

BISCLAVRET

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1996

Since I'm making *lais*, Bisclavret
Is one I don't want to forget.
In Breton, "Bisclavret"'s the name;
"Garwolf" in Norman means the same.
Long ago you heard the tale told--
And it used to happen, in days of old--
Quite a few men became garwolves,
And set up housekeeping in the woods.
A garwolf is a savage beast,
While the fury's on it, at least:
Eats men, wreaks evil, does no good,
Living and roaming in the deep wood.
Now I'll leave this topic set.¹
I want to tell you about Bisclavret.

In Brittany there dwelt a lord;
Wondrous praise of him I've heard:
A handsome knight, an able man,
He was, and acted like, a noble man.
His lord the King held him dear,
And so did his neighbors far and near.

He'd married a worthy woman, truly;
Always she acted so beautifully.

He loved her, she him: they loved each other.
But one thing was a bother:
Every week he was lost to her

¹In the introduction, Marie juxtaposes, but distinguishes, the historical action recorded by songs (the activities of real werewolves) and the action of making the songs or stories. Compare the beginning of *Equitan*, which seems to be going to tell us how noble the deeds of the Bretons were, but ends up praising their *lais* rather than their actions. In introducing *Bisclavret*, Marie is, again, seriously teasing the reader: what terrible beasts these garwolves were! Cruel, wild man-eaters... who then can blame the wife in the story for not wanting to sleep with her husband? Yet Marie lightly dissociates the garwolf myth from her own tale ("now I will drop this matter, because I want to tell you the story of *Bisclavret*"). As the story continues, the reader is forced to contrast the wife's rejection of her husband for his beastliness with the king's admiration of the same creature for his humanity. The horror the garwolf arouses in the introduction turns out to be irrelevant to this tale, in which the real horror is the woman who betrays the man she has loved.

For three whole days, she didn't know where,
What became of him, what might befall
Him; his people knew nothing at all.
He came home to his house one day,
So joyous he was, happy and gay;
She began to ask him and inquire:
"My lord," she said, "my friend, my dear,
There's just one thing I might care
To ask, if only I might dare--
But I'm afraid that you'll get angry,
And, more than anything, that scares me."
He hugged her when he heard all this,
Drew her close and gave her a kiss.
"My lady," he said, "Ask me now!
Anything you want to know,
If I can, I'll tell you." "Sir,
By my faith, you work my cure.
My lord, I'm in terror every day,
Those days when you've gone away,
My heart is so full of fear,
I'm so afraid I'll lose you, dear--
If I don't get some help, some healing,
I will die soon of what I'm feeling!
Where do you go? Now you must say
What life you live, where do you stay?
You are in love--that's it, I know--
And you do wrong if this is so!"
"My lady," he said, "Please, God above!
I'll suffer great harm if I tell you:
I'll drive you off, right out of love,
And lose my own self if I do."

The lady heard how he refused.
She was not the least amused.
She brought it up again, and often
She would flatter him and cozen
Him to tell her his adventure--
Till, hiding nothing, he told her.
"My lady, I turn bisclavret;
I plunge into that great forest.
In thick woods I like it best.
I live on what prey I can get."
When he'd told her all the story

She asked, inquired one thing more: he
Undressed?² Or what did he wear?
"My lady," he said, "I go all bare."
"Where are your clothes? Tell, for God's sake."
"My lady, I won't say this, no;
For if I lost them by this mistake,
From that moment on, I'd know
I'd stay a bisclavret forever;
Nothing could help me, I'd never
Change back till I got them again.
That's why I don't want it known."
"My lord," the lady replied, "It's true
More than all the world I love you.
You should hide nothing from me, nor
Ever doubt I'm loyal in any affair.
That would not seem like true friendship.
How have I ever sinned? What slip
Makes me seem untrustworthy to you?
Do what's right! Now tell me, do!"
She nagged him thus, and thus harassed
Him till he just had to tell, at last.
"My lady," he said, "near that wood,
Where I come home, along that road,
Standing there is an old chapel,
Which often serves me well.
The stone is there, hollow and wide,
Beneath a bush, dug out inside;
I put my clothes there under the bush
Until I can come back to the house."

The lady heard this marvel, this wonder.
In terror she blushed all bright red,
Filled with fear by this adventure.
Often and often passed through her head
Plans to get right out, escape, for
She didn't want ever to share his bed.

² The verb "se depuille" is used ("undressed"); in lines 124, 268, and (as a rhyme word) 275, the noun "depuille" refers to Bisclavret's clothes (otherwise called "draps," linen). "Depuille" in modern French is a snake's sloughed skin, a trophy animal hide, or spoils, booty of war; a dead body is a "depuille mortelle." While the word always could refer to clothes, it certainly seems the ideal word to suggest clothes as both a unit, like skin itself, and clothes as the precious social identity that allows a man to be recognized as a man.

A knight in that country there
Who long had loved the lady fair,
Begging her so, praying hard,
Giving generously to win her regard
(She had never loved him before this,
Nor let him think her love was his)--
She sent a messenger to bring
Him to her, and told him everything.

"My friend, my dear," she said, "be glad!
You've been tormented, driven, sad
Wanting what I'll give you today--
No-one will ever say you nay--
I grant you my love and my body, too:
Take me, make me your lover, you!"

He thanks her very gratefully.
He takes her pledge made solemnly--
She swears an oath on the engagement.
Then she told him how her lord went
Away, and what he turned into.
The path he'd always taken to
Enter the forest--this she shows;
She sent him to get his clothes.
Thus was Bisclavret betrayed
And by his own wife waylaid.

Having lost him so often, indeed,
Everyone generally agreed
That he had finally left for good.
He was looked for, inquiries pursued,
But they couldn't find a trace.
Finally they closed the case.
The lady's marriage was celebrated
To the fellow who'd loved and waited.

So, a whole year, matters rest,
Until the King went hunting one day.
He went straight to the forest
Where the bisclavret used to stay.
When the hounds were loosed and let
Run, they found the bisclavret.
They chased him always that long day,

The huntsmen and the coursing dogs,
Till they had him--almost--at bay
And they would have torn him to rags,
But then he picked out the King
And ran there for mercy. To beg,
He seizes the King's stirrup-ring,
And kisses his foot and leg.
The King sees this, and feels great fear;
He calls all his companions over.
"My lords," he says, "come, come here!
Behold this marvel, see this wonder.
How this beast bows down to me!
Its³ sense is human. It begs for mercy.
Drive me those dogs away again,
See that no-one strikes a blow!
This beast understands, feels like a man.
Let's get going! You're all too slow!
To the beast my peace I'll grant.
Now, no more today will I hunt."

With that, the King turns and goes.
The bisclavret follows him close;
It won't escape, it stays right near.
Losing him is its only fear.
The King leads it back to his castle keep;
It pleases him, his delight is deep
For he's never seen such a creature.
He's decided it's a marvel of nature,
And treats it as a great treasure.
He tells his people it's his pleasure
For them to take the best of care
Of it; let no-one harm it, or dare
To strike it, for love of the King.
It must be fed well and given drink.
They're all glad to care for and keep
It; every day it goes to sleep

³ At first, I use "it" to refer to the werewolf as seen by the king; at the point when the lady's husband enters the picture, I return to the masculine pronoun. In French, and therefore in Marie's text, there is no neuter pronoun; the King refers to Bisclavret as "la bête" (feminine) and so uses feminine pronouns, while Marie calls him "Le Bisclavret" (masculine) and uses masculine pronouns. Later, the King's adviser uses the feminine word "beste" but continues to use the masculine pronoun for Bisclavret. So my "it" corresponds to Marie's "she."

Among the knights, close to the King.
Every man thinks it a precious thing,
For it's so gentle, well-bred, polite,
It never would do what isn't right.
Wherever the King might go
It didn't want to be separated, so
It went along with him constantly.
That it loved him was easy to see.

Now listen to what happened next.
The King was holding court; he'd asked
That all his barons attend him,
Those who owed their land to him,
To help him hold his high feast-day,
And see him served in a royal way.
That very knight came to the feast,
Well equipped and richly dressed,
Who had married Bisclavret's wife.
He never thought nor reckoned
To find him so close in his life.
He came to the palace; the second
That Bisclavret saw him standing around,
He made for him with a single bound,
Bit into him and dragged him off.
He would have treated him very rough
If the King hadn't called him back
And threatened him with a stick.
He tried to bite him twice before night.
Many folks were amazed at the sight;
For never had he acted this way
To any man he'd seen, until this day.
All those of the household insist
There must be a reason he's doing this.
He's hurt him, gave him some offense--
For he'd be glad to take vengeance.
This time he lets it drop
Until the feast has broken up
And the lords take leave; each baron
Returns to his home, one by one.
The knight has left, I happen to know,
Among the very first to go,
He whom Bisclavret attacked;

He hates him⁴--not a surprising fact.

Some time later (not very long,
I think, unless I heard it wrong),
The King went riding in the wood,
That courteous King, so wise and good,
That wood where they'd found Bisclavret,
And he came along with him. At
Night, time to retire for the day,
In a country lodging he lay.
Bisclavret's wife knew it; she dressed
Herself in her attractive best,
Next day, to go speak to the King--
Sent him a gift, some costly thing.
When Bisclavret saw her entrance,
No man could have held him back;
He ran like mad to the attack--
Listen now to his fine vengeance:
He tore her nose right off her face.
Could anything be worse than this is?
Now they surround him in that place,
They're ready to cut him in pieces,
When a wise fellow tells the King,
"My Lord," he says, "Hear what I say:
It's with you this beast's been living
And every one of us here today
Has watched him a long time; beside
Him we've traveled far and wide.
He's never before hurt anyone,
Or shown a criminal disposition,
Except to this lady you see here.
By the faith I owe you, it's clear
He holds some grudge or other
Against her and her lord together.
This is the wife of that knight who
Used to be so dear to you,
Who was lost such a long time ago;
What happened to him, we don't know.

⁴As so often in the *Lais*, the antecedents for subject and object pronouns of the same gender can often be distinguished only by using common sense: "He feared him" must be the knight fearing Bisclavret, while "He hated him" is Bisclavret hating the knight.

Now try this lady with some torture,⁵
And see if she doesn't have more to
Tell you why the beast hates her!
If she knows, make her say it!
Many strange things we see occur
In Brittany, early and late."

With this advice the King agrees.
On the one hand, the knight they seize;
The lady's taken, on the other,
And seriously made to suffer.
From pain just as much as from fear,
She told him her lord's whole affair:
How she'd betrayed him, she said,
And taken away the clothes that he shed,
The adventure he'd told, so she'd know,
What he became and where he'd go.
Since she'd stolen all his linen,
In his lands he'd not been seen;
But she believed--her mind was set--
The beast was indeed Bisclavret.
The King wants the clothes on the spot;
Whether the lady wants to or not
She has them brought back out
And given to the Bisclavret.
They set them down in front of his nose,⁶
But Bisclavret ignores the clothes.
That wise fellow speaks to the King,
Who'd given the other advice, too:
"Sire, you're doing the wrong thing.
He will never make the least
Move to get dressed in front of you
And change from the form of a beast.
This is terrible--you don't know--

⁵ It's not clear how the words "en destreit" ("in torture") and "destresce" ("suffering, pain," lines 264-65) should be taken; is it a matter of merely arresting the wife and questioning her, or of administering some form of physical torture? In line 264, she is put to "mut grant destresce," which suggests that there are degrees of unpleasantness in whatever "destresce" is. "They grilled her" might be the closest possible sense....

⁶ In line 279, "in front of his nose" is my addition to Marie's "devant lui" ("in front of him"); rhyming "nose" and "clothes" was just too tempting.

Something he's far too ashamed to show.
Have him taken to your own room,
And his lost clothes brought with him;
A good long time, leave him alone;
Then we'll see if he becomes a man."

The King himself took Bisclavret
Inside, and closed all the doors tight;
He returned when the time was done.
He brought along two barons, not one.
They entered the chamber, all three.
On the king's royal bed, they see
Lying fast asleep, the knight.
The king ran to hug him tight;
He kissed him a hundred times that day.
When he catches his breath, he hands
Him back all his fiefs and lands,
And more presents than I will say.

The lady, now, they expell
From that realm, from that time forward.
He goes with her, as well,
For whom she betrayed her lord.
She had plenty of children; grown,
They were, all of them, quite well-known,
By their looks, their facial assembly:
More than one woman of that family
Was born without a nose to blow,⁷
And lived denosed. It's true! It's so!

The adventure you have heard
Is true--don't doubt a single word.
Of Bisclavret they made the lay,
To remember, forever and a day.

⁷ Similarly, "born without a nose to blow" is silly, but Marie's

C'est verite, senz nes sunt nees
et si viveient esnasees

is sillier.