

BISCLAVRET

In my effort to compose lays I do not wish to omit *Bisclavret* – for such is its name in Breton, while the Normans call it *Garwaf*. In days gone by one could hear tell, and indeed it often used to happen, that many men turned into werewolves and went to live in the woods. A werewolf is a ferocious beast which, when possessed by this madness, devours men, causes great damage and dwells in vast forests. I leave such matters for the moment, for I wish to tell you about Bisclavret. [1–14]

In Brittany there lived a baron whom I have heard greatly praised. He was a good and handsome knight who conducted himself nobly. He was one of his lord's closest advisers and was well loved by all his neighbours. As his wedded wife he had a woman who was worthy and attractive in appearance. He loved her and she returned his love. But one thing caused her great worry: each week he was absent for three full days without her knowing what became of him or where he went, and no one in the household knew what happened to him. One day, when he had returned home in high spirits, she questioned him: 'Lord,' she said, 'my dear, sweet love, I would gladly ask you something, if only I dared; but there is nothing I fear more than your anger.' [15–35] When he heard this, he embraced her, drew her towards him and kissed her. 'Lady,' he said, 'come, ask your question! There is nothing you can ask which I shall not tell you, if I know the answer.' 'In faith,' she said, 'I am relieved to hear this. Lord, I am so fraught with anxiety the days you are apart from me, my heart is so heavy and I have such a fear of losing you that I shall surely die shortly from this unless I soon get help. Please tell me where you go, what becomes of you and where you stay. I think you must have a lover and, if this is so, you are doing wrong.' 'Lady,' he said, 'in God's name, have mercy on me! If I tell you this, great harm will come to me,

for as a result I shall lose your love and destroy myself.' [36–56]

When the lady heard what he said, she thought it was no laughing matter. She questioned him repeatedly and coaxed him so persuasively that he told her his story, keeping nothing secret. 'Lady, I become a werewolf: I enter the vast forest and live in the deepest part of the wood where I feed off the prey I can capture.' When he had related everything to her, she asked him whether he undressed or remained clothed. 'Lady,' he said, 'I go about completely naked.' 'Tell me, in the name of God, where do you leave your clothes?' 'That I will not tell you, for if I lost them and were discovered in that state, I should remain a werewolf forever. No one would be able to help me until they were returned to me. That is why I do not wish this to be known.' [57–79] 'Lord,' the lady replied to him, 'I love you more than the whole world. You must not hide anything from me or doubt me in any way. That would not seem like true love. What have I done wrong? What sin have I committed that you should doubt me in any way? Do tell me – you will be acting wisely'. She tormented and harried him so much that he could not do otherwise but tell her. 'Lady,' he said, 'beside the wood, near the path I follow, stands an old chapel which often serves me well. There beneath a bush is a broad stone, hollowed out in the centre, in which I put my clothes until I return home.' The lady heard this remarkable revelation and her face became flushed with fear. She was greatly alarmed by the story, and began to consider various means of parting from him, as she no longer wished to lie with him. [80–102] She sent a messenger to summon a knight who lived in the region and who had loved her for a long time, wooed her ardently and served her generously. She had never loved him or promised him her affection but now she told him what was on her mind. 'Friend,' she said, 'rejoice: without further delay I grant you that which has tormented you; never again will you encounter any refusal. I offer you my love and my body; make me your mistress.' He thanked her warmly and accepted her pledge, whereupon she received his oath and told him of her husband and what became of him. She described the path he took to the forest and sent him for her husband's clothes. Thus was Bisclavret betrayed and wronged by his wife. Because he was often missing, everyone thought that this time he had gone away for good. They searched and inquired for him a

long while but, as no trace of him was found, they had to let the matter drop. Then the knight married the lady he had loved for so long. [103-34]

A whole year passed by until one day the king went hunting and headed straight for the forest in which Bisclavret was living. When the hounds were unleashed they came upon Bisclavret and the dogs and hunters spent the whole day in pursuit until they were just about to capture him, tear him to pieces and destroy him. As soon as he saw the king he ran up to him and begged for mercy. He took hold of his stirrup and kissed his foot and his leg. The king saw him and was filled with dread. He summoned all his companions. 'Lords,' he said, 'come forward! See the marvellous way this beast humbles itself before me! It has the intelligence of a human and is pleading for mercy. Drive back all the dogs and see that no one strikes it! The beast possesses understanding and intelligence. Hurry! Let us depart. I shall place the creature under my protection, for I shall hunt no more today.' [135-60]

The king then left with Bisclavret following him. He kept very close to the king, as he did not want to be separated from him and had no wish to abandon him. The king, who took him straight to his castle, was delighted and overjoyed at what had happened, for never before had he seen such a thing. He considered the wolf to be a great wonder and loved it dearly, commanding all his people to guard it well for love of him and not to do it any harm. None of them was to strike it and plenty of food and water must be provided for it. His men were happy to look after the creature and each day it would sleep amongst the knights, just by the king. It was loved by everyone and so noble and gentle a beast was it that it never attempted to cause any harm. Wherever the king might go, it never wanted to be left behind. It accompanied him constantly and showed clearly that it loved him. [161-84]

Now hear what happened next. The king held court and all his barons and those who held fiefs from him were summoned so that they could help him celebrate the festival and serve him all the better. Amongst them, richly and elegantly attired, was the knight who had married Bisclavret's wife. He did not realize and would never have suspected that Bisclavret was so close by. As soon as he arrived at the palace, Bisclavret caught sight of the knight and sped towards him, sinking his teeth into him and dragging him

down towards him. He would soon have done the knight serious harm if the king had not called him and threatened him with a stick. On two occasions that day he attempted to bite him. Many people were greatly astonished at this for never before had he shown signs of such behaviour towards anyone he had seen. Throughout the household it was remarked that he would not have done it without good reason. The knight had wronged him somehow or other, for he was bent on revenge. On this occasion that was the end of the matter, until the festival came to a close and the barons took their leave and returned home. The knight whom Bisclavret attacked was one of the very first to go, I believe. No wonder Bisclavret hated him. [185-218]

Not long afterwards, as I understand it, the king, who was wise and courtly, went into the forest where Bisclavret had been discovered. Bisclavret accompanied him and on the way home that night the king took lodging in that region. Bisclavret's wife learnt of this and, dressing herself elegantly, went next day to speak to the king, taking an expensive present for him. When Bisclavret saw her approach, no one could restrain him. He dashed towards her like a madman. Just hear how successfully he took his revenge. He tore the nose right off her face. What worse punishment could he have inflicted on her? From all sides he was threatened and was on the point of being torn to pieces, when a wise man said to the king: 'Lord, listen to me. This beast has lived with you and every single one of us has seen him over a long period and has been with him at close quarters. Never before has he touched a soul or committed a hostile act, except against this lady here. By the faith I owe you, he has some grudge against her and also against her husband. She is the wife of the knight you used to love so dearly and who has been missing for a long time without our knowing what became of him. Question the lady to see if she will tell you why the beast hates her. Make her tell you, if she knows! We have witnessed many marvels happening in Brittany.' [219-60] The king accepted his advice. Holding the knight, he took the lady away and subjected her to torture. Pain and fear combined made her reveal everything about her husband: how she had betrayed him and taken his clothes, about his account of what happened, what became of him and where he went. Since his clothes had been taken he had not been seen in the region. She was quite convinced that the beast was

Bisclavret. The king asked her for the clothes and, whether she liked it or not, made her bring them and return them to Bisclavret. When they were placed before him, Bisclavret took no notice of them. The man who gave the advice earlier called to the king: 'Lord, you are not acting properly: nothing would induce him to put on his clothing in front of you or change his animal form. You do not realize the importance of this; it is most humiliating for him. Take him into your bedchamber and bring him the clothes. Let us leave him there for a while and we shall soon see if he turns into a man.' [261-92] The king himself led the way and closed all the doors on the wolf. After a while he returned, taking two barons with him. All three entered the room. They found the knight sleeping on the king's own bed. The king ran forward to embrace him, and kissed him many times. It was not long before he restored his land to him; he gave him more than I can tell and banished the woman from the country, exiling her from the region. The man for whom she betrayed her husband went with her. She had a good many children who were thereafter recognizable by their appearance. Many of the women in the family, I tell you truly, were born without noses and lived noseless. [293-314]

The adventure you have heard actually took place, do not doubt it. The lay was composed about Bisclavret to be remembered for ever more. [315-18]

V

LANVAL

Just as it happened, I shall relate to you the story of another lay, which tells of a very noble young man whose name in Breton is Lanval. [1-4]

Arthur, the worthy and courtly king, was at Carlisle on account of the Scots and the Picts who were ravaging the country, penetrating into the land of Logres and frequently laying it waste.

The king was there during the summer, at Pentecost, and he gave many rich gifts to counts and barons and to those of the Round Table: there was no such company in the whole world. He apportioned wives and lands to all, save to one who had served him: this was Lanval, whom he did not remember, and for whom no one put in a good word. Because of his valour, generosity, beauty and prowess, many were envious of him. There were those who pretended to hold him in esteem, but who would not have uttered a single regret if misfortune had befallen him. He was the son of a king of noble birth, but far from his inheritance, and although he belonged to Arthur's household he had spent all his wealth, for the king gave him nothing and Lanval asked for nothing. Now he was in a plight, very sad and forlorn. Lords, do not be surprised: a stranger bereft of advice can be very downcast in another land when he does not know where to seek help. [5-38]

This knight whose tale I am telling you had served the king well. One day he mounted his horse and went to take his ease. He left the town and came alone to a meadow, dismounting by a stream; but there his horse trembled violently, so he loosened its saddlegirth and left it, allowing it to enter the meadow to roll over on its back. He folded his cloak, which he placed beneath his head, very disconsolate because of his troubles, and nothing could please him. Lying thus, he looked downriver and saw two damsels coming, more beautiful than any he had ever seen: they were richly dressed in closely fitting tunics of dark purple and their faces

jealousy

tremble