

Bisclavret

(ed. Alfred Ewert, 1944, repr. 1987, trans. AH)

Quant de lais faire m'entremet,
Ne voil ublier Bisclavret:
Bisclavret ad nun en bretan,
Garwaf l'apelent li Norman.
Jadis le poeit hume oïr
E sovent suleit avenir,
Humes plusurs garual devindrent
E es boscages meisun tindrent.
Garualf, c[eo] est beste salvage:
Tant cum il est en cele rage,
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,
Es granz forez converse e vaît. (1–12)

When I set myself to compose lays, I do not want to forget Bisclavret: Bisclavret is [its/his?] name in the Breton language, the Normans call [it/him] Bisclavret. Once people could heard about [it] and often it used to happen [that] many men became werwolves and lived in the woods. A werwolf is a savage beast: when he is in this condition, it/he eats men, does great damage, traverses the great forests.

[A baron lived in Brittany with his wife. They were very contented, except...]

Que en la semeine le perdeit
Treis jurs entiers, que el ne saveit
U deveneit nē u alout,
Ne nul des soens nient n'en sout. (25–28)

that every week she was without him for three whole days, when she did not know where he went, nor did any of their people know anything about it.

[So one day, she persuades him (by nagging!) to tell her:]

‘Dame, jeo devienç bisclavret...
... jeo vois tut nu.’ (63, 70)

‘Lady, I become a werwolf... I go about completely naked.’

[Bisclavret’s wife betrays him, sending an admirer to take her husband’s clothes, thus trapping him in his bestial form. One day the king, out hunting, comes upon the wolf, which displays amiability and intelligence, so the king takes him back to court. The wolf is friendly towards everyone. His wife’s admirer, now her husband, visits court and the wolf attacks him. Later, the wife comes to court, and the wolf attacks her. A wise man suggests there is a reason behind this, and the wife, tortured, confesses. She returns the stolen clothes, but the wolf ignores them. The wise man says:

‘Cist nel fereit pur nule rien,
Que devant vus ses dras reveste
Ne mut la semblance de beste.
Ne savez mie que ceo munte:
Mut durement en ad grant hunte.’ (284–8)

‘Not for anything would he do this, to dress himself again in his clothing in front of you nor change from his animal shape. You don’t grasp what it means: it would cause him enormous shame.’

[The wolf is placed in a room with the clothes and left alone. When the king returns, he finds his baron sleeping on the bed.]

Melion

(ed. and trans. (adapted) Amanda Hopkins, 2005)

[An early episode allows Melion to be separated from the court, to live in a distant castle. Out hunting, he meets a woman, whom he soon marries. One day they are out hunting and Melion sees a stag. The lady insists she will die if she doesn’t have venison from it, so Melion tells her:]

‘J’ai en ma main .i. tel anel:
ves le ci en mon doit manel.
.ii. pieres a ens el caston:
onques si faites ne vit on;
l’une est blanche, l’autre vermeille.
Oïr en poés grant merveille:
de la blanche me toucerés
et sor mon chief le meterés
qant jo serai despoilliés nus,
leus devenrai, grans et corsus.
Por vostre amor le cerf prendrai
et del lart vos apporterai.
Por Deu vos pri, ci m’attendés
et ma despoille me gardés.
Je vos lais ma vie et ma mort:
il n’i auroit nul reconfort
se de l’autre touciés n’estoie;
jamais nul jor hom ne seroie.’ (155–72)

‘I have on my hand a ring: see it here on my ring-finger. It has two stones in its setting, never has anyone seen such work; one [stone] is white, the other crimson. You can hear a great wonder about them: if you touch me with the white stone and place it on my head when I am completely naked, I shall become a huge strong wolf. For love of you, I shall catch the stag and carry some rich meat back to you. I beg you, for God’s sake, wait for me here and look after my clothing. I leave you [power over] my life and my death: there could be no recovery if I were not touched with the other stone; never again should I be a man.’

[Having turned him into a wolf, the lady takes his possessions and departs to Ireland, her father’s land, with Melion’s squire. Melion follows, and in Ireland begins a war of attrition, killing much livestock. Then he joins up with a pack of ten wolves]

... avoec lui les a menés,
et font totes ses volentés.
Par le país molt se forvoient,
homes et femes malmenoient.
Un an tot plain ont si esté:
tot le país ont degasté,

homes et femes ocioient;
tote la terre destruoient. (271–78)

he took them with him and they did all he wished.
Through the countryside they roamed, and attacked
men and women. For a whole year things went on in
this way: they devastated all the country, killed men
and women and ravaged all the land.

[The wolves are killed during a hunt; Melion escapes, but loses hope. The, one day, a ship appears on the sea, and Melion recognizes the shields of King Arthur and his barons. When they land, he enters their camp, and behaves in such a friendly manner that the king takes him to the King of Ireland's court next day. Here the wolf attacks his former squire; confession ensues, his wife is forced to return the ring and the king changes him back to human form, taking him to a private room so Melion is not shamed by being publicly:]

Biclarel

(ed. and trans. (adapted) Amanda Hopkins, 2005)

[Largely similar to Marie's text, but with a strong misogynous bias.]

Biclarel, sicon Dieu plaissi,
Ot une taiche qui taissi
Et que nulz fors lui ne seüst,
Se sa folie ne feüst.
Po avient que hons telz taiche oit,
Quar chascun mois beste il estoit.
Deus jours trestoz antiers ou .iij.
Demouroit beste par le bois:
Avec autres bestes onjoint
Et char de beste crue manjoit
Et conme loups grans et corsus
Fort cuir et de mambres ossus.
Ne pour ce ne perdoit son san,
Sa memoire ne son asan.
Ge te conte tout verité
Et certain conme autorité... (33– 47)

As it pleased God, Biclarel had a trait which he hid, and no-one except himself might have known about it had it not been for his foolishness. It seldom happens that anyone hears of such a trait, because every month he became a beast. Two whole days, or three, he would live as a beast in the forest; he would join other beasts and eat the raw flesh of beasts, like a big strong wolf, with a sturdy hide and bony limbs. He would not lose his wits because of this, nor his memory or his will. I am telling you the utter truth, and sure, according to the authority.

[The wife's persuasive speeches and her protestations of love and trustworthiness are greatly extended; but so is her husband's explanation of his absences:]

'Ou bois an la forest me tien,
An un secret me vois tapir
Et toute robe desvestir.
Et lors sui ge deus jors ou .iij.
Beste sauvaige par le bois;
Et tant con g'i suis, ge manjue
Conme autre beste [la] char crue;
Con j'ai la esté, ge me velz
Et d'icelui cecret leu elz.

Qant il fu ens, l'uis si ferma,
l'anel li a sor le chief mis:
d'ome li aparut le vis,
tote sa figure mua:
lors devint hom et si parla.
As pies le roi se lait cheïr;
d'un mantel le firent covrir.
Qant le virent home formé,
molt ont grant joie demené. (546–54)

When he was inside, he closed the door, and put the ring to Melion's head: his face appeared like a man's, all his body altered: then he became a man and he spoke like a man. He fell at the king's feet; they covered him with a cloak. When they saw him made into a man, they felt very great joy.

Mèz qui ma robe m'osteroit,
Trop grant durté il me ferroit,
Car a toujours beste ceroie
Jusqu'atant que ge la ravroie
Ou jusque ge devroie morir
Que nulz ne m'an pourroit garir.
Et pour ce me met ge an repost
Que nulz hon ma robe ne m'ost.
Or vous ai ge dit mun secré;
Or le veilliez si panre an gré
Que nulz ne connoisse ma taiche
Ne mun couvine ja ne saiche.' (224–44)

'I keep myself in to in the woods or the forest; I go to hide myself in a secluded place, and I take off all my clothes, and then, for two or three days, I am a wild beast in the woods. And as long as I am there, I eat raw flesh, like other beasts. When I have been there, I come back and come out from that same secret place. But anyone who took my clothes away from me would do me very great harm because I should always remain a beast until that time that I should regain them or until I had to die, for no one would be able to save me. And for that reason I set out in secret so that no one might steal my clothes from me. Now I have told you my secret; now you may willingly accept that no one should learn of my trait nor ever know about my condition.'

[It is clear that the wife has wished to rid herself of her husband for some time; she herself follows him, steals his clothes and announces his death. King Arthur meets the wolf in the forest and takes him to court, where the beast is perfectly friendly until his wife appears, and he attacks her. She escapes, he follows her into the town and attacks her again. The wife is forced to return her husband's clothes, but this time the transformation does not require privacy (and, indeed, it isn't entirely clear whether it happens at the palace, or in the town – no relocation to the court is specified):]

Li rois fist que la robe vint;
Dedans se boute et hom devint. (449–50)

The king had the clothes brought: he scrambled into them and became a man.