

# Emaré

*anon*

*a late fourteenth century Middle English Breton lai*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose  
by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This tale has been translated and retold from: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Eds), 1995. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii

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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



# Emaré

anon

*late-fourteenth century*

**H**er name was called Emaré, as I here synge in songe. Her fadyr was an emperour, of castell and of ryche towre; sir Artyus was hys nome. He hadde bothe hallys and bowrys, frythes fayr, forestes wyth flowrys; so gret a lord was none – There was once an emperor who owned many a castle and many a forest and woodland full of wild flowers and he was the father of Emaré, as I hear it sung. There was no finer lord to be found anywhere; his name was Sir Artius and he was married to a courteous and very beautiful lady who was as white as whalebone.

Sir Artius was considered by all to be the finest man living in the whole world at that time; he was valiant, courteous and knew how to conduct himself. He had only one child, however, a very pretty young daughter whom they had named Emaré.

When Emaré was born she was the fairest creature alive. But unfortunately her mother, the empress, died before Emaré had learned to walk or to speak and the child, therefore, was fostered out and given into the care of a nurse. This nurse taught the girl courtesy and etiquette, and she taught her how to sew with gold and silk – a skill possessed by all the other young maidens of the nobility. She taught her how to conduct herself properly amongst courtiers and, indeed, amongst the highest in society.

Emaré was courteous to all, young and old, and as white as a lily. She had no need to toil in the fields! She was very skilful with her hands and everybody loved her. But let us leave this young maiden for a moment and speak of the emperor.

The Emperor of Germany, Sir Artius, was thought to be a good man, high born and courteous, though when his wife died, he did not remarry but reverted somewhat to his old bachelor life.

After a passage of time, the King of Sicily journeyed to see the emperor, bringing with him an expensive present; a cloth made with the highest skill. The emperor welcomed him graciously. The King of Sicily knelt before the emperor and presented the cloth to

*The Middle English tale of Emaré is also found in an early-fifteenth century manuscript known as Cotton Caligula A.ii lying in the British Library. The language itself suggests that it was composed perhaps in East Anglia in the late-fourteenth century. The story is found all across Europe in the late Middle Ages and a Latin version can be traced as far back as the twelfth century. Chaucer tells essentially the same story in his Canterbury tale from the Man of Law.*

*The same central incident is found in the story of Sir Eglamour of Artois and, perhaps revealingly, in Marie de France's Breton lai Guigemar. A lady floats across the sea in a boat, rudderless, without sail or crew, without food or water, to begin a new life on a distant shore. She has departed from a situation in which her life was in extreme danger.*

*A clue may lie in the lighted candelabra at the front of the boat that the lady in Guigemar follows her lover in, in Marie de France's Breton lai. Like the shrine at the front of boats in which a solitary traveller stands, on Minoan funerary rings.*

him. It was wrought with diamonds and other precious stones – topaz and rubies, agates and other crystals with a magical quality. I tell you no word of a lie, this cloth was thickly encrusted with gems.

The cloth was shown to the emperor, and in all honesty, he could not see the silken weave for all the diamonds and rubies and agates! ‘How can this be!’ he exclaimed. ‘This cloth must have come from an Otherworld, unless it is an illusion.’

‘Nothing like it exists in all Christendom,’ agreed the King of Sicily. ‘It was made by the daughter of a heathen Emir and was seven years in the making.



‘In one corner is embroidered the story of two lovers – can you see how it is symbolized by a love-knot in the shape of a flower? Can you see the sapphire and the onyx set in gold, and the diamonds and rubies highlighting the figure of a minstrel playing a lute?

‘In this other corner is presented the story of Tristan and Isolde, that Celtic tale of illicit love – see how the scene is highlighted with topaz and ruby. And these other corners are just the same. A different pair of lovers in each, portrayed with care and skill in the most costly of materials. See the coral and the

garnets! Here is the son of the Sultan of Babylon with the emir’s daughter, for it was for his sake that she made this cloth, she loved him so much. This cloth is a testament to this young lady’s love for the sultan’s son, for in front of her own embroidered image she has depicted birds, flowers and a unicorn with a long horn – there is symbolism everywhere!

‘When the sultan’s daughter had finished making this cloth,’ the King of Sicily explained, ‘she took it to her father. And my own father won it off this heathen bastard in the Crusades, by strength of arms. And out of love, he gave it to me, and for this same reason I offer it to you, as a token of my love and esteem.’

When the King of Sicily had formally presented the cloth, the emperor received it graciously and with great honour, and thanked him.

The King of Sicily remained with the emperor for a little while, then took his leave and travelled home. But I must at this point reveal that the emperor had lustful desires for his own daughter and as soon as the King of Sicily had departed, he sent for this maiden. Messengers set off in all their finery, along roads and paths, and when they arrived, both she and her nurse were put into sedan chairs and carried back to the palace. The emperor rode out a mile or so to meet them.

The maiden got out of her chair and was escorted into her father’s presence by two knights. The emperor, wearing a crown of gold, got down from his horse, and when they

were both on their feet, he approached and embraced his daughter and kissed her. Then they made their way on foot to the palace, as the romance tells us.

Then all the great lords and noblemen washed and sat down to eat. Everybody was quickly served. The maiden sat in front of her father; she was the fairest woman in all the land. And all he could think about was how to lure her into his bed! He looked at her constantly and was so enamoured with her that he conceived, there and then, a desire to marry her.

When the meal was over, the emperor retired to his private quarters and called his counsellors. And he instructed them to travel immediately to Rome and to seek a special dispensation from the Pope to allow him to marry his daughter. So messengers were sent – they dared not go against his wishes – and many earls amongst them. They went to the pontiff and found no difficulty in obtaining, for a fee, the necessary documentation that would allow the emperor to marry his own daughter.

The emperor was delighted when they returned and had the cloth-of-gold given to him by the King of Sicily made into a wedding gown for his daughter; and when Emaré was given it to wear, she looked like something out of a fairy tale. A creature of the Other-world. The emperor declared excitedly:

‘Daughter, I shall marry you! You are so beautiful!’

‘No, Sir! May God of heaven forbid it!’

‘If we are married and go to bed together,’ she exclaimed, ‘we are both damned! Word would spread like wildfire. You are well-respected. Sir, think what infamy you will draw upon yourself. That my father should marry me! – may Jesus forbid such a thing!’

The emperor was very angry at this outburst, so angry that he swore that he would kill her – vowed that he would kill his own daughter! He decreed that a richly-fashioned boat should be made and that Emaré should be put into it, in the wedding gown that he had had made for her from the magical cloth. She was to be given no money, no food and no water, but simply cast into the sea.

So Emaré was set adrift upon the ocean, without oar and without anchor. A wind came up and blew the ship away from the land until it was out of sight. The boat vanished, and the emperor immediately began to regret what he had done; he stood motionless in anguish, then fell to the ground in a faint. The lords and noblemen around him ran to his aid and comforted him as best they might. And when he had recovered he sobbed:



'Alas! My dear daughter! Why have I done this? Oh Why!' and the tears ran down his face. The whole occasion took on the atmosphere of a funeral. Neither old nor young could stop crying for that beautiful maiden. Nobody thought to send a boat out after her. Perhaps they could not. But we must leave the emperor and speak of the damsel on the sea.



The lady floated all by herself, and cried complaints to God and to his mother. The wind and the rain drove her onwards; storms gathered above the blue water and as I have heard the minstrels sing, she had no idea how far she was from land, nor if any land at all lay in the direction she was going. She was very frightened. Emaré hid her head in the boat, afraid even to look at the water.

She drifted like this for seven nights and more, tossed by the waves in sorrow and despair, wearing only her enchanted gown; she lay still at the bottom of the boat and endured

an ancient voyage. Hunger and thirst drove her almost to madness.

She found herself drifting towards land; it was a land called Wales, as I understand, a fair country. The king's steward there was called Sir Cadore, and he lived in a magnificent castle and was in the habit of taking exercise on horseback along the seashore. And on this particular day he had gone to take the air with two knights. The weather was lovely. They found a boat at the water's edge, and inside was a sparkling thing. It looked almost supernatural! Sir Cadore trotted his horse across the sand to the boat and saw the lady inside. She had been so long without food that Sir Cadore thought she was near to death. They asked her her name, and she changed it and said that her name was Egaré.

Sir Cadore took pity upon Egaré and led her up to his castle. She looked so tired and thin that he took her into a chamber and fed her the finest meal – gave her the best food and wine that was available to him. And when this lady had recovered somewhat, when she had regained her colour, she taught the ladies of the castle how to sew and to embroider in silk. They were delighted that she had arrived and she was courteous to everybody, both young and old. She had all the qualities that made her a pleasure to have around, and was loved by everybody.

Sir Cadore called a feast and invited the king. There were many minstrels, with lutes and tabors, trumpets, harps and fiddles. And the lady served in the hall before the king himself. The material of her dress shone so brightly that it seemed not to be of this world at all.

The king looked at her and thought that he had never seen a more beautiful young woman. She completely stole his heart! He was so fascinated by her that he hardly ate

a thing. She was so beautiful that the king fell head over heels in love with her, as the tale tells. When the feasting was over, the king went to a private chamber and called his barons to him.

First he called Sir Cadore to come quickly, then other knights. Then dukes and earls well versed in the law were asked to make haste to the king's chamber. The king addressed Sir Cadore:

'Who is that lovely maiden who served me in your hall?' he asked. 'Tell me, my friend!'

'She is the daughter of an earl in a far land,' replied Sir Cadore. 'I sent for her to teach my children courtesy and to be their governess. I vow she is the most intelligent woman in all Christendom, and her needlework is amazing!'

'I shall marry that fair maiden!' declared the king. 'She shall be my queen!'

The king sent for his mother to hear what she thought about his intention. The maiden Egaré, the daughter of an earl in a far off land, was quickly sent for and she arrived, as bright as a summer's day. The material of her dress shone so vividly that the old queen exclaimed: 'I have never seen such a woman in all my life!'

But then her mood changed. 'Son, this is a devil in enchanted clothes. If you love me, forget about marrying her. May Christ forbid it!'

'I shall marry this maiden,' replied the king defiantly, 'whether you like it or not!'

The old queen turned angrily for home, and refused to attend the wedding.

So the king has married this beautiful young lady.

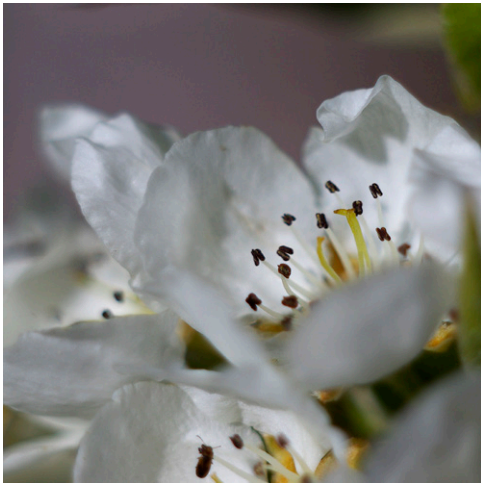
A great banquet was assembled in the hall. Lords were served with all the courtesy and etiquette belonging to such a grand occasion; dukes, earls, and every knight in the land attended. There was a huge crowd in that hall to celebrate the day, so the story goes. Everything one might expect to see at a king's wedding was there; and many a fine minstrel.

When the feast was over, the noble guests departed in great splendour. And the king lived with the queen in happiness; there was much love between them, and frivolity and playfulness. She was so courteous and good-natured that I have not heard of her equal anywhere. They both loved one another. And soon, as God willed, she became pregnant.



The King of France at this time was beset by enemies and found himself in some difficulty. He sent frantic messages to the King of Wales and to other noble and worthy lords. The King of Wales responded to this urgent plea by gathering as many men as he could, in bright armour. Then the king instructed Sir Cadore, and other lords who were to remain behind, to look after his kingdom for him: 'And take especially good care of my queen,' he said.

The King of France summoned everyone he could and the steward was charged to keep the queen safe in the king's absence. And in due course, the queen gave birth to a healthy little boy bearing a distinctive and royal birthmark. He was christened Segramour.



The steward, Sir Cadore, wrote a letter bearing this good news and hurriedly gave it to an envoy to take to the king. The messenger set off at once and rested for the night at the residence of the king's mother. He foolishly spent the night at her castle.

He was received richly and was asked how the queen was. 'Madam,' the envoy replied, 'she has given birth to a handsome little boy and is resting in her bed.'

For this news the king's mother gave him a fine robe and forty shillings, and some other expensive gifts. Then she plied him with as much beer and wine as he could drink and got him very drunk. When she could see that he was fit for nothing but sleep, she led him to his chamber. And when he was unconscious, she rifled through his personal belongings, found the letter and threw it into a fire. Then in her wickedness she wrote another letter, saying how the queen had given birth to a devil and that no one dared approach her. The child has three heads – she wrote – one of a lion, one of a dragon and another of a bear! This devilish woman has given birth to a monstrous fiend!

The next morning the messenger set off, somewhat the worse for wear, taking all sorts of paths and roads until he came to the king. He coughed and spoke softly to his lord, believing himself to be the bringer of good news. He gave the king the letter; the king read it and began to cry, then fell down onto the floor, sobbing and weeping.

Some barons who were standing nearby took him up and put him on his feet again but the king would not stop weeping. 'Alas that I was born!' he cried. 'Alas that I was made a king and married to the most beautiful woman in the world who has brought forth a monster from our union!'

When he saw that there was no way of changing the situation and that crying would do little good, he wrote a letter and sealed it with his seal. In it, he commanded that the queen should be well looked-after until she had recovered from her confinement. Everybody was to do as she instructed. The envoy took this letter and followed the same route back with it as he had come, via the castle belonging to the king's mother.

When he arrived there to rest for the night, he was welcomed as before and given gifts as befit a royal messenger. He had no inkling that any treason was afoot. His comfort was well attended to, he was given bread and ale, and wine, and again became very intoxicated. And when he was fast asleep the king's mother searched for the letter he was carrying, found it and cast it into the fire. Then she commanded that another letter be written, instructing the king's counsellors to take the queen out of the city and to put her into a boat and cast her on the sea, wearing only her costly robe of diamonds and jewels and carrying her little boy; and she was to be given no money, and no food and no water: 'But let her be gone!' wrote the king's mother. 'Upon pain of death upon yourselves, your children, and your wives, let she and her son be exposed to the harsh salt spray and to the icy chill of the sea.'



Egaré heard sounds of lamentation coming from the hall and went to ask the steward what was going on.

'My lord has sent a letter,' the steward replied, truthfully, 'and it is for this reason that we are distressed.' Egaré took the letter from him and read with anguish how she was to be put into the sea.

'Be still, Sir,' said the queen, calmly. 'Do not mourn. Have no concern for me. Do not bring harm down upon yourself. Act as my lord requires. God forbid that you should disobey him! He lowered himself so much to marry me, a humble governess, that he is ashamed. Greet my lord for me when he comes back. But tell him that he will never again find a lady of such gentle blood were he to search the whole of Christendom.'

There was sorrow and anguish when the lady was led to the boat. Everybody wept and wrung their hands. Egaré took her child in her arms and said goodbye to the land. She was put into the sea wearing only the robe in which she had arrived. Men fainted on the shore for grief.

The lady and her little child were set adrift upon the rough sea and were tossed mercilessly by the waves. Egaré hid her face in the folds of her dress. She was frightened of the sea and lay her head down against the wooden keel with her baby at her breast. The waves kicked at her, slapped and burst noisily around the boat and when the child cried she sang it a song to make it sleep and put it to her breast, saying: 'If ever we get to land, I shall curse you, Oh sea, by the strength and expanse of your cruel water, for I have much cause to denounce the shame that you bring upon me.' And she lay grieving and prayed to Jesus and to his mother Mary, in every way that she knew.



Now this lady drifted in the boat for seven nights and more. She lay still in the bottom of the boat and was taken by the tides and by the currents to the city of Rome, through the grace of God Almighty, although she was nearly driven to madness through hunger and thirst.

A merchant lived in that city, a rich man named Jurdan. Every day he would go to the seashore to take the air. On this particular day he was walking along the beach by himself when he found a boat on the sand, with a fair lady in it. The lady seemed to be very distressed. Her garment shone so brightly that he was frightened of her at first, thinking in his heart that she was not of this Earth but must have made the journey from some Otherworld. He called out to her: 'Who are you?'

'My name is Egaré,' she replied. 'Please help me.'

Jurdan helped to lift the lady out of the boat as she clutched her child to her, and led her to his house. And when he arrived, he welcomed the beautiful young lady into his home and asked his wife to bring food and drink to her at once. 'Whatever she wants, let her have it,' he instructed, 'for she has gone without food and water for many days – see that she receives all the comfort you can give her.'

So now the lady lives here, with all the food she needs. She was courteous and kind, and soon grew to be loved by young and old alike. The child began to thrive, and grew into the most pleasant little boy that anybody knew. Egaré sewed in a room, with silk, and taught her son how to conduct himself; she taught him the value of manners and etiquette. But in her heart she was full of sadness.

By the time the child was seven years old he showed both courage and wisdom, and was strong for his age. He displayed noble virtues and could gallop a horse with the best. There was no child more courteous than he. Everybody loved Segramour; he was well-liked wherever he went. But we must leave this virtuous lady and return to the King of Wales, to hear what happened when he returned from the wars.

**T**he war is won, the siege is broken and the king returns to Wales. Knights of great wealth, dukes, earls and barons all ride merrily by his side.

Sir Cadore quickly rode out to meet them, and began to inform the king of everything that had happened during his absence and of which he might be unaware; all the domestic affairs of state.

'In God's name!' cried the king, interrupting him. 'Why are you telling me all this? Why do you not tell me how my lady Egaré is – is she well?'

The steward was quite taken aback. 'Sir, why do you say this?' he asked, suddenly rather frightened. 'My lord, do you expect that we should have ignored your command? Look, here is the letter you sent to me. What we have done was at your own bidding. See for yourself!'

The king took the letter, and when he saw what it contained, the blood drained from his face. 'Sir Cadore, I swear that this letter did not come from me. I tell you this now.'

They both wept and were hardly able to stand for grief and shock. Dukes and earls ran to the king and held him for pity. The king took out the letter he had received.

'I never wrote anything like that! cried Sir Cadore. 'Alas, what has been happening?'



They sent for the messenger and ordered him to tell them at once which route he had taken with his letters. 'Via your mother's castle,' he explained.

'Alas!' cried the king. 'By my sovereignty, she shall be burned alive! There can be no other course!'

**T**he king's mother was punished for her crime.

The king ruled with a heavy heart and much sadness. He sighed and mourned for his fair Egaré. And when he saw children play, he would weep silently to himself.

Seven years passed, and nobody could relieve him of his grief and sadness. Until one day he mused how his lady had been drowned in the sea and conceived the idea of journeying to Rome. 'Through the grace of God I shall visit the Pope,' he declared, 'and suffer a penance.' He ordered many ships to be fitted out, and he filled them full of the things that would make for a pleasant voyage for his men. Then he distributed alms, for the good of his soul, and made his way on board.

The best sailors in the land raised the sail, put out the oars and saw to the safe handling of the ship. The wind blew just as they wished, the weather was perfect, they sailed swiftly over the salt foam and through the grace of God, through his power, they came safely to Rome and took their lodgings at the very house in which Emaré was living.

Emaré called her son quickly over to her and said: 'Darling, do as I tell you. Tomorrow you are to serve in the hall dressed in fine clothes, before a king! Make sure that you are courteous and that no one finds any cause to criticise you for anything you say or do. When you serve the after-dinner sweets, kneel before the king and take his hand in yours. And when you have done this, take the gold cup and serve him with wine. And whatever he says to you, for God's blessing and for mine, come quickly and tell me what he has said.'

So when the time came, the child went into the hall among all the handsome lords and noblemen. The guests washed and went to sit at the tables, and minstrels played as the meal was served. Segramour served so carefully and so courteously that all those present were delighted and spoke very highly of him. They said they had never seen such a gracious and well-mannered young man. The king said laughingly to him: 'Sweet son, what is your name?'

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘it is Segramour.’

Immediately, the king’s humour changed to one of great sadness, for the name reminded him of his dead son. He began to cry, he was so upset. The tears streamed from his eyes and his heart broke once again as he remembered the dreadful events that had once taken place. But despite this, he collected himself and found great pleasure in the child’s company. The king asked the merchant, Jurdan: ‘Sir, is this your son?’

‘Yes, it is,’ replied the merchant.

The noblemen all washed again when they had finished eating, and waited for the after-dinner sweets. The child knelt before the king and offered him the plate. The king called the merchant to him and said: ‘Sir, if you don’t mind, I would very much like this young man to join my household. In due course he may well rise to knighthood, I am so taken with him.’

When he had finished serving, Segramour went quickly to his mother and told her what the king had said. His mother replied: ‘Shortly, my darling, when the king goes to his private rooms, take him by the hand as he leaves the hall and ask him to come and speak with Emaré, who changed her name to Egaré in the land of Wales; for he is your father.’

Segramour went back into the hall among all the great noblemen and resumed his duties. And when the evening was drawing to a close and everybody was well at ease and had had enough bread and ale and wine, the king rose and began to make his way to his bed. Segramour went to take his hand as he left the hall, as though to lead him to his chambers.

‘Sir, if it is your desire,’ he said, ‘take my hand and come with me, for we are related. You shall speak again with Emaré, who changed her name to Egaré, if you will come with me.’

The king was sorrowful and angry to hear spoken in such an unexpected way the name of the lady who had once been his queen, and said: ‘Son, why do you say this? Why do you remind me of such things? Your behaviour is reprehensible!’

Nevertheless he went with him, and coming towards him he saw Egaré in the robe of sparkling gems. He took her into his arms and they both nearly fainted with joy, there was so much love between them. Sir Cadore was delighted, and all the other lords as well, when they learned that the lady they had put into the sea was alive and well after all, through the grace of God in Trinity!

But we must leave this lady and turn to her father the emperor, whose story opened this tale. By now, Emaré’s father is an old man, tormented by guilt through his sinful treatment of his daughter, all those years ago. He decided to visit the Pope and receive penance for it, so that he might go to heaven and win everlasting bliss when he died. Envoys were sent to Rome to prepare for the visit.

Emaré begged her lord the King of Wales: 'Sir, wait for the arrival of the Emperor of Germany and introduce yourself to him when he comes, for it will bring great honour upon you.'

'There is no finer lord in the whole of Christendom,' agreed the king.

'Take your knights when he arrives and ride alongside his entourage,' urged Emaré; and she instructed her young son how he should behave during the emperor's arrival. 'Be



always beside my lord the king,' she told him, 'and be my sweet son! When the emperor kisses your father, move as if to receive a kiss yourself, and bow to him. Ask him to come and speak with Emaré, who was put into the sea at his command.'

The emperor arrived, and the King of Wales rode out to meet him in magnificent array. The noble child rode beside his father, and when he met the emperor, Segramour observed every courtesy and received a kiss; and other lords riding with the emperor honoured the boy in turn.

The emperor was greatly impressed by the child. His father and all the other lords in attendance looked on in admiration as Segramour manoeuvred his horse beside the emperor's and said: 'My lord, for your own honour, listen to what I have to say! Come and speak with Emaré, who has changed her name to Egaré, for she was once your daughter.'

The emperor went pale.

'Son,' he asked, 'why do you censure me when there can be no advantage to you in doing so?'

'Sir, if you will come with me,' insisted Segramour, 'I shall lead you to her.'

So the emperor, despite his misgivings, went with the boy and met Emaré walking towards him. The emperor got down from his horse and took her into his arms and hugged her, and kissed her.

There was a joyful meeting! The King of Wales, Emaré, the Emperor of Germany and Segramour, who afterwards became emperor himself and grew to be a good man. A great feast was held to celebrate this reunion, as the story tells.

This is one of those Breton lais that were told in ancient times, called the Complaint of Egaré. Jesus, who sits on the throne of heaven, grant us Paradise with you, in your everlasting glory!

Amen.

