set those little birds to sing.
 The lord arose in early morning,
 Dressed himself to go out hunting.
 He roused up, too, the old woman
 To lock the door tight behind him.
 He gave the order, she'd obey;
 The lord and his men rode away.
 The old woman took her psalm-book along,
 And sat mumbling David's song.
 The lady lay awake in distress;
 Now she picked out the sun's brightness.
 She saw the old woman had gone
 Out and left her all alone.
 She began to sigh and complain;
 Her weeping began all over again:
 "Alas! I was born on an evil day!
 Hard and cruel is my destiny!
 This tower is a prison for me,
 And only death will set me free.
 What's he afraid of, that jealous
 Old man, keeping me in this fortress?
 He's a fool, crazy, always afraid
 Somehow, somewhere, he'll be betrayed.
 I can't even go to church
 To hear Mass, do God's works.
 If I was able to talk with people,
 Go out, enjoy those pleasures peaceable,
 I'd be so sweet to him, so good,
 Even if I wasn't in the mood.
 A curse on my family
 And on all those, collectively,
 Who gave this jealous man my hand,
 Gave me his body for husband!
 I pull and pull--nought comes of it:
 I wish and wish, but he won't die of it.
 Instead of his being baptized,
 In Hell's river his boat capsized!
 His sinews are tough, his veins tough,
 The blood that fills them's alive enough...

"Often I've heard the tale told
 How people found, in days of old,
 In this same land, adventures bright,
 The sad redeemed, the wronged made right.
 A knight might find a maiden-lover
 Sweet and fair, by thinking of her;

Ladies could find lovers who
 Were handsome, gentle, valiant, true--
 Nor were they blamed for such affairs:
 They alone ever saw their lovers.
 If this can be--if it did happen--
 If this ever came to any woman--
 God, who have power over all,
 Please hear, please answer now my call!"

When she'd spoken this sad word,
 She picked out the shadow of a great bird
 Through a narrow window. She
 Didn't know what it might be.
 It entered her room flying--
 Jesses on its feet--a hawk it seemed,
 Moulded five or six times in its life.
 It settled there, in front of the wife.
 After it had rested a minute,
 And she'd closely inspected it,
 It became a knight, handsome, gentle.
 The lady thought this was a marvel--
 Her blood stirred and began to race.
 In her fear she hid her face.

The knight was gentle, courteous;
 He addressed her, speaking first, thus:
 "Lady," he said, "Fear ye not, no!
 The hawk's a gentle bird, you know;
 Though how and why remain a mystery,
 Still, you see that you may trust me,
 And take me for your friend, your dear.
 For this," he said, "I came here.
 I've loved you for a long time now.
 In my heart I yearned for you. I vow,
 I never loved any woman but you,
 Nor will love any other; I'll be true.
 Still, I couldn't come here where you are,
 Or come forth out of my own land
 Unless you had made that prayer.
 Now at last I can be your friend!"
 The lady was now reassured;
 She uncovered her head and spoke a word
 In response to what the knight asked of her;
 She told him she would make him her lover
 If he believed in God above;
 This would make possible their love.
 For his beauty was very great:

Never in her life, early nor late,
 Had she seen a knight so handsome,
 Nor will she ever, in days to come.
 "Lady," he said, "How well you speak!
 Not for anything would I wreak
 That wrong, be your occasion of sin--
 The guilt, the doubt, the suspicion.
 I firmly believe in the Creator,
 Who freed us from that sad state where
 We'd been thrust by Adam our father
 When he bit that apple bitter;
 He is and was and will be ever
 Light and life to each poor sinner.
 If my word you cannot credit,
 Ask for your chaplain to visit;
 Say you've a sudden ill, an ailment;
 For this you want the sacrament
 Which God established in this world
 So that we sinners may be healed.
 Then I'll take on your form and face,
 Receive Christ's body in your place.
 And so that you'll have no more need
 To doubt me, I'll say my whole Creed."
 She approved of what he'd said.
 He lay beside her on her bed,
 But he didn't want to caress her
 Nor embrace her yet, nor kiss her.

And told each other their hearts' truth,
 The knight takes his leave of his dame
 To go back to his own land, as he came.
 Sweetly, softly she makes her prayer
 That he'll return often to see her.
 "Lady," he said, "when it's your pleasure!
 I won't let slip a single chance;
 But in your wishing find some measure,
 Or else our ruin you'll advance;
 That old woman's a traitor, all right;
 She'll spy on us both day and night.
 She'll learn of the love between us,
 And tell her lord how she's seen us.
 If it all happens as I've said,
 And we are indeed betrayed,
 I will never be able to fly
 Away again, except to die."

Just then the old woman came home,
 Found the lady awake in her room,
 Told her it was time she rose,
 Wanted to bring in the day's clothes.
 The lady said she had some disease--
 They'd better go alert her priest,
 And tell him to come to her, quick,
 She feared death, she was so sick.
 The old woman said, "Well, suffer away!
 My lord has gone to the woods today,
 And no-one but me will come in here!"
 The lady felt a terrible fear;
 She faked a faint, and there she lay.
 The old woman saw this with dismay.
 She unlocked the door and ran
 Off to find the good chaplain.
 Soon as he could, the priest came, swiftly,
 Bringing with him Corpus Christi.
 The knight received the sacred bread,
 Drank wine from the chalice in her stead.
 Now the good chaplain is gone;
 The old woman locks up the door again.

The lady lies beside her dear;
 You never saw such a lovely pair.
 When they've laughed and played enough,