

## LE FRESNE

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1996

I'll tell you the lai of the Ash Tree now,  
Le Fresne,<sup>1</sup> as a story goes I know.

In Brittany lived, yesteryear,  
Two knights--they were neighbors, near,  
Rich men, the sort who do what they want--  
Noble knights, bold, proud, valiant.  
They'd lived near each other all their life,  
And each had married himself a wife.  
Soon one lady grew big with child;  
When her nine months was fulfilled,  
In one birth she produced two boys.  
Her good lord could not count his joys--  
Then, to add to his joys' savor  
He sent word to his good neighbor  
His wife's had not one son, but two!  
So many children inside her grew--  
He'll give one boy to his friend to raise,  
And with his own name to baptize.  
At his table sits the rich man--  
Look! here comes his friend's footman;  
In front of the high table he kneels;  
His message, word for word, he tells.  
The lord thanked God for the news, of course,  
And gave the messenger a fine horse.  
The knight's wife smiled just a little  
(She sat right beside him at table)  
For she was full of envy and pride;  
She loved saying cruel things; she lied.  
This time she really lost her head:  
Right in front of everyone, she said,

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<sup>1</sup> Marie gives the title only in French (Le Fresne), not in English or Breton (compare the endings of Chevrefoil and Laustic). "Fresne" is simply a masculine noun, the name of the ash tree; I have retained the French form for the girl's name and included both English and French for the tree's name in my translation. Le Fresne's sister's name, La Codre, means "the hazel," and is (mostly) a feminine noun--the same tree that the honeysuckle twines around in *Chevrefoil*. The grammatical/sexual gender contrast in Le Fresne's name extends an ambiguity that begins when she's born--throughout her infant adventures she's mostly referred to as "l'enfant" (the baby), a masculine noun requiring masculine pronouns; I've used "it" instead of "he" but in French the baby is "he" most of the time.

"So help me God, I do wonder  
Where this gentleman found the advisor  
Who told him to ask my lord to foster  
A child born of shame and dishonor.  
For his wife bore two boys, not one,  
To his dishonor, and her own.  
It's quite true, as we all know well,  
That never was, nor will we hear tell,  
Nor could it happen on this earth  
That one woman in a single birth  
Had two separate sons, except where  
Two separate men had put them there."  
Her lord looked her over, long and hard,  
Then scolded her for what he'd heard:  
"Lady," he said, "let it drop!  
You shouldn't say such things, so stop!  
The truth is that, all her life,  
That lady's been a faithful wife."

Everyone in the house heard  
And remembered every word.  
It was talked about and repeated  
Until all Brittany had heeded.  
The lady was hated for her slur  
(Later, worse will come to her)--  
Poor wife or rich wife, every and each  
Who heard it hated her for her speech.  
The messenger went back to his lord  
And told him the story, every word.  
When he'd heard it told and explained,  
He suffered, was confused and pained.  
His good wife, his children's mother,  
He mistrusted now altogether,  
And he guarded her, almost in prison,  
Though she had given him no reason.

The lady who'd come up with this smear  
Got pregnant herself within the year,  
And pregnant, in fact, with twins.  
Now her neighbor, the good wife, wins!  
She carried them until she was due,  
And bore two daughters. It hurts too  
Much--she suffers awful torments.

To herself now she laments:  
"Alas!" she says, "What shall I do?  
I'll never regain my honor, it's true!  
My good name! No, shame thrives and lives.  
My lord and all his relatives  
Will never believe me now, for sure,  
Once they hear of this adventure,  
For I have judged myself a criminal;  
I spoke ill of all women, all--  
For didn't I say that it's never been  
Nor have we ourselves ever seen  
A woman who bore two children  
Unless she had known two men?  
Now I have two; it's plain to see,  
The worst of it's turned back on me.  
You can slander others and lie  
But not know it'll hit you in the eye;  
A person may speak ill of a person  
Who's more worth praising than the first one.  
Now, to avoid castigation  
I must kill one of these children.  
I'd rather make it up to God  
Than live in shame, under a cloud."  
The women in the room there with her  
Comforted her but they told her  
They couldn't let her act as she spoke--  
Killing people is no joke.

The lady kept a damsel; she  
Came from the best kind of family.  
She'd brought her up with great care  
And loved her and held her dear.  
She heard how the lady cried,  
Wept and mourned and piteously sighed.  
This tormented the poor maid; she  
Came to comfort her dear lady.  
"Madame," she said, "Now there's no need--  
Stop mourning so--listen, heed  
Me! Give one of these babes to me--  
I'll take it and you will be free.  
I'll see you never feel shame or pain,  
Or ever have to see her again.  
I'll dump her somewhere on church ground

(I'll carry her there safe and sound).  
Some holy man'll find her in the church;  
God willing, he'll find her a nurse."  
She spoke thus, and the lady heard  
With greatest joy; she gave her word  
If the girl carried this task forward  
She'd give her a rich reward.  
In a fine linen scarf they lapped  
The noble babe, then gently wrapped  
Her in a wheel-stitched silk brocade.  
A gift from her lord, it was made  
In Constantinople--he'd been there;  
No-one ever saw a cloth so fair.  
With a piece of bodice-string  
She tied on Baby's arm a ring,  
A big ring, pure gold, an ounce heavy,  
Set with a fine rosy ruby,  
And letters engraved all around.  
Wherever the baby might be found,  
Anyone would know, at once and truly,  
She had been born to good family.

The damsel picked up the infant  
And left the lady's room that instant.  
That night, after the sun was down,  
She slipped quietly out of town.  
She took her way along a high road  
Which led her into the wild wood.  
She keeps to the path through the forest shade  
To the other side, still holding the babe;  
Off the main road she never veers.  
Far away, to the right, she hears  
Dogs bark, cocks crow to call the dawn.  
That way, she knows, she'll find a town.  
Quick as she can she makes her way  
In the direction she heard dogs bay.  
In a town of beauty and wealth  
This young woman finds herself.  
In the town is an abbey  
Richly endowed in every way;  
I happen to know, here live some nuns  
And a prudent abbess runs  
It. The maiden spots the steeple, tall,

Sees the abbey towers and wall.  
She goes there at her quickest rate  
And stops before the abbey gate.  
She lays down the child she's borne all night  
And kneels down, humble in God's sight.  
She begins her prayer this way:  
"God, by your holy name I pray  
If it please you, please, dear Lord,  
Protect this child, be its safeguard."  
When she'd finished all her prayer  
She happened to look behind her.  
She saw an ash tree thick and wide  
With boughs and branches on every side;  
At its fork it branched in four.  
Shade is what it was planted for.  
She picked the baby up again  
And ran to the ash tree-- "fresne."  
She put the child up, left her there;  
God watch over you, was her prayer.  
Now the maiden goes back home  
To tell her lady what she's done.

In the abbey there was a porter  
Who used to open the church door--  
The gate through which the people pass  
When they come to hear the Mass.  
That night he was up betimes,  
Lit lamps and candles, rang the chimes,  
Opened the church, ready for Mass.  
He glimpsed the cloth up in the ash.  
He supposed it was some loot, seized  
By a robber, hidden in the trees.  
He had no other theory.  
Quickly he went to the tree,  
Felt around, and found the child.  
Now he thanks God's mercy mild.  
He doesn't leave the babe in the boughs,  
But takes it right home to his house.  
He has a daughter; she's a widow--  
Her lord died leaving her a little  
One in the cradle, still at her breast.  
The good man calls her from her rest:  
"Get up, get up, my dear daughter--"

Light fire and candles, bring some water!  
I've got a child, newborn, you see.  
I found it outside, in the ash tree.  
With your own milk you will nurse it.  
Warm it up now, gently wash it!"  
She does just as he commands--  
Lights fire, takes the child in her hands,  
Bathes the baby, gets it warm,  
Nurses it with her own milk.<sup>2</sup>  
She finds the ring tied on its arm;  
They see the rich, fine piece of silk.  
They understand and both agree  
This child is of the nobility.

The next day, when the good abbess  
Leaves church after hearing Mass,  
The porter comes to speak to her.  
He wants to tell the adventure  
Of the baby he found in the tree.  
The abbess commands that he  
Bring this foundling child around  
To her, just as it was found.  
The porter goes home quickly,  
Brings the baby back gladly,  
Shows my lady abbess the child.  
She looks it over for a while;  
She herself will have someone raise  
This child as her niece, so she says.  
She sternly forbids the porter  
Ever to tell just how he brought her.  
So the abbess brings the girl up now.  
Because she was found in the ash-tree bough  
(Ash is "fresne"), they called her "Le Fresne,"  
And Le Fresne is her name among men.

The lady tells folk she's her niece;  
Thus a long time hidden, in peace,  
Dwelling within the abbey close,  
Gently brought up, the damsel grows.

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<sup>2</sup> In Marie's lai *Milun*, which is also the story of a baby abandoned at birth, she makes particular note of the provision of nurses for the baby as it is transported to the mother's sister's house. Here it is coincidence that provides little Fresne with milk.

When she reaches that age and stature  
Where beauty is formed by nature,  
There's no lovelier girl in Brittany,  
No young lady more versed in courtesy.  
Her noble nature was easy to teach  
Good manners and gentleness of speech.  
All who saw her loved this damsel,  
Admired her, prized her as a marvel.

The lord of Dol was a noble prince--  
No better lived before or since.  
I'll tell you his name before I'm done:  
His subjects called their lord Gurun.  
He heard tell of this hidden maiden,  
And began to love her unbidden.  
He went jousting to a tourney,  
And returned by way of the abbey.  
He asked for the damsel fair;  
The abbess showed her to him there.  
He saw her, so beautiful, wisely ruled  
By prudence, polite, well-bred and -schooled.  
If he can't have her love, he mused,  
He will curse Fate and feel abused.  
He's lost; how to do it? If he went  
Too often to visit the convent,  
The abbess'd think what might occur,  
And he'd never get to set eyes on her.  
He comes up with one strategy:  
He resolves to endow the abbey;  
He'll give land with such generosity  
The abbey will benefit in perpetuity.  
As benefactor, his only request  
Is a room there, just a place to rest.  
To join their brother- and sisterhoods  
He's donated plenty of worldly goods;  
It seems his purpose ends and begins  
With obtaining remission of his sins.  
Often he goes there to stay,  
Talking to the girl all day.  
With prayers and promises he haunts  
Her till she gives him what he wants.

When he's sure of her affection,

He one day makes this proposition:  
"Beauty," he says, "before this is over  
Truth will out: you've made me your lover.  
Now come live with me! Come, leave!  
You know, as I think and believe,  
If your aunt discovers our affair,  
It'll be so hard for her to bear,  
And if you should get pregnant here  
She'd be so angry, having you near.  
If you will just take my advice,  
You'll come home with me--don't think twice.  
For I will never fail or hurt you--  
I will tell you what's best to do."  
She, whose love always increases,  
Gives in and does whatever pleases  
Him. She goes off with him alone;  
He takes her to his castle home.

She brings her ring and silk brocade,  
Hoping they'll someday be of aid.  
The abbess had given them to her,  
Telling her the whole adventure  
How she had been sent to the abbey,  
How she was found lying in the ash tree.  
The silk and ring were her only present  
From whoever it was who first sent  
Her; she had no other legacies;  
But she had raised her as her niece.  
The girl looked them carefully over,  
Then shut them up in a little coffer.  
Now she brings this coffer along;  
To leave or forget it would be wrong.  
The knight who took her from the abbey  
Loves and cherishes her dearly,  
And his servants and the men of his hall--  
There isn't one, big man or small,  
Who doesn't love her noble ways,  
And honor her as worth all praise.

Long had she lived with him this way  
When his vassal knights one day  
Began to treat this as a grievance.  
Often and often they spoke to advance

Their plan: he'll take some noble bride,  
And send this other from his side;  
If he had an heir, they'd be glad,  
Who'd have from him, as he had had,  
His title, lands, and property.  
What a crime--what a pity  
If, because of this concubine,  
He had no child in the legal line.  
From now on, he loses his feudal rights;  
He won't be lord of his vassal knights  
Unless he does what they want him to.  
The knight grants them their due:  
He'll take a wife, with their advice.  
Have they looked into a likely choice?  
"My lord," they said, "Near our manor  
Lives a nobleman, your equal in honor;  
His one daughter's his heir, as it stands--  
With her you could get vast lands.  
She's called La Codre, the Hazel Tree,  
No damsel for miles is so lovely.  
Leave the Ash now lying there,  
And trade her for the Hazel fair.  
The Hazel gives sweet nuts and pleasure;  
Barren Ash, fruitless, is no treasure.  
We'll try to arrange to get this bride  
To give you, if God's on our side."  
They do what they can to attract  
This marriage; soon they have a contract.

Alas! fate strikes a cruel blow  
For none of these good men even know  
These two damsels' past adventure:  
Each is the other one's twin sister!

Her sister's hidden from Le Fresne--  
Her lover marries the other one.  
When she learns another's in her place,  
She never makes an ugly face,  
But serves her lord<sup>3</sup> with sweet patience,

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<sup>3</sup>Another interesting ambiguity derives from Marie's use of the word "sire/seigneur" (here, "Her lord"). The word means "lord" but also "husband" and could certainly be translated "husband" many times--that is what it means in the opening story about Le Fresne's parents. But as Le Fresne's story develops, the

And treats his court with deference.  
The knights of the lord's household,  
Squires, servants young and old,  
They all mourn for Le Fresne,  
For now they'll never see her again.

The wedding day comes; her lord sends  
Invitation to all his friends,  
Dol's archbishop especially,  
Who owes him feudal loyalty.  
Now they present him with his bride.  
Her mother's come there, at her side.  
She fears that young girl, for her part,  
Who, they say, holds this lord's heart;  
She'd make mischief, surely, if she could,  
Between her daughter and her lord.  
They'll have to dump her, get her out,  
She'll talk to her son-in-law about  
Marrying her off to some gentleman--  
He'll be free of her then. That's her plan.

The wedding feast was richly laid;  
Music, games of all sorts were played.  
The damsel had gone to the bedroom.  
For all she'd seen, no sign of gloom  
Hinted feelings deeply troubled,  
Or, by a little anger, ruffled.  
In the bride's entourage, sweetly,  
She'd served everyone politely.  
They marveled at her lack of venom,  
All who saw her, men and women.  
Her mother too had looked her over;  
Her heart began to prize and love her.  
She thought, and said, if she had known  
What she was like, this other one,  
She'd never have lost out to her daughter--

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double meaning gains force: Gurun is her "seigneur," her lord and master, yet he is not her legal husband. After leaving the abbey, she is no longer a "damoiselle" or young lady, but a "meschine" or servant-girl (translated just "girl"); she is certainly not his bride or wife, the role reserved for her sister. Her intensification of the master-servant relationship finally brings it about that her "seigneur" really becomes her "seigneur," and a wifely (!) attitude triumphs over the technicalities of marriage contracts. I might add that, as in the other *lais*, the lovers are called "ami-amie," friend or lover, as well as "her lord" and "that girl." But Le Fresne's mother also addresses her as "belle amie" ("Beauty, dear"), a loverlike phrase.

She'd not have taken her lord and master.  
So, that night, to help prepare  
The wedding bed for the bridal pair,<sup>4</sup>  
The damsel went to the bridal chamber;  
She doffed her cloak (to disencumber  
Herself for work), called servants there,  
Showed them exactly how and where  
Her lord liked things done and set;  
For she had often noticed it.  
When they'd prepared the wedding bed  
On top they tossed an old bedspread.  
The cloth was just some thin, worn stuff;  
The girl saw it--she'd seen enough  
To know it's no good, not suitable;  
It weighed down her heart with trouble.  
She opened her coffer, took her brocade,  
On her lord's bed this silk she laid.  
She did this to honor the pair,  
Since the archbishop would be there  
To sign them with the cross and bless  
Them--it's his job, he can't do less.

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<sup>4</sup>The story is related to the "patient Griselda" legend (retold by Petrarch and then immortalized by Chaucer in his *Clerk's Tale*), in which a husband gets carried away playing God to his Job-like wife. Marie's Guron, though, seems morally weak rather than tyrannical and cruel like Griselda's husband Walter. I can't resist citing Graham Greene's portrait of a jealous lover, which seems to owe something to Marie's story or an analogue of it (the first speaker is the woman):

It angered me that she didn't make any claim.

"Of course. You may be right. I'm only saying I want you to be happy. I hate your being unhappy. I don't mind anything you do that makes you happy."

"You just want an excuse. If I sleep with somebody else, you feel you can do the same--any time."

"That's neither here nor there. I want you to be happy, that's all."

"You'd make my bed for me?"

"Perhaps."

--*The End of the Affair*, 2.2

Despite the unfeminist (and, I think, unironic) message that humility triumphs and a good wife is a good slave, the lai depicts a world in which power--to legitimize children and to save or slay them, to slander, to confer social dignity and to educate, to solve the mystery and make all things right--is in the hands of women. Le Fresne's mother, who seems unpromising moral material at the outset, turns out to be a good mother after all; instead of being punished at her abused daughter's wedding like the stepmothers in many fairy tales, she is allowed to grow out of her youthful rage and spite, to reform and be forgiven.

When everyone had left the chamber,  
The lady brought in her daughter.  
She wants to put her to bed; best  
Begin, she says, by getting undressed.  
She sees the silk brocade spread there;  
She's never seen a cloth so fair  
Except the one in which she wrapped her  
Baby daughter when she hid her.  
Now she remembers that lost child;  
Her heart trembles, she grows wild.  
She calls in the head chamberlain.  
"Tell me, as you're a Christian, when  
And where did you find this fine brocade?"  
"Madame," he answered, "that's easily said;  
The damsel brought it, for the bed;  
She dumped it on top of the old spread,  
An ugly one--she saw that in a wink.  
The brocade belongs to her, I think."  
Next the lady called her in;  
She came and stood before her, then  
Respectfully she doffed her cloak.  
Finally the mother spoke.  
"Beauty, dear, don't hide the truth!  
Where did you find this fine silk cloth?  
Where'd it come from? How'd you get it? Who,  
If it was a gift, gave it to you?"  
The girl answers, "Madame, please,  
My aunt, the abbess--I'm her niece--  
Who raised me, she gave this to me  
And told me to keep it carefully.  
I was given this and a golden ring  
By those who sent me, a foundling."  
"Beauty, may I see the ring?"  
"Yes, ma'am, that's an easy thing."  
She brought the ring to the mother,  
Who very carefully looked it over.  
Identification was easily made;  
She knew the ring and the silk brocade.  
She doubted no more, she knew, believed,  
That this girl was her daughter indeed.  
She can't hide it; so all can hear,  
"You are my daughter, beauty dear!"  
She cries. From pain and pity she fell

Back in a faint, and lay there a spell.  
When she's revived from her swoon,  
She calls her lord to the bedroom.  
He comes, worried, full of fears.  
The moment her husband appears,  
She falls at his feet, clasps his knees,  
Lets her kisses mix with her pleas,  
Begging pardon for her sin.  
He can't make out the case she's in.  
"Lady," he said, "What do you mean?  
There's only ever been good will between  
Us. Whatever you did, I forgive it!  
Say what you want; I will give it!"  
"Lord, since you grant me pardon,  
I'll tell you all, so now listen!  
Once, long ago, my evil nature  
Let me speak nonsense of my neighbor:  
I vilified her for having twins--  
I blackened myself, for my sins.  
I gave birth; truth is, when I did,  
I bore two daughters--one I hid,  
Had her dumped in a church by my maid.  
I sent with her our silk brocade  
And the gold ring you gave to me  
When first you spoke of love to me.  
I can no longer hide anything:  
I've found the brocade and the ring!  
I recognize this girl, our daughter.  
Through my folly we almost lost her!  
And this is the same demoiselle  
(Beautiful, wise and good as well)  
Who was so loved by that knight  
Who has married her sister tonight!"  
The lord replied, "I am glad of this!  
Never before have I known such bliss!  
Now we've found our girl who was lost,  
God has given us joy rejoiced,  
Before we could double the treachery.  
Daughter," he said, "Come here to me!"  
The girl rejoiced at heart, for sure,  
When she heard this adventure.  
Her father won't wait; from the room  
He goes himself to fetch the groom

(His son-in-law) and archbishop,  
And tell the tale from start to finish. Up  
The knight's heart rejoicing flew,  
At this adventure, when he knew.  
The archbishop said it'd be all right  
To leave things as they were that night.  
Tomorrow he'll divorce or divide  
The knight from his espoused bride.  
They all agreed on this good plan.  
Thus separated was wife from man  
And he married his dear, next day,  
And her father gave the bride away,  
For his heart was warm toward her;  
He made her his half-inheritor.  
He and his wife and their daughter  
Stayed till the wedding-feast was over.  
Then they returned to their own country,  
Taking La Coudre, the Hazel Tree;  
They found her a fine rich groom  
And married her off nearer home.

When this story got around,  
Just as it happened, people found  
A lai of it, Le Fresne, the Ash Tree;  
The named the lai after the lady.