

Stolen Away by Fairies

By Dorothy Trench Bonett



Dorothy Trench Bonett

Dorothy Trench Bonett is a graduate of Yale University, where she received both her B.A. (1979) and her M.A. (1980). She attended l'Université de Paris VII (Denis Diderot) during a junior year abroad. She also studied at the Taipei Language Institute (1981).

She served on the Yale Alumni Board of Governors from 2010-2013 and was on the Board of the Yale-China Association from 1987-1993. She has taught at Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg and at Hood College.

Dorothy's translation of Alexandre Dumas pere's *Charles VII at the Homes of His Great Vassals* was published in 1991 by the Noble Press. The New England Poetry Club awarded her an Honorable Mention for the Der Hovanessian Translation Award in 2006, and she has won prizes for her original poems.

She has been a member of the Torch Club of Frederick, Maryland since 2008 and has presented three papers there. Her paper on Xu Zhimo, "China's First Great Modern Poet," was published in the Winter 2016 *Torch*. She has been married to Michael Bonett, also a member of the Torch Club, since 1983, and they have three grown sons.

Her paper was presented at the Frederick Torch Club on October 1, 2010.

About eight hundred years ago, a woman named Marie began writing a series of short, narrative poems called *lais*. It was unusual that Marie could write—but not because she was female. Europe in the twelfth century was undergoing some important social transformations, and one of these was a spike in the number of literate people. But still, only a few had reading skills, and fewer still could write. Those in this elite minority were likely to be connected in some way with the church (since the church was the reason that any literacy and any books at all had been preserved from the wreck of the Roman Empire), and if they were not monks or nuns, readers and writers were always from the upper class. But definitely not always male. Book-learning not being a skill considered necessary for a knight, the lady was the person in the castle who was more likely to take an interest in books, whether devotional or what we would now call "literature" (Pernoud 79).

Around the
year 1100,
European
civilization was
expanding and
flourishing.

And an interest in "literature" was developing at this time. Around the year 1100, European civilization was expanding and flourishing. The glorious Gothic cathedrals began to be built; the first universities came into being; Henry II codified English law;

and scholastic philosophy flourished. This was the atmosphere in which the first pioneers started writing books on secular subjects, often in the vernaculars that people spoke, rather than in Latin. They tended to stay with "safe" subject matter, though, and to stress not innovation, but tradition. It was safest to write on subject matter taken from the classical authors who had survived, the "authorities" that medieval people, still very much in the shadow of Rome, trusted. History and classical legends were what they liked most. Local legends sometimes crept in under the guise of "history," but for someone to deliberately use local folklore and traditions in a written work was not common.

Marie, however, dared to do this. The themes and settings of her *lais* were Celtic, and she used Celtic folklore in them—the kind of legends that the *jongleur* sang accompanied by his harp and his "rote" (a stringed instrument with a soundboard). The innovative nature of the *lais* can be seen in her feeling compelled to justify at length in her prologue not her standing as a woman writer, but her choice of subject matter.

How did Marie come to tell Celtic stories? How did she even know them? We cannot be certain; it cannot be too strongly stressed that we know nothing for certain about Marie, except that she included her name in the three texts commonly attributed to her, the *Lais*, the *Fables* and *l'Espurgatoire Saint Patriz*. The name that she called herself is simply 'Marie'. We add 'de France' because she wrote, in some famous lines at the end of the *Fables*:

*Me numerai pur remembrance,
Ai num Marie, si suis de France.*

Because of this statement, in 1561, Claude Fauchet, in one of the first histories of French literature, gave her the surname by which she is still known.

When someone in Marie's time wrote that they were from "France," they meant the area that later became known as the province of Ile-de-France. Marie must have been born there. She did not write in the *francien* dialect of that area, though (which would later develop into standard modern French), but in Norman, spoken only in the duchy of Normandy and in England. Since Marie used Anglo-Norman and even included, in some of her *lais*, a word or two of English, we can assume that she spent time in England.

She may have been part of the Angevin court; she dedicated the *Lais* to a king who was probably Henry II Plantagenet. She may have been one of the aristocrats who then traveled back and forth between England and the parts of the Angevin empire in France. Certainly she always takes an aristocratic point of view in her work—but she may have done so to appeal to her audience. She was definitely educated. She knew the standard Latin classics and evidently read Latin because both the *Fables* and *l'Espurgatoire* are translations from that language. Some have assumed because of this that she was a nun, which is certainly possible (and would not preclude an aristocratic background), but with no concrete evidence, it remains speculation.

Marie may have acquired some of her knowledge about Celtic folklore while in England. England borders Wales and is separated only by a narrow channel from Ireland. Henry II conquered Ireland in 1171, and *l'Espurgatoire*, written after this conquest, is set at Lough Derg in County Kerry. However, no special knowledge of Ireland is displayed in the *Lais*, and the background of this work seems Breton. Many of the characters

have Breton names, the place descriptions are accurate, and at least one of the legends that she claimed to have heard there (*Deuz Amanz*) was still being told by the local populace in Brittany in 1900.

So the facts we can be (mostly) certain of are these. Marie, an educated woman, wrote between c. 1160 and c. 1190. She was probably born in Ile-de-France but travelled extensively in both England and Brittany. And she uses settings that took a lot from Celtic culture and folklore for her *Lais*, which are innovative works.

Lanval is
a knight of the
Round Table,
kind and
brave and
generous,
handsome
and full of
prowess.

Marie wrote twelve *lais*, which survive in five manuscripts. All have Celtic settings, and four deal with the supernatural. In *Bisclavret*, the hero is a werewolf. In *Yonec*, a lover can turn into a bird and fly to his mistress. The hero of *Guigemar* hunts a white doe that speaks to him, and sails in a boat which has no crew, yet pilots itself. *Lanval* deals with fairy abduction—and that brings us to the rich tradition that is the focus of this paper.

The theme of "going away with the fairies" or being "stolen away by fairies" is a long-lasting one in the folklore and beliefs of the Celts, persisting even into modern times. Thus we have written records (including interviews with

people from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who believed abduction by fairies to be was a real possibility) that we can compare with Marie's writings. Such a comparison can tell us much not only about what has been called "the fairy-faith," but also about Marie and her authorial intentions.

Lanval is a knight of the Round Table, kind and brave and generous, handsome and full of prowess. He is a foreigner at Arthur's court, and although he fights valiantly with the king in the wars against the Scots and Picts, when the King returns to Caerleon and shares out the spoils, he forgets Lanval. The young knight has no other means of sustenance than the King's largesse, so this places him in a bad position. Also, the other knights ignore him.

So Lanval rides out of the city one day and comes to a meadow. Cities in his time are the safe places—when you leave their walls, and go out into the untamed wild, anything might happen. And of course, it does. The knight's horse refuses to enter the meadow, but Lanval leaves the animal outside and goes in alone. As he lies beside a river, two beautiful women come to him. They lead him to a splendid pavilion, where Lanval is greeted by a lady who is even more beautiful than her attendants. She comes from "a far off country" she says, but has been watching him. She offers him her love, and they become lovers, Lanval swearing eternal fidelity. Afterwards, he eats a meal with her. She dresses him in magnificent clothes, tells him that she has the power to grant his wishes, and that she will always come to him when he summons her—on the condition that he never tell anyone else about her. Lanval swears that he will not. He then returns to the town. Once there, he is able to show knightly generosity and to lavishly entertain. He becomes popular now with the other knights.

Marie tells us that the lady is a “fairy.” What does this mean? The people who believed in these beings (referring to them only in oblique terms like “the folk” or “the people”) were uncertain of their nature and origin. They look human, but are not; they may be fallen angels, or they may be the dead. Sometimes they are described as being small (though never as small as Shakespeare’s Queen Mab), and sometimes they are our size, or taller. They can be grotesque, or more than humanly beautiful. Some can see them (with what is called “the second sight”), but most cannot unless the fairies wish it. Animals can always sense their presence, though—like Lanval’s horse.

Fairies have powers that humans do not. Like Lanval’s fairy, they can do magic and grant wishes, but they are masters of illusion, so what they grant is often not what it seems. They live longer—centuries longer—but they envy us our immortal souls. They have knowledge that humans can profit from—some who have “been with the fairies” have there learned healing or other useful arts. On the other hand, humans can have abilities that fairies need, which is why fairies sometimes steal them. But they also kidnap for other reasons: beautiful people are always in danger; babies; nursing mothers; and anyone who stumbles upon a fairy ritual.

People who lived in areas where the fairy belief persisted lived in dread of these abductions. They went to great lengths to preserve vulnerable individuals from this fate, making sure that infants were christened quickly or protected by objects of iron (fairies hate iron—and also hate Christianity). Pregnant women and nursing mothers were guarded. All knew never to call the fairies by name (doing so gives them power over a person) and to avoid places fairies were known to frequent—meadows where they danced and their burghs, or forts. It was particularly important to avoid

these places on the great holy days of the pre-Christian Celts, when the fairies were supposed to have the most power: Samhain (Halloween), which began their year; Imbolc (Groundhog Day); Beltain (May Day); and Lughnasadh on August 1st.

Fairies could use their gifts of illusion to enchant an object, like a piece of wood, to resemble the person they had stolen, or they might switch a fairy for the person.

The idea of being abducted by the fairies was particularly frightening because it could happen without anyone else realizing. Fairies could use their gifts of illusion to enchant an object, like a piece of wood, to resemble the person they had stolen, or they might switch a fairy for the person. That would be a “changeling,” which we think of as a switched infant, but adults also were in danger. Fairies resorted to this trick because those abducted by fairies could be rescued within a certain window of time, if the family or loved ones knew. Nine days, some sources say, and others say after a year and a day, and yet others say seven years. The fairies did not want the family to make rescue attempts, but to believe that the kidnapped person had fallen ill and died (and then to bury the enchanted piece of wood in their place), or keep the changeling with

them, not realizing that it was not the same person in spite of the changes in character. (Changelings were sickly and lethargic, or perhaps violent; worst of all, they had tremendous appetites, eating to the point that the rest of the family could starve.)

The person who had been stolen might be able to effect their own rescue even if the family failed, but if he or she ate fairy food, even a bite, a return became impossible. This is why Lanval’s meal with the fairy is significant. It shows his willingness, right after their meeting, to leave this world for Faerie. This brings up an interesting point. Are the victims of fairy abductions always unwilling? Do not some of them wish to stay in Faerie? Believers seemed to have feared this possibility.

In the Bridget Cleary case in County Tipperary, 1898, a woman was killed because her husband, father, and other relatives believed that she had been switched for a changeling (Hoff and Yeates, chapters 4-6). While trying to get the “real Bridget” back, they burned her to death, because fire exorcised fairies. Something that came up repeatedly in the interviews afterwards was that they thought that “their Bridgie” might not wish to return from Fairyland. Bridget had had the habit of walking alone in a “fairy fort” and had done other things that put one at risk of being abducted. She was bright and attractive, and both she and her husband (who set her alight) had some English education, but it was clear that she was dissatisfied with life as an Irish country woman. Might she not have wished for the splendours of Faerie, in the way that she had wished for (and managed to obtain) a sewing machine, gold earrings, and stylish modern hats, much as Lanval had wished for means to uphold his position as a knight?

Lanval is happier in Caerleon, of course, with the fairy’s gifts. This happy state does not last. He attracts the attention of Queen Guinevere. (The

Continued on page 33

Continued from page 28

character of Sir Lancelot had not been invented and would not be invented until ten years after Marie wrote this *lai*—by Chretien de Troyes—but Marie knew the tradition that Arthur’s wife was unfaithful.) Lanval rejects the Queen’s advances, and during the following argument makes the mistake of telling Guinevere that he has a mistress whose servants are more beautiful than she. Guinevere reports this insult to Arthur, and Lanval is put on trial. He can be saved only if the fairy appears and proves that what he said is true about her beauty is true. However, she won’t come now since he has broken the *geasa*, or taboo, that she put him under when he promised never to speak of her.

If this *lai* were an authentic Celtic legend, instead of a literary adaptation by Marie, chances are good that Lanval’s lady would leave him to suffer the doom that he has brought down upon himself. In these tales, a *geasa* that seems simple to keep is often laid on various characters, and yet they break it and must take the consequences, whether or not they are at fault. Fairies are not merciful, and the Celtic view of the world is harsh. But although Marie’s *lais* sometimes end in tragedy, this one does not. Lanval’s fairy appears at court, and he is vindicated. And then, when the fairy is riding away, out of this mortal world, he makes the decision to go with her and leaps onto the back of her horse. “No man,” Marie says, “ever saw him more.” He had “gone away with the fairies,” Marie tells us, to “Avalun.”

We can hope that in Lanval’s case, Avalon (or Fairyland, or Faerie or Elfland or Elfhame) turned out to be as he hoped. In some tales, mortals stolen by fairies find that they are in a kind of Celtic heaven, with every reason to stay there, rather than to try to return to Earth. There are plenty of tales (the one about Cuchulain’s son Oisín is the most famous) about mortals who

return from Fairyland (or even from just dancing for moments with fairies in a fairy ring) and find that it is centuries later. The unfortunate mortal then crumbles into dust. Often, however, those who go away with fairies find that Faerie is not what they hoped. They may find that they are wanted as slaves there, doomed to repeat some repetitive and unpleasant task for eternity. Tam Lin, who went away to be the Queen of Elfhame’s lover, learned after seven years of good treatment, that he was designated as their human victim to be sacrificed, presumably at one of the great feasts previously mentioned. He is saved by a brave human girl.

Lanval rejects
the Queen’s
advances, and
during the following
argument makes
the mistake of
telling Guinevere
that he has a
mistress whose
servants are
more beautiful
than she.

But humans wanting to save others from fairies might not only find that they were reluctant to come with them; they might also find that the abducted person had had what was called “glamour” cast over them, causing them to see Faerie as splendid and beautiful when they were actually living in squalor. If they could be made to understand that they were deceived, and if they were lucky or clever enough to get away, they might return to the human world with fairy gifts:

eloquence, or song, or the “second sight,” which might stay with the person forever after (as they did in the case of Thomas the Rhymer). Fairy gold, however, was famously unreliable; in the light of day, fairy gold is revealed as trash. And, when one deals with fairies, there is always the question of one’s soul.

Marie de France’s Celtic-influenced story of Lanval, then, is less dark than are authentic beliefs about fairy abductions. However, her details are accurate. And, of course, her purpose in writing this *lai* was not to give her readers an anthropological account. She used interestingly exotic folk beliefs as a backdrop to stories whose main interest was in the realistic portrayal of how people interact with one another. Her characters are delicately but convincingly drawn, her dialogue sharp and forceful, her descriptions accurate, and her poetry lovely. And her works were successful and popular both during her time and afterwards. Two centuries after she died, Chaucer still wrote “Breton lais.” His *Franklin’s Tale* is in that genre. Marie’s experiment paid off, and she had an influence on literature. We are lucky that she wrote and that her works remain for us to enjoy today.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Burgess, Glyn S. and Keith Busby. *The Lais of Marie de France*. London and NY: Penguin, 1986, 1999
- Evan-Wentz, W. Y. *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*. London: Oxford UP, 1911.
- Hoff, Jean and Yeates, Marion. *The Cooper’s Wife is Missing*. NY: Basic Books, 2000
- Les Lais de Marie de France*. Ed. Jean Rychner. Paris : Librairie Honore Champion, 1973
- Pernoud, Regine. *La Femme Au Temps de Cathedral*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1980

*The publication of this article is funded by
The Torch Foundation*