

Marie de France

Marie de France

March 7

①

Laustic (*The Nightingale*)

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

35 their houses were next door,
 and so were their rooms and their towers;
 there was no barrier or boundary
 except a high wall of dark stone.
 From the rooms where the lady slept,
 40 if she went to the window
 she could talk to her love
 on the other side, and he to her,
 and they could exchange their possessions,
 by tossing and throwing them.
 45 There was scarcely anything to disturb them,
 they were both quite at ease;
 except that they couldn't come together
 completely for their pleasure,
 for the lady was closely guarded
 50 when her husband was in the country.
 Yet they always managed,
 whether at night or in the day,
 to be able to talk together;
 no one could prevent
 55 their coming to the window
 and seeing each other there.
 For a long time they loved each other,
 until one summer
 when the woods and meadows were green
 60 and the orchards blooming.
 The little birds, with great sweetness,
 were voicing their joy above the flowers.
 It is no wonder if he understands them,
 he who has love to his desire.
 65 I'll tell you the truth about the knight:
 he listened to them intently
 and to the lady on the other side,
 both with words and looks.
 At night, when the moon shone
 70 when her lord was in bed,

she often rose from his side
 and wrapped herself in a cloak.
 She went to the window
 because of her lover, who, she knew,
 was leading the same life,
 75 awake most of the night.
 Each took pleasure in the other's sight
 since they could have nothing more;
 but she got up and stood there so often
 that her lord grew angry
 80 and began to question her, to ask
 why she got up and where she went.
 "My lord," the lady answered him,
 "there is no joy in this world
 85 like hearing the nightingale sing.
 That's why I stand there.
 It sounds so sweet at night
 that it gives me great pleasure;
 it delights me so and I so desire it
 90 that I cannot close my eyes."
 When her lord heard what she said
 he laughed in anger and ill will.
 He set his mind on one thing:
 to trap the nightingale.
 95 There was no valet in his house
 that he didn't set to making traps, nets, or snares,
 which he then had placed in the orchard;
 there was no hazel tree or chestnut
 where they did not place a snare or lime
 100 until they trapped and captured him.
 When they had caught the nightingale,
 they brought it, still alive, to the lord.
 He was very happy when he had it;
 he came to the lady's chambers.
 "Lady," he said, "where are you?
 105 Come here! Speak to us!"

- I have trapped the nightingale
 that kept you awake so much.
 From now on you can lie in peace:
 he will never again awaken you."
 110 When the lady heard him,
 she was sad and angry.
 She asked her lord for the bird
 but he killed it out of spite,
 115 he broke its neck in his hands—
 too vicious an act—
 and threw the body on the lady;
 her shift was stained with blood,
 a little, on her breast.
 120 Then he left the room.
 The lady took the little body;
 she wept hard and cursed
 those who betrayed the nightingale,
 who made the traps and snares,
 125 for they took great joy from her.
 "Alas," she said, "now I must suffer.
 I won't be able to get up at night
 or go and stand in the window
 where I used to see my love.
 130 I know one thing for certain:
 he'd think I was pretending.
 I must decide what to do about this.
 I shall send him the nightingale
 and relate the adventure."
 135 In a piece of samite,
 embroidered in gold and writing,
 she wrapped the little bird.
 She called one of her servants,
 charged him with her message,
 140 and sent him to her love.
 He came to the knight,
 greeted him in the name of the lady,

Lais 159
 related the whole message to him,
 and presented the nightingale.

- 145 When everything had been told and revealed to the knight,
 after he had listened well,
 he was very sad about the adventure,
 but he wasn't mean or hesitant,
 He had a small vessel fashioned,
 150 with no iron or steel in it;
 it was all pure gold and good stones,
 very precious and very dear;
 the cover was very carefully attached.
 He placed the nightingale inside—
 155 and then he had the casket sealed—
 he carried it with him always.
- 1
 This adventure was told,
 it could not be concealed for long.
 The Bretons made a *lais* about it
 160 which men call *The Nightingale*.