

## CHAITIVEL

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1996

Fancy moves me to recollect  
A lai I've heard people discuss.  
I'll tell you the adventure, direct,  
And give the city's name that was  
Its birthplace, and its given name:<sup>1</sup>  
Someone called it Chaitivel;  
Plenty of folks, all the same,  
Call it "Four Mournings" as well.

At Nantes in Brittany there dwelled  
A fine lady; she excelled  
In beauty, and in schooling too,  
And every ornamental virtue.  
In all the land there was no knight  
Worthy in deeds, but at first sight--  
One glimpse--he would love her,  
Begging, trying for her favor.  
She couldn't be everybody's lover,  
But she didn't want to kill them, either.

From each and every lady of  
The land, a man should seek some love.  
Try to take a rag from a crazy man,  
He'll hit you back hard as he can;  
But a lady thanks you for your desires,  
More even than good-will requires.  
Even if she doesn't want to hear them,  
She shouldn't use her words to smear them,  
But honor them and hold them dear,  
Thank and serve them with good cheer.

The lady I want to tell you of  
Who was begged so much to grant her love--

---

<sup>1</sup> The opening uses masculine pronouns (where "he" was born and what name "he" had) which can only refer back to the masculine noun "lai"; I have translated these in English neuter ("Its"). Since the lai's name is the noun "Chaitivel" ("the miserable one" or "the prisoner"--but close to *châtré*, "castrated") which the castrated suitor applies both to it and to himself, there is a painful ambiguity. Marie is discussing the history of the lai, not of the man.

For her beauty, for a prize so sweet  
Day and night they all compete.

In Brittany four barons there were,  
But I don't know their names, these four.  
They didn't have much age on them,  
But they were still all quite handsome,  
Worthy knights and valorous,  
Free-spending, courteous, generous.  
They were highly valued and  
Were the gentry of that land.  
These four were in love with the lady.  
Their task--doing really well--was weighty:  
To have the lady and have her love  
Each of them, hard as he could, strove.  
Each for himself, they wanted her,  
To this each devoted his labors,  
And every one of them was sure  
He could outperform all others.

The lady was full of good sense.  
She considered, in her conscience,  
Trying to know, to ask which of  
These men would be the best to love.  
They're all each better than the rest--  
She cannot manage to choose the best.<sup>2</sup>  
Losing three for one--this she hates.  
So on each she turned a smiling face,  
To all she gave her love-favors,  
Sent messages to all these lovers.

---

<sup>2</sup> This lai seems to complement *Laustic*: both present courtly-love puzzles of a classic and rather absurd sort. In *Laustic*, a woman chooses her lover because he is a) much admired, and b) next door. In the other, a woman faced with four identically admirable suitors simply has no basis on which to choose one. Both stories involve the interplay of secrecy and publicity, and both explore the vision of love in which nobility is rewarded by sexual pleasure. In *Laustic*, the lovers are happy with seeing each other and with talking; when further contact is dangerous, they resign themselves to the fading of their passion. In *Chaitivel*, lovers risk death for their beloved, and in fact their risk seems to be what gives her pleasure; but the survivor cannot enjoy any special benefits, and is merely frustrated by verbal attention from the beloved, and by seeing her every day. In *Laustic*, the lover is symbolically castrated by his beloved's husband, who kills the lover's bird surrogate; in *Chaitivel*, the lover is actually castrated, and his fellow lovers die, during the heroics enforced by his darling.

None of them knew about the others, either  
But none of them could bear to leave her.  
By his prayers and service sweet,  
Each thought he'd make out the best.  
Whenever knights gathered for a meet,  
Each wanted first place in every test,  
To do well, if he could, and so measure  
Up to providing his lady's pleasure.  
They all treated her as their lover,  
They all carried her love-favor,  
Ring or sleeve or banner-flame  
And all had one war-cry: her name.

She loved all four, all four pleased her  
Until, in the time after Easter,  
In front of her city of Nantes  
There was proclaimed a tournament.  
To get to know these four true loves  
Knights came from other lands in droves:  
Frenchmen of France and Normans rode forth,  
Flemish and Brabants from the North,  
Boulognais and Angevins appear,  
And others from other countries near.  
Gladly they all made the journey,  
And stayed there for quite a while.  
On the evening of the tourney,  
They traded blows in serious style.  
The four true loves, well-armed all,  
Sallied forth from the city wall.  
After them rode knights galore,  
But the burden of defense was on the four.  
Each was known to the knights on the field  
By his enseign and his shield.  
They send four knights to the assault,  
Two from Flanders, two from Hainault.  
Armed for attack, spurring on, no knight  
Wasn't looking for someone to fight.  
The defenders saw them coming.  
No-one wished to flee or tarry.  
Lances lowered and spurs humming,  
Each picked out his adversary.  
They struck together with such force  
The four attackers each fell off his horse.

The four steeds caused no distress--  
They let them run off riderless--  
Over the victims their stand they made.  
Their knights hurried to bring them aid.  
The rescue became a free-for-all<sup>3</sup>  
Many felt the sword-blows fall.  
The lady stood upon a tower,  
Easily spotted her own and their followers--  
Saw them helping out her lovers;  
She didn't know which to value higher.

Now the tournament began.  
Ranks grew, the crowd thickened.  
Before the gate again and again  
Into a mêlée the jousting quickened.  
The four true lovers did so well  
They took the overall prize outright,  
Until the time when evening fell  
And they should have stopped the fight.  
Crazy men, they fought far away  
From their own knights; for this they'll pay:  
Three of them were killed dead  
And the fourth had a wound that bled  
Through the thigh--the body speared--  
On the other side the lance-head appeared.  
All were pierced through by the blows;  
All four fell there in the fields.  
Those who'd proved their mortal foes  
Now cast down on the ground their shields.  
Deeply they mourn the dead;  
They knew not what they did.  
They raise a great cry of warning.  
Never was there heard such mourning.  
The knights of the town rode to the site,  
Never fearing the others would fight.  
To mourn the knights fallen there  
Two thousand men in that place

---

<sup>3</sup> The "free-for-all" (or "mêlée" in line 114) is a stage of the battle in which all the knights fight anyone they meet on the opposing team, as opposed to orderly, "seeded" one-on-one contests. The "great cry of warning" of line 131 translates "la noise ... e le cri" which would refer to an official alarm, the vocal equivalent of a tolling bell, identifying danger, disaster, or the proximity of a crime.

Undid their helmet visor-lace,  
Tore their beards and ripped their hair.  
Mourning was their common plight.  
Upon his shield they laid each knight  
And brought them inside the city wall  
To the lady who'd loved them all.

When with the adventure she was acquainted  
Down on the hard ground she fell, fainted.  
When her fainting spell is over,  
Naming them, she mourns each lover.  
"Alas," she says, "What shall I do?  
I will never be happy again!  
I loved these four knights, it's true!  
Each for himself, I wanted these men.  
They had the greatest good in themselves,  
And they loved me more than anything else.  
Because of their beauty, prowess, power,  
Generous spirit, noble valor,  
I made all their love-thoughts turn to me;  
I wouldn't take one if I'd lose three.  
I don't know which I should feel worst for,  
But I can't hide or pretend any more.  
Three are dead; one wounded I see;  
Nothing on earth can comfort me.  
I'll have the dead men buried, first,  
And if the wounded man can be nursed  
Gladly I'll be involved, and send him  
The best doctors to attend him."  
She has him borne to her rooms. Then she  
Had them lay out the other three:  
With love, with noble sentiments,  
She adorned them, and at great expense.  
A very wealthy monastic foundation  
Got a huge endowment, a big donation,  
From her when they were buried there.  
May God show them His merciful care!  
She sent for wise men of medicine,  
Had them brought to the knight in  
Her room where he lay, wounded, until  
He turned the corner, began to heal.

She went to see him frequently,

Comforted him like a good lady.  
Still, she mourned the other three,  
And lamented them all painfully.  
One summer day, when their fast was broken,  
The lady to the knight had spoken,  
Then, overcome by her great sorrow,  
Bent her head, her face in shadow;  
She fell into fierce concentration.  
This caught the knight's attention.  
He saw that she was deep in thought.  
He addressed her, as he ought.  
"Lady, you're in a fearful state!  
What are you thinking? Tell me, now.  
Let your pain go, before it's too late!  
You must be comforted somehow."  
"My friend," she said, "I was reflecting  
On your companions, recollecting.  
No lady of such rank as mine--  
Be she so lovely, wise, good, fine--  
Ever will love four such men as they  
Were, and lose them all in one day.  
Except for you alone, wounded in the thigh  
So badly you feared you might die.  
Because I loved you so much, my sorrows  
Should be recollected for all tomorrows.  
I will make a lay about all you,  
And "The Four Mournings" I'll call you."  
Quickly the knight answered  
Her, when this he heard.  
"Lady, make the lai afresh!  
Call it Chaitivel--The Wretch!  
And I will show you the reason why  
This is the name it should go by.  
The others died a while ago,  
Their days in this world were through.  
They suffered terrible pain and woe  
From the love they had for you.  
But I, who got off with my life,  
Wretched, confused, lost in strife--  
The thing in the world I could love so  
I watch day after day come and go  
Talking to me morning, evening--yet  
I can't enjoy it, not so much

As a kiss, an embrace, a touch.  
Talking is all the good I get.  
With so many such griefs you torture me,  
I'd be better off dead, truth to tell.  
That's why the lai should be named after me,  
And be called `The Wretch'--`Chaitivel.  
Calling it `Four Mournings,' from this day,  
Is changing the right name of the lai."  
"By my faith," she said, "I like this well;  
Now we will call it `Chaitivel.'" <sup>4</sup>

Thus the lai was begun,  
Finished, and given two names, not one:  
Those who first took it abroad  
Called it "Four Mournings"--well, some did.  
Both names in fact are a good fit,  
For the subject-matter requires it.  
"Chaitivel"'s the name you usually hear.  
Here it ends, there is no more;  
I have not heard, I cannot say,  
I won't tell you any more today.

---

<sup>4</sup> The lady of *Laustic* is a failed poet: the little metaphor she composes, in which the lovers' defiant pleasure in each other is veiled by the image of the nightingale, does not fool her husband efficiently; her song is not the memorial to their love, rather the material body of the dead bird is. The lai itself results from the story's becoming known. But the lady of *Chaitivel*, in her sublime egoism, does manage to immortalize her lover; her poem springs from her own pain, but she has room to commemorate his. I feel Marie struggling with the role of the woman poet: this lady is selfish, unwilling to give up anything, proud, "fearful" and dismaying to her lover as she composes her song. Her poetry springs from her own self-importance, her narcissism; but it encompasses and is accessible to those whom she loves, and can be renamed by them to make sense of their lives. We take for granted the story of the artist who betrays and destroys a woman as he immortalizes her, the Picasso model; Marie explores, centuries ago, what a female Picasso might be like.

Note that this poem and *Chevrefoil* are the only ones of Marie's stories that describe the actual composition of a lai by participants in its events. For the rest of the poems, the primitive lay was composed by "the Bretons," "the old ones," or an anonymous "they."