

MARIE DE FRANCE

GUINGAMOR, LANVAL,
TYOLET, BISCLAVERET

Marie Marie de France

**Guingamor, Lanval,
Tyolet, Bisclaveret**

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Marie de France

Guingamor, Lanval, Tyolet, Bisclaveret / Four lais rendered into English prose

Preface

The previous volumes which have been published in this series have contained versions belonging to what we may call the *conscious* period of romantic literature; the writers had not only a story to tell, but had also a very distinct feeling for the literary form of that story and the characterisation of the actors in it. In this present volume we go behind the work of these masters of their craft to that great mass of floating popular tradition from which the Arthurian epic gradually shaped itself, and of which fragments remain to throw here and there an unexpected light on certain features of the story, and to tantalise us with hints of all that has been lost past recovery.

All who have any real knowledge of the Arthurian cycle are well aware that the Breton *lais*, representing as they do the popular tradition and folk-lore of the people among whom they were current, are of value as affording indications of the original form and meaning of much of the completed legend, but of how much or how little value has not yet been exactly determined. An earlier generation of scholars regarded them as of great, perhaps too great, importance. They were inclined indiscriminately to regard the Arthurian romances as being but a series of connected *lais*. A later school practically ignores them, and sees in the Arthurian romances the conscious production of literary invention, dealing with materials gathered from all sources, and remodelled by the genius of a Northern French poet.

I believe, myself, that the eventual result of criticism will be to establish a position midway between these two points, and to show that though certain of the early Celticists exaggerated somewhat, they were, in the main, correct – their theory did not account for all the varied problems of the Arthurian story, but it was not for that to be lightly dismissed. The true note of the Arthurian legend is evolution *not* invention; the roots of that goodly growth spring alike from history, myth, and faëry; whether the two latter were not, so far as the distinctively *Celtic* elements of the legend are concerned, originally *one*, is a question which need not here be debated.¹

This much is quite certain; while the mythic element in the Arthurian story is yet a matter for discussion, while we are as yet undecided whether Arthur was, or was not, identical with the *Mercurius Artusius* of the Gauls; whether he was, or was not, a *Culture Hero*; whether Gawain does, or does not, represent the same hero as Cuchullin, and both alike find origin in a solar myth; we at least know that both Arthur and Gawain are closely connected with, and as their final destination found rest in, Fairyland. It is, therefore, no matter for surprise if we find such definitely fairy stories as the *lais* of *Guingamor* and *Lanval* (which, be it noted, represent a whole family of kindred tales) connected with the Arthurian cycle, and their heroes figuring as knights of Arthur's court.²

At that court the fairy, whether she be Morgain, the Lady of the Lake, or the Mistress of Graalent, Lanval, or Gawain, is at home, to be distinguished by nothing, save her superior beauty and wisdom, from the mortals who surround her. (It is scarcely necessary to remark that the fairies of the mediæval French romance writers are not the pigmies of the Teutonic sagas and of Shakespeare.) The rôle of these maidens is, generally speaking, a clearly defined one: they are immortals in search

¹ In this connection, *cf.* Mr. Nutt's "Fairy Mythology of Shakespeare" – Popular Studies, No. 6.

² *Cf.* Dr. Schofield's studies of the *lais* of *Guingamor*, *Graalent*, and *Lanval*, referred to in the Notes.

of a mortal love,³ and in this character the parallels carry us far back to the earliest stages of Celtic tradition as preserved in ancient Irish romance.

A special feature of these Breton *lais*, to be noted in this connection, is that they often combine two features which are more generally found apart, and which, as represented by their most famous mediæval forms, are wont to be considered by us as belonging to two different families of tradition, *i. e.*, the *Tannhäuser* legend (the carrying off of a knight by the queen of the other world), and the *Lohengrin* legend (the rupture of a union between a mortal and an immortal, and the penalties incurred by the former by the transgression of a prohibition imposed by the latter). Two of the stories given in this volume, *Guingamor* and *Lanval*, in common with others which will be found noted in Dr. Schofield's studies, combine both *motifs*.

Now that such tales as these, in themselves independent popular folk-tales, sometimes became incorporated with, at other times by the loan of incident and feature strongly influenced, the Arthurian story, cannot I think be denied. Fairies such as the mistresses of *Guingamor* and *Lanval* were, as I have said above, residents or visitors at Arthur's court. Arthur himself is, like those knights, carried to Avalon; even as *Guingamor* in the extremity of mortal weakness. That like Guingamor he was thought of as recovering, and reigning with undiminished vigour over his fairy kingdom, is clear from numerous references in mediæval romance. The authors of *La Bataille de Loquifer* and *Ogier le Danois* knew him as King of Avalon; in *Huon de Bordeaux* he has been promised the reversion of Oberon's kingdom; in *Lohengrin* he reigns with Parzival, in a mysterious other-world realm; he is as completely lord of Fairyland as any knight beloved of fairy queen. The boyhood of *Tyolet* is the boyhood of Perceval; the mysterious stag guarded by lions wanders in and out of the mazes of Arthurian romance.

Some might, of course, suggest that these stories are really fragmentary borrowings from the Arthurian legend; but such a view is scarcely compatible with the fact that in their earlier forms they are entirely unconnected with that story. Thus we see that the *lai* of *Guingamor* in the solitary version we possess knows nothing of Arthur; neither the king or the queen, the fairy or her kingdom is named; Chrétien de Troyes knew the lady as Morgain, and her land as Avalon, and brings Guingamor to Arthur's court. The same remark applies to *Graelent*, while *Lanval* is in an Arthurian setting. If the stories had originally formed part of the cycle it is difficult to see why they should have been separated from it; while we can well understand that already existing folk-tales would be swept into the vortex of an increasingly popular tradition.

The story of *Tyolet* as preserved in the *lai* is certainly not in its earliest form; it is in some points incomprehensible, and as I have suggested in the Notes, the real meaning of the tale has been already forgotten. But *Tyolet* is never elsewhere mentioned as one of Arthur's knights, and the adventure achieved by him when transferred to Lancelot loses even the measure of coherence and plausibility it had preserved. Thus Lancelot, though knowing what is to be the guerdon of the successful knight, and voluntarily undertaking the adventure, when achieved, leaves the lady under the pretext of summoning his kinsmen and never returns; on no account would he be faithless to Guinevere.

In the *Were-Wolf*, again, the characters are anonymous; but Malory's reference leaves no room for doubt that the hero later on figured as one of Arthur's knights.

It is, I think, impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Arthurian legend, in the process of evolution, borrowed with both hands from already existing stores of popular folk-lore and tradition; and an examination of the parallels with this folk-lore element makes it equally clear that it was largely of Celtic origin.

But in what form was this popular tradition when the literary masterpieces of the Arthurian cycle, the poems of Chrétien de Troyes and his German rivals, were composed? We know that many of these tales were told as Breton *lais*, and in this original form they have practically disappeared.

³ To this rule *Nimue*, = the Lady of the Lake, appears to be the only exception.

Those we possess are French translations, and of these the best and largest collection we owe to the skill and industry of Marie de France, an Anglo-Norman poetess who lived in the reign of Henry II. and was therefore a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes. Of the four *lais* here given, two, *Lanval* and *Were-Wolf* (*Bisclaveret*), are undoubtedly by her, and *Guingamor* is very generally considered to be also her work. The metre in which she wrote was the eight-syllable verse, in rhymed pairs, adopted also by Chrétien in common with most of the poets of his time. As we see, Marie, like Chrétien, connected some of these *lais* with Arthur. They are Breton *lais*; Arthur is a Breton king; his legend certainly came to the Northern French poets partly, if not entirely, from Breton sources; the probability, therefore, is that the connection took place, in the first instance, on Breton rather than on French ground —*i. e.*, it is due neither to Marie nor to Chrétien, but to the sources they used.

Setting hypothesis aside, however, this may be stated as an absolute matter of fact: at the time that the longer Arthurian romances took shape there were also current a number of short poems, both in Breton and in French, the latter in the precise metre adopted for the longer poems, connecting the Arthurian story with a great mass of floating popular folk-tale, which short poems were known to the writers of the longer and more elaborate romances. Are we seriously called upon to believe that they made absolutely *no* use of them? That they left all this wealth of material rigidly on one side, and combined for themselves out of their inventive faculties and classical knowledge the romances that won such deserved repute? Such a solution of the Arthurian problem I can scarcely think likely in the long run to be accepted by serious students; certainly not by those whom the study of comparative religion and folk-lore has taught how widely diffused in extension, and how persistent in character, are the tales which belong to the childhood of the race. That a large and important body of genuine existing tradition should be, not merely superseded, but practically beaten out of the field and destroyed by the power of mere literary invention, would be a curious phenomenon at any date; in the twelfth century it is absolutely inconceivable. The Arthurian legend has its roots in folk-tradition, and the abiding charm of its literary presentment is in reality due to the persistent vitality and pervasive quality of that folk-lore element. Children of a land of eternal youth, Arthur and his knights are ever young; it is true that some of the romances tell us that in the last great war with Lancelot Arthur was over ninety years old and Gawain above seventy, but one feels that even for the writer such figures had no significance; their words and actions are the words and actions of youth — we have here no Charlemagne and his veterans *à la barbe fleurie*.

But this is an element which in our rightful appreciation of the literary masterpieces of the cycle we are apt to ignore, nor is it other than scantily represented in English literature; it has therefore been thought well, in such a series as this to include a volume which shall direct attention less to the completed Arthurian epic than to the materials from which that epic was formed, since if we mistake not, it is to the nature of that material even more than to the skill of its fashioners, that the unexampled popularity of the Arthurian legend is due.

Bournemouth, *May* 1900.

Guingamor

*"Graislemiers de Fine Posterne
I amena conpeignons vint,
Et Guigomars ses frere i vint;
De l'Isle d'Avalon fu sire.
De cestui avons oi dire
Qu'il fu amis Morgain la fee,
Et ce fu veritez, provee."*

Chretien de Troyes. —Erec. vv. 1952-58.

I will tell ye here a fair adventure, nor think ye that 'tis but mine own invention, for 'tis truth, this tale I tell ye, and men call the lay wherein 'tis writ the lay of Guingamor.

In Brittany of old time there reigned a king who held all the land in his sway, and was lord of many noble barons – his name I cannot tell ye. This king had a nephew who was both wise and courteous, a very brave and skilful knight, and Guingamor was he called. For his bravery and his beauty the king held him passing dear, and thought to make him his heir since he had no son. All men loved Guingamor; he knew how to promise, and how to give; knights and squires alike honoured him for his frankness and his courtesy; and his praises went abroad throughout all that land.

One day the king went forth to hunt and to disport himself in the forest. His nephew had that morn been bled and was still feeble, so might not go forth into the woodland, but would abide in his hostel, and with him were many of the king's companions.

At prime Guingamor arose and went forth to the castle to seek solace. The seneschal met him and threw his arm around his neck, and they spake together awhile, and then sat them down to play at chess. And as they sat there the queen came even to the door of the chamber, on her way to the chapel. She was tall and fair and graceful; and there she stood awhile to gaze on the knight whom she saw playing chess, and stayed her still and moved not.

Very fair did he seem to her in form and face and feature; he sat over against a window, and a ray of sunlight fell upon his face and illumined it with a fair colour. And the queen looked upon him till her thoughts were changed within her, and she was seized with love for him, for his beauty and his courtesy.

Then the queen turned her back, and called a maiden, and said: "Go thou to the knight who sitteth within playing chess, Guingamor, the king's nephew, and bid him come to me straightway."

So the maiden went her way to the knight, and bare him her lady's greeting, and her prayer that he come forthwith and speak with her; and Guingamor let his game be, and went with the maiden.

The queen greeted him courteously, and bade him sit beside her; but little did he think wherefore she made such fair semblance to him.

The queen spake first: "Guingamor, thou art very valiant, brave and courteous and winning – a fair adventure awaits thee – thou canst set thy love in high places! Thou hast a fair and courteous friend, I know neither dame nor damsel in the kingdom her equal! She loveth thee dearly, and thou canst have her for thy love."

The knight answered: "Lady, I know not how I can dearly love one whom I have never seen nor known; never have I heard speak of this aforetime, nor have I besought love from any."

And the queen spake: "Friend, be not so shamefaced; *me* canst thou very well love, for of a sooth I am not to be refused; I love thee well and will love thee all my days."

Then Guingamor was much abashed, and answered discreetly: "Well do I know, lady, that I ought to love thee; thou art wife to my lord the king, and I am bound to honour thee as my liege lady."

But the queen answered: "I say not that thou shalt love me thus, but I would love thee as my lover, and be thy lady. Thou art fair, and I am gracious; if it be thy will to love me very joyful shall we both be," and she drew him towards her and kissed him.

Guingamor understood well what she said, and what love she desired of him, and thereof had he great shame, and blushed rosy-red, and sprang up thinking to go forth from the chamber. The queen would fain keep him with her, and laid hold on his mantle, so that the clasp broke and he came forth without it.

Then Guingamor went back to the chessboard, and seated himself, much troubled at heart; so startled had he been that he had no thought for his mantle, but turned to his game without it.

The queen was much terrified when she thought of the king, for when Guingamor had so spoken, and showed her his mind she feared lest he should accuse her to his uncle. Then she called a maiden whom she trusted much, and gave her the mantle, and bade her bear it to the knight; and she laid it around his shoulders, but so troubled in mind was he that he knew not when she brought it to him; and the maiden returned to the queen.

So were the two in great fear till vesper-tide, when the king returned from the chase and sat him down to meat. They had had good sport that day, and he and his comrades were very joyful. After meat they laughed and made sport, and told their adventures, each spake of his deeds, who had missed, who had hit fair. Guingamor had not been with them, whereof he was sorrowful. So he held his peace, and spake no word.

But the queen watched him, and thinking to make him wrathful, she devised words of which each one should weigh heavily. She turned herself to the knights and spake: "Much do I hear ye boast, and tell of your adventures, yet of all whom I see here is none brave enough (were one to give him a thousand pounds of gold) to dare hunt or wind horn in the forest here without, where the white boar wanders. Marvellous praise would he win who should take that boar!"

Then all the knights held their peace, for none would assay that venture. Guingamor knew well that it was for him she spake thus. Throughout the hall all were silent, there was nor sound nor strife.

The king answered her first: "Lady, thou hast often heard of the adventure of the forest, and this thou knowest; it displeaseth me much when in any place I hear it spoken of. No man may go thither to hunt the boar who may return therefrom, so adventurous is the land, and so perilous the river. Much mischief have I already suffered; ten knights, the best of the land, have I lost; they set forth to seek the boar and came never again."

Then he said no more, but the company departed from each other, the knights went to their hostel to slumber and the king betook himself to his couch.

Guingamor did not forget the word which he had heard, but went his way to the king's chamber and knelt before him. "Sire," he said, "I ask of thee somewhat whereof I have great need, and which I pray thee to grant me, nor in any wise to refuse the gift."

The king said: "Fair nephew, I grant thee what thou prayest from me, ask securely, for in naught would I deny thy will."

The knight thanked him, and said: "This is that which I demanded, and the gift which thou hast given me. I go to hunt in the forest." Then he prayed him to lend him his horse, his bloodhound, his brachet, and his pack of hounds.

When the king heard what his nephew said, and knew the gift he had given, he was very sorrowful and knew not what to do. Fain would he have taken back his word and bade him let the matter be, for such a gift should he not have asked; never would he suffer him, even for his weight in gold, to go chase the white boar, for never might he return. And if he lent him his good brachet and his steed then would he lose them both and never see them again, and naught had he that he valued so highly; there was nothing on earth he would have taken for them – "an I lose them I shall grieve all the days of my life."

And Guingamor answered the king: "Sire, by the faith I owe thee, for naught that thou could'st give me, were it the wide world, would I do other than I have said and chase the boar to-morrow. If thou wilt not lend me thy steed, and the brachet thou dost hold dear, thy hound and thine other dogs, then must I e'en take my own, such as they are."

With that came the queen who had heard what Guingamor desired (and know ye that it pleased her well), and she prayed the king that he would do as the knight required, for she thought thus to be delivered from him, and never, in all her life, to see him again. So earnestly did she make her prayer that at length the king granted all she might ask. Then Guingamor prayed leave, and went joyful to his dwelling; naught might he sleep that night, but when he saw dawn he arose in haste and made ready, and called to him all his companions, the king's household, who were in much fear for him, and would gladly have hindered his going as they might. He bade them bring him the king's steed which he had lent him the night before, and his brachet, and his good horn, which he would not have given for its weight in gold. Two packs of the king's good dogs did Guingamor take with him, and forgot not the bloodhound. The king himself would accompany him forth from the town, and with him came the burghers and the courtiers, rich and poor, making great cry and lamentation, and with them too were many ladies sorrowing sorely.

To the thicket nearest the city went all the huntsmen, taking with them the bloodhound, and seeking for the track of the wild boar, for they knew well where he was wont to haunt. They found the track and knew it, for many a time had they seen it, and traced the beast to his lair in the thick bushes and loosed the bloodhound, and by force drove forth the boar.

Then Guingamor sounded his horn and bade them uncouple one pack of dogs and the other lead forward to await him near the forest, but they should not enter therein. Thus Guingamor began the chase and the boar fled before him, leaving his lair unwillingly. The dogs followed, giving tongue, and hunted him to the verge of the forest, but further might they not go, since they were weary, wherefore they uncoupled the others. Guingamor rode on winding his horn, and the pack ran yelping on the boar's track; return to his lair he might not, but plunged into the forest, and the knight followed after, carrying the brachet which he had borrowed from the king.

They who had borne him company, the king and his fellowship and the men of the city, stayed without the wood, nor would go further. There they abode so long as they might hear the blast of the horn and the barking of the dogs, and then they commended the knight to God and turned them back to the town.

The boar ran further and further till he had wearied out the dogs, then Guingamor took the brachet and loosened the leash, and set it on the track, which it followed of right good will, while the knight did what he might to aid and encourage his uncle's dog by blowing gaily on his horn. Much did the sounds of the chase please him, but ere long he had lost both brachet and boar, he heard neither yelp nor cry and became sorrowful and much displeased; he deemed he had lost the brachet through the thickness of the forest, and he was passing sorrowful for the sake of his uncle who loved the dog so well. So he went still forward into the forest, and coming to a high hill he stayed awhile, very sorrowful and much at a loss.

The sky was clear and the day fair, all around him sang the birds but he hearkened not to their song. Ere long he heard the brachet give tongue afar off and he began to wind his horn, troubled at heart till he saw the dog. Through a little plantation towards the open ground he saw the brachet and the boar come swiftly, and thought to reach them easily. He spurred his steed to a gallop, nor would delay, rejoicing much at heart and saying to himself that might he take the boar, and return whole and unharmed to court, he would win much fame, and his deed would be spoken of for all time.

In the joy of his heart he set the horn to his lips and blew a marvellous great blast. Afore him passed the boar with the brachet close upon its track. Guingamor rode after swiftly, through the adventurous land, across the perilous river, over the meadowland where the turf was green and flowery; well nigh had he overtaken his prey when he looked ahead and saw the walls of a great

palace, well built, yet without mortar. 'Twas all enclosed of green marble, and above the entry was a tower which seemed to him of silver, so great was the clearness it gave. The doors were of fine ivory, inlaid with golden trefoils, nor was there bar nor lock.

Guingamor came on swiftly, and when he saw the door stand wide and the entrance free, he thought him he would go within and find the goodman who kept the gate, for fain would he know who was lord of the palace, since 'twas the fairest he had ever seen. Much it pleased him to look upon its beauties, for he thought he might lightly overtake the boar ere it had run far, since it was wearied by the chase. So he rode within and drew bridle in the palace, and looked all around, but no man might he see, naught was there about him but fine gold; and the chambers which opened from the hall seemed of stones of Paradise. That he found neither man nor woman there pleased him not, else was he glad that he had found so fair an adventure to tell again in his own land.

Then he turned him back, and rode quickly through the meadows by the river, but naught did he see of his boar, quarry and dog were alike lost. Then was Guingamor wrathful. "Of a truth," he said, "I am betrayed, men may well hold me for a fool. Methinks that to look upon a house have I lost all my labour. If I find not my dog and my boar little joy or pleasure shall I have henceforward, and never more may I return to my own land." Much troubled, he betook himself to the high ground of the forest, and began to listen if he might hear the cry of the dog.

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