

Quemar Press

Bisclavret (werewolf)

Marie de France



Translated by Katharine Margot Toohey



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Preface

Bisclavret is a re-imagining by Marie de France of traditional werewolf legends. This is a work where hierarchy between animals and humans can be demolished, and affection for an individual being (be it in an animal or human state) can be clear and unwavering.

‘At this sight, the king had great fear,
called all his companions here,
saying: “Lords, come before,
come here to watch this wonder;
how this animal bows to me,
with a man’s sense, calling for mercy.
For me, hunt those dogs back.
Watch he isn't struck.
This beast has understanding and reason.
Act now; light us on.
To the beast I grant rest,
for I'll hunt no more this forest.”’

In this lai's original text, the 'werewolf' has no monstrous or fearsome characteristics, but sleeps in his wolf form close by the king, who has a building affection for him. Here, the werewolf-knight is identical to an engaging and non-threatening wolf - similar to a wolf-cub. He is suspended in wolf-guise after his spouse had his clothes stolen to prevent him from turning into a knight again, leaving him forced to traverse the forest. There, the king is stunned at encountering this animal with a man’s reason and feels incapable of killing him in a hunt. He takes the wolf into shelter in the castle.

Marie de France, considered to be the earliest female French poet, constructed this lai from ancient Breton lais, originally translating them in the twelfth-century to Anglo-Norman French. While Quemar's Modern English translation is of all the original Anglo-Norman text, Marie de France's original Anglo-Norman is also included, juxtaposed with the translation. To reflect her tone, energy and structure, Quemar’s creative



translation tries to preserve her four stresses to a line and suggest the couplet rhyme on the line's end.

Marie de France also acts as the lai's narrative voice, indicating levels of humour in the text and witty exaggerations, as when she recounts in jest the supposed consequences of the werewolf-knight's wife's nose being 'nipped off', apparently without any medical ill effects. When the king discovers that the spouse betrayed the werewolf-knight, she goes to live in exile with her new husband. Marie jests:

'Together, they had many children.

Then these were well-known.

They had unusual features and appearance.

Many women in this lineage hence
were born without noses - honestly -
and continued to live nose-free.

The story you hear me tell
is true. Doubt nothing at all'

Sometimes in interpretations of this work, every action described within the narrative seems to be presented as serious. As that approach to the text could leave aspects of the it surreal or inexplicable, or erase aspects of Marie de France's wit and narrative skill, Quemar Press' translation attempts to retain the jocular as well as compassionate aspects of her voice.

An approach to the text that minimises jest might also risk minimising serious clarifying instances, which are made startling and intensified by their contrast with comedic elements.

In the original, Marie creates a remarkable level of clarity when the affection between the king and the werewolf-knight is unchanged by his form, affirming an underlying continuity of the self - regardless of state, regardless of situation.

Katharine Margot Toohey

Quemar Press



Bisclavret (werewolf)

Many lais engage me.

I'm unwilling to forget Bisclavret.

Bisclavret - its name in Breton.

They called it 'Garwall' in Norman.

Long ago, this was heard then,

as once it would happen often:

many became Garwall, would become

werewolves, with forests for home.

The Garwall was a wild beast, savage.

It felt such rage,

devoured men, created menace.

It traversed great forests.

But now, let that issue be.

I wish to tell of the Bisclavret.

Once a lord lived in Brittany.

I heard lauded marvellously,

the knight who had goodness and beauty.

Always, he behaved nobly.

His lord felt so close to him.



All neighbours loved him in affection.

He married a worthy woman

who made a noble impression.

He loved her, and she too,

but something challenged her now.

Every week he'd be gone

for three entire days unknown.



Quant de Lais faire m'entremet/Ne voil ublier Bisclaveret ;/Bisclaveret ad nun en
Bretan,/Garwall l'apelent li Norman./Jadis le poët-hum oïr,/E souvent suleït
avenir,/Humes plusurs Garwall devindrent/E es boscages meisun tindrent./Garwall si
est beste salvage;/Tant cum il est en cele rage,/Humes dévure, grant mal fait,/Es granz
forest converse è vait./Cest afère les ore ester/Del' Bisclaveret voil cunter./En
Bretaine maneit un Ber/Merveille l'ai oï loer;/Beau chevaliers è bon esteit/E
noblement se cunteneit./De sun Seinur esteit privez/E de tuz ses veisinz amez./Femme
ot espusé mut vailant/E qui mut feseit beau semblant./Il amot li è ele lui ;/Mès d'une
chose ert grant envi/Qu'en la semeine le deperdeit/Treis jurs entiers qu'ele ne saveit.





To go where, become what,
his men knew neither of it.
Once, he returned again,
joyous, gladly back to his home.
She asked him this question:
‘Lord, sweet and beautiful companion,
I ask you this thing,
by my will, by my daring,
but I fear your anger
nothing would upset me more.’
Hearing her, he embraced,
pulled her to him and kissed,
saying, ‘Ask me lady
what you will say to me.
If I can I’ll answer.’
‘By faith, now I’m secure.
Lord, I’m in such anxiety,
the days you leave me.
Waking, I’m placed in dolour
and losing you becomes my terror.
If I have no quick comfort,
soon I’ll die of it.
So tell to me where
you go to inhabit there.



By my knowledge, loved by you,
have you gone astray now?’
‘Lady,’ he said, ‘for God’s Mercy,
ill would come if I say.
You’d abandon my affection
and leave me lost soon.’
Hearing these words, the lady
didn’t take them seriously.
She asked him often
cajoling him and flattering him
to tell her about his adventure.
He concealed nothing from her:
‘Lady, I become Bisclavret,
in that immense forest stay.



U deveneit, ne ù alout ;/Ne nul des soenz nient ne sout./Une feiz esteit repeirez/A sam
 eisun joius è liez ;/Demandé li ad è enquiz,/Sire, fait-el, beau duz amiz,/Une chose vus
 demandasse/Mut volontiers si jeo osasse :/Mès jeo creïm tant vostre curuz/Que nule r
 ien tant ne redut./Quant il l’oï si l’acola,/Vers li la traist, si la beisa,/Dame, si fait-il, d
 emandez ;/Jà cele chose ne me direz/Si jeo la sai, ne la vus die./Par fei, fet-ele, ore sui
 garie :/Sire, jeo sui en tel effrei,/Les jurs quant vus partez de mei ;/El lever en ai grant
 dolour/E de vus perdre tele pour,/Si jeo n’en ai hastit cunfort,/Bien-tost en puis avoir l
 a mort./Kar me distes ù vus alez,/U vus estes, ù conversez./Mun escient, qui vus amez,
 /E si si est vus meserrez./Dame, fet-il, pur Deu merci,/Mal m’en vendra si jol’ vus di :
 /Kar de m’amur vus partirai/E me-mesmes en perderai./Quant la Dame l’od entendu,
 /Nel’ ad nient en gas tenu/Suvente feiz li demanda,/Tant le blandi, è losenga,/Que s’av
 enture li cunta,/Nule chose ne li céla./Dame jeo deviens Bisclaveret,/En cele grant for
 est me met,



Within the woods, the part denser,

I live on roots and plunder.’

When he told her everything,

she questioned him, enquiring

‘Go you undressed or covered?’

‘Lady, I go naked.’

‘Your clothes where, by God?’



‘Lady, that can’t to you be told,
because if I lost them
and this was glimpsed by someone,
I would be a bisclavret for all days
with nothing to help me always,
unless they return them.
So I wish this known by no one.’
The lady answered him, ‘Lord,
my love for you is greater than the world.
You should hide from me nothing,
Mistrust nothing at all, doubting.
That would not seem like companionship.
What did I sin, forfeit,
that you doubt me at all?
Tell me and it will be well.’
She scared him, she surprised him.
He answered her, with no option,
saying: ‘Lady, by the woods,
by the path, by the crossroads,
there can be found a chapel,



that often serves me well.

There the stone is wide and hollow,

under a bush, buried below.

I set my clothes beneath,

until I return to this hearth.' ...



Al plus espès de la gaudine,/Si vif de preie è de racine./Quant il li aveit tut cunté,/Enquis li ad è demaundé/S'il se despuille u vet vestu./Dame, fet-il, jeo vois tut nu./Di mei, par Deu, ù sunt voz dras ?/Dame, ceo ne dirai vus pas/Kar si jeo les eusse perduz/E de ceo feusse aparcéuz, /Bisclaveret sereie à tuz-jurs ;/Jamès n'avereie mes sucurs,/De ci k'il me fussent rendu :/Por ceo ne voil k'il seit séu./Sire, la Dame li respunt,/Jeo vus eim plus que tut le mund ;/Nel' me devez nient céler,/Ne de nule rien duter:/Ne semblereit pas amisté./Qu'ai-jeo forfait, por quel péché/Me dutez vus de nule rien ?Dites mei et si ferez bien./Tant l'angoussa, tant le surprist,/Ne pout-il faire, si le dist :/Dame, fet-il, delez cel bois,/Lez le chemin, par un troivois,/Une vielz chapele i esteit,/Ke grant bien me fait ;/Là est la pierre cruose è lée,/Suz un bussun, dedanz cavée ;/Mes draz i met suz le buissun/Tant que jeo revine à meisun.



The lady listened to this in wonder.

She turned crimson from fear,

because the story frightened her.

She was mostly planning there

how she from this could flee -

by him, wishing no more to lie.



There was a knight within the country,
longtime had loved the lady,
who implored and sought her often,
steadfast in her service then.

She had never loved him,
nor had she promised her affection.

By message she commanded him,
to unveil to him her heart's intention.

‘Friend’, she said, ‘be glad.
that for which you’ve worked hard
at once, I grant you
for me, will be nothing to argue.

I grant you my love, my body.
Your lover make of me.’

He thanked her for this warmly,
here vowing an oath faithfully,
and by pledge she held him,
then told to him the situation :

how her lord goes, what becoming,
all the path he takes when roaming.





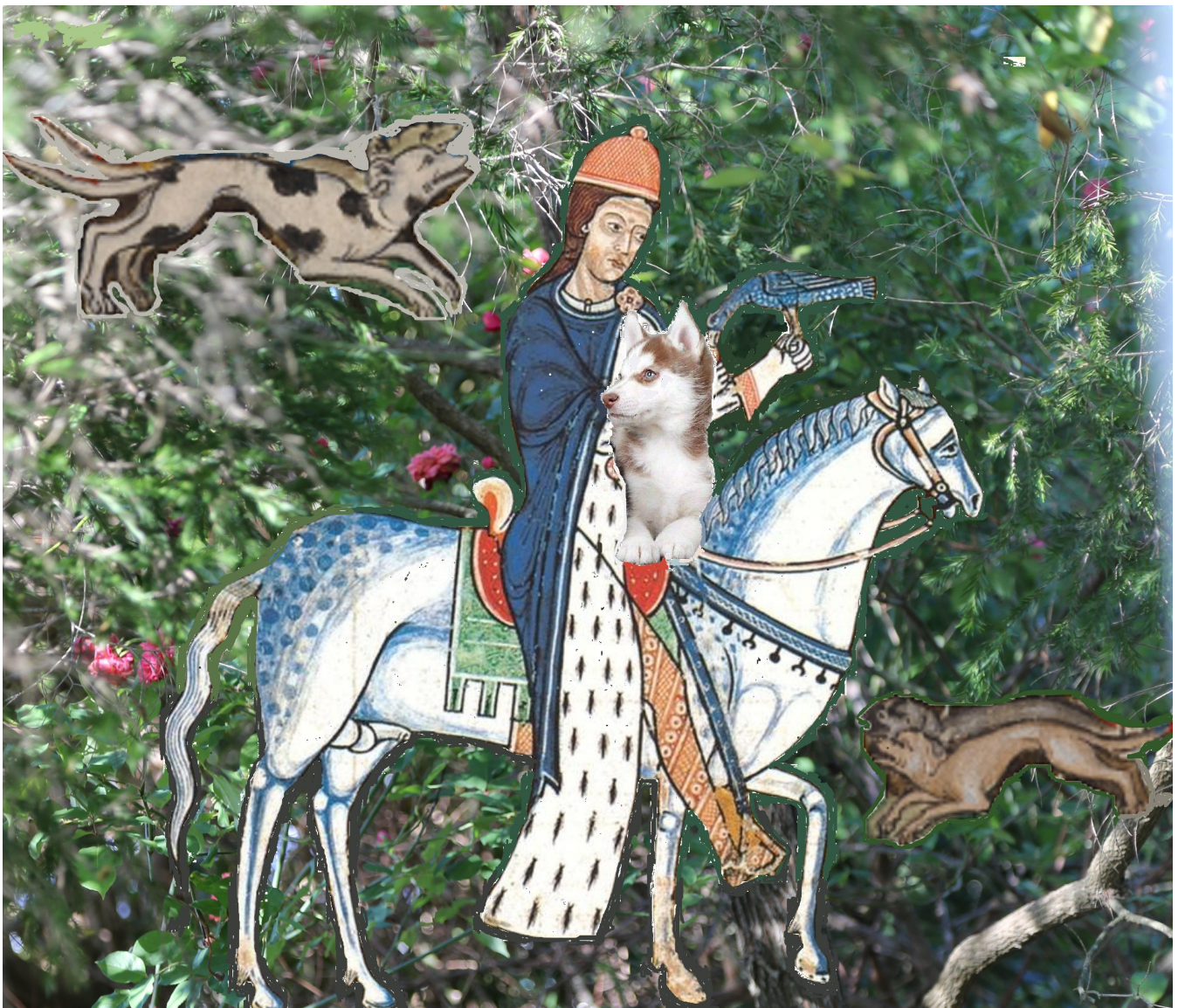
La Dame oï cele merveille,/De pāour fu tute vermeille,/De l'aventure s'effréa,/E maint endroit se purpensa/Cume ele s'en puist partir ;/Ne voleit mès lez-lui gesir./Un Chevalier de la cuntrée/Qui lungement l'aveit amée/E mut préié è mut requise,/E mut durré en sun servise/Ele ne l'aveit unkes amé,/Ne de s'amur aséuré,/Celui manda par sun message/Si li descouvri sun curage ;/Amis, fet-ele, séez lez,/Ceo dunt vus estes traveillez/Vus otri-jeo sanz nul respit ;/Jà m'averez nul cuntredit ;/M'amur è mun cors vus otrei :/Vostre drue faites de mei./Cil l'en mercie bonement/E la fiance de li firent ;/E ele le met par serement ;/Puis li cunta cum-faitement,/Ses Sires ala, è k'il devint ;/Tute la veie ke il tint.



Go toward the forest was her teaching,
sending the man for her lord's clothing.
Bisclavret was betrayed like this.
His wife had treated him malice.
Of this man, who disappeared often,
all there wondered in common
that he had left everything.
They asked for him, seeking,
but they could find nothing.
Then they stopped searching.
The lady married the other man
who had loved her for such a time.
This continued, a year unceasing
until the king went out hunting.
In the forest, he rode directly
to the place where was the Bisclavret.
Then, when the dogs were unbound,
here the Bisclavret they found,
all the day chased him,
the dogs there and the huntsmen
on the edge of taking him then
for all destruction and all harm.
He saw the king clearly
and ran to him in search of mercy.



Holding onto him by the stirrup,
His leg he kissed and his foot.
At this sight, the king had great fear,
called all his companions here,
saying: 'Lords, come before,
come here to watch this wonder;
how this animal bows to me,
with a man's sense, calling for mercy.'



Vers la forest l'enséïgna,/Pur sa despuille l'envéia./Issi fu Bisclaveret trahiz/E par sa
 femme maubailiz./Pur ceo qu'hum le perdeit sovent,/Quidouent tuz
 comunament./Quant dunc s'en fust del' tut alez,/Asez fu quis è demandez :/Mès nel'
 porent mie trover ;/S'il lur estuit lesser ester./La Dame ad cil dunc espusée/Qui
 lungement l'aveit amée ;/Issi remist un an entier,/Tant que li Reis ala chacier :/A la
 forest ala tut dreit,/La ù li Bisclaveret esteit./Quant li chiens furent descuplé,/Li
 Bisclaveret unt encunré ;/A lui currurent tute jur,/E li chiens è li venéur/Tant que par
 poi nel' eurent pris,/E tut deciré è mau-mis./Desi qu'il ad le Rei choisi ;/Vers li curut
 querre merci./Il l'aveit pris par l'estrié,/La jambe li baise è le pié./Li Reis le vit grant
 poür ad ;/Ses cumpainuns tuz apelad./Seignurs, fet-il, avant venez,/Ceste merveille
 esgardez ;/Cum ceste beste se humilie :/Ele ad sen de hum, merci crie



For me, hunt those dogs back.

Watch he isn't struck.

This beast has understanding and reason.

Act now; light us on.

To the beast I grant rest,

for I'll hunt no more this forest.'

Then the king turned away.

Following him now was the bisclavret;

not wishing to leave, keeping near,

not wanting to abandon him here.



The king led him to his castle,
glad, to him he was beautiful,
the most he had seen before,
held him in great wonder,
held him greatly fond,
to all his men gave command:
for the king's love, protect this animal,
with no wrong done to him at all.
None here may him strike,
and shall give him a drink and comfort.



Chacez mei tuz ces chiens arère,/Si gardez que hum ne la fière./Ceste beste ad entente
è sen,/Espleitez vos ; alum nus en./A la beste durrai ma pès/Kar ici ne chacerrai
huimès./Li Reis s'en est turné à-tant./Le Bisclaveret li vet siwant ;/Mut se tint près,
n'en vout partir,/Il n'ad cure de li guerpier./Li Reis l'enmeine en sun chastel,/Mut en fu
liez, mut li est bel,/Ke unke mès tel n'ot véu./A grant merveille l'ot tenu,/E mut le
tient à grant chierté,/A tuz les siens ad comaundé/Que sur s'amur le gardent bien/E ne
li meffacent de rien,/Ne par nul d'eus ne seit feruz,/Bien seit abevreiz è péuz.



They watched over, willingly.

He was amongst the knights daily

and he slept by the king.

Not one didn't treasure him,

he was so debonair and noble:

None wished him harm at all.

Where ever the king should wander

from him the Bisclavret wished not sever,

together, always with him went on.

Clearly, he loved him.

What happened next, listen:

a royal court was held by the king.



He asked every baron,
those who'd hunted with him,
to help make up his celebration,
to be served finely then.

Here, ready attired and richly
there, the knight came by
who had married Bisclavret's wife,
a knight without knowledge or belief
that he should find him so close.

As soon as the knight came to the palace,
the Bisclavret saw him instantly
and sped towards him suddenly,



Cil le gardèrent volenters./Tuz-jurs entre les Chevalers,/E près del' Rei s'alout
cuchier./Ni ad celui qui nel' ad chier,/Tant esteit franc è déboneire :Unc ne volt à rien
meffaire./U ke li Reis déust errer/Il n'out cure de desevrer ;/Ensemble od li tuz-jurs
alout,/Bien s'apareit que il l'amout./Oez après cument avint/A une Curt ke li Rei
tint,/Tuz li Baruns aveit mandez,/Ceus ki furent de li chacez,/Pur aider sa feste à
tenir,/E lui plus beal faire servir./Richement è bien aturnez,/Li Chevaler i est alez/Ki
la femme Bisclaveret ot./Il ne saveit ne ne quidot/Qu'il le déust trover si près./Si tost
cum il vint al paleis,/E le Bisclaveret l'aparceut,/De plain esleis vers li curut.



and seizing with his teeth, dragged him,
could have caused him great harm,
but the king called him back,
threatened him down with a stick.

Twice wanting to bite that day
many there wondered at Bisclavret,
for he had never given such impression
that any man had seen.

It was said through the house:

Bisclavret did not act without sense -

he was provoked by some grief

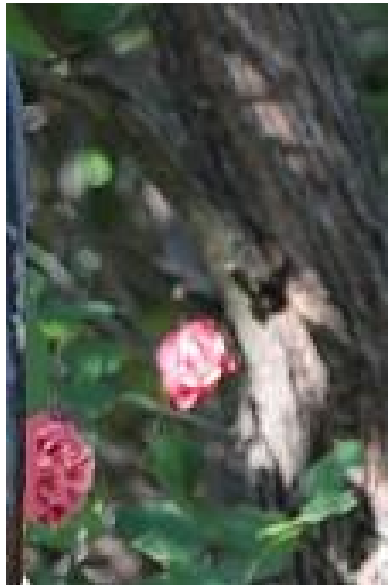
and must have avenged himself.



Then, it was left at this
until the celebration's close.
Bidding goodbye, the barons
all returned to their own homes,
and the knights travelled back then.
To my knowledge the first one gone
was the one Bisclavret had leapt upon.
His eagerness to leave seemed not surprising.
Within a short space of time,
as is my opinion on this, as is my understanding,
then the king went to the forest,
the king who was wise and courteous,



As dens le prist, vers li le trait,/Jà li éust mut grant leid fait,/Ne fust li Reis ki
l'apela/D'une verge le manaça./Deus feis le vout mordre al jur./Mut s'esmerveillent li
plusur,/Kar unkes tel semblant ne fist,/Verz nul hume ke il véist./Céo vient tut par la
meisun/Ke il ne fet mie sans reisun ;/Meffait li ad coment que seit/Kar volontiers se
vengereit./A cele feiz remist issi,/Tant ke la feste départi ;/E li Baruns unt pris
cungé ;/A lur meisun sunt repeiré./Alez s'en est li Chevalers,/Mien escient tut as
premiers,/Que le Bisclaveret asailli ;/N'est merveille s'il le haï./Ne fu puis guères
lungement,/Ceo m'est avis, si cum j'entent,/Qu'à la forest ala li Reis,/Qui tant fu
sages è curteis,



to the place where the Bisclavret was found,
who went by him to this ground.
When they returned, in night,
they rested in the countryside.
Bisclavret's wife knew of this,
prepared herself in fine dress,
wished to talk with the king tomorrow,
bringing a rich gift to bestow.
When Bisclavret saw her again,
him no man could restrain.



He ran to her as if enraged.
Hear how he was quite avenged.
He nipped her nose off.
What could he have done worse?
Threatening him from every corner,
they'd have torn him asunder,
when a sage spoke to the king:
'Sir', he said, 'listen.



U li Bisclaveret fu trovez ;/E il i est od li alez./La nuit, quant il s'en repeira,/En la cuntrée héberga ;/La femme Bisclaveret le sot ;/Avenantment s'appareilot,/Al demain vait al Rei parler,/Riche présent li fait porter./Quant Bisclaveret la veit venir/Nul hum nel' poeit retenir,/Vers li curut cum enragiez,/Oiez cum il est bien vengiez./Le neis li esracha del' vis ;/Quei li péust-il faire pis ?/De tute parz l'unt manacié/Jà le eussent tut depescié,/Quant un sages Hum dist al Rei :/Sire, fet-il, entent à mei ;



with you now has lived this beast.

There is not one amongst us

hasn't at length seen him

and gone near to him often.

Never one has he touched

or ever shown an evil act,

but for the lady you see here.

By this faith, I'll say more:



at her, he has some kind of anger -
also at her new lord, before.
She was once the knight's spouse,
the knight who you cherished so much,
the knight a long-time lost,
and what became of him unknown to us.
You should arrest that lady now,
for something she could tell to you:
the reason why this creature hates her.
Make her say if she has the answer.
We've witnessed wonders already
take place here in Brittany.'



The king his counsel understood.
He detained the knight, her lord,
elsewhere, apprehended the lady,
the lady here, distressed so greatly
she under stress and afraid
recounted all of her first lord:
how she had betrayed him,
taken his clothes away and stolen.
She told of Bisclavret, the story,
his destination, what he would be.
Since his clothing was taken from him
he was not seen in his country again.
She thought, and believed well
that the Bisclavret may be this animal.
The king asked for the clothing at that,
whether it was her wish or not.
He had the clothes carried away
and had them presented to Bisclavret.
When they were set down,
Bisclavret paid them no attention.



The king was called by the Goodman,

the one who first advised him:

‘Sir, you do not well.

He’ll not do this at all

before you, he can’t dress.

He’ll not change from his animal guise.

Ignore not what he’d endure.

He’d have great shame to suffer.

Have him led to your chambers,

and his clothes carried with him there.



Leave him in a great room,

to see if he turns to a man.’



The king led him in person
and closed every door on him.

Walking to the room's front, the king,
two barons with him, leading,
in the chamber all three entered.

Now on the king's royal bed,
he found the knight sleeping.

The king ran to him, embracing -
embraces, kisses, a hundred more.

The moment the king could there,
he restored his lands all,
giving more than I can tell.

The wife lived exiled from the country,
as from that land she was hunted away.

The one who accompanied her
was the knight betrayer of her lord earlier.

Together, they had many children.

Then these were well-known.

They had unusual features and appearance.

Many women in this lineage hence



were born without noses - honestly -

and continued to live nose-free.

The story you hear me tell

is true. Doubt nothing at all.

This lai was written to be Bisclavret's,

to recall his story, for all days.



Ceste Beste ad esté od vus,/Ni ad ore celui de nus,/Qui nel' eit véu lungement,/E près
de li alé sovent./Unke mès hume ne tucha,/Ne félunie ne mustra,/Fors à la Dame
qu'ici vei,/Par cele fei que jeo vus dei :/Aukun curuz ad il vers li/E vers sun Seigneur
autresi./Ceo est la femme al Chevaler/Qui taunt par suliez avoir cher,/Qui lung-tens ad
esté perduz,/Ne sumes ù est devenuz./Kar metez la Dame en destreit,/S'aucune chose
vus direit ;/Pur quei ceste Beste la heit,/Fêtes li dire s'el le seit./Meinte merveille
avum véu,/Que en Bretagne est avenu./Li Reis ad sun conseil créu,/Le Chevaler ad
retenu,/Del' autre part ad la Dame prise,/E en mut grant destresce mise ;/Tant par
destresce è par poür,/Tut li cunta de sun Seigneur,/Coment ele l'aveit trahi,/E sa
despoille li toli./L'aventure qu'il li cunta/E que devint è ù ala,/Puis que ses dras li ot



toluz,/Ne fud en sun païz véuz,/Très bien quidat è bien créeit,/Que la beste Bisclaveret
 seit./Le Reis demande la despoille :/U bel li seit u pas nel' voile ;/Arière la fet
 apporter,/Al Bisclaveret la fist doner./Quant les urent devant li mise/Ne se prist garde
 en nule guise ;/Li Prudum le Rei apela,/Cil ki primes le cunseilla :/Sires, ne fêtes mie
 bien/Cist nel' fereit pur nule rien,/Que devant vus ses dras reveste,/Ne muet
 semblance de beste./Ne savez mie que ceo munte/Mut durement en ad grant
 hunte :/En tes chambres le fai mener,/E la despoille od li porter ;/Une grant pièce l'i
 laisrums,/S'il devient hum bien le verums./Li Reis méïsmes le mena,/E tus les hus sur
 li ferma ;/Al chief de pièce i est alez,/Deus Baruns ad od li menez,/En la chambre
 entrent tut trei/Sur le demeine lit al Rei/Trova dormant le Chevalier./Li Reis le curut
 embracier,/Plus de cent feiz l'acole è baise,/Si tost cum il pot aver aise./Tute sa tere li
 rendi,/Plus li duna ke jeo ne di./La feme ad del' païs ostée,/E chacié hors de la
 cuntrée./Cil s'en alat ensemble od li/Par ki sun Seignur od trahi,/Enfanz en ad asez
 éuz,/Puis unt esté bien cunéuz,/Del' semblant è de le visage :/Plusurs femmes de cel
 lignage,/C'est vérité, senz nés sunt néies,/E si sovient esnasées./L'aventure k'avez
 oïe/Veraïe fu, n'en dutez mie ;/De Bisclaveret fu fait li Lais,/Pur remembrance à
 tut-dis-mais.



The End

Fin

