

Le Freine (The Ash Tree)

anon

*a fourteenth century Middle English retelling of Marie de
France's twelfth century lai Le Fresne*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This lai 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 the only surviving manuscript copy, in National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auchinleck Manuscript, of the mid-fourteenth century.

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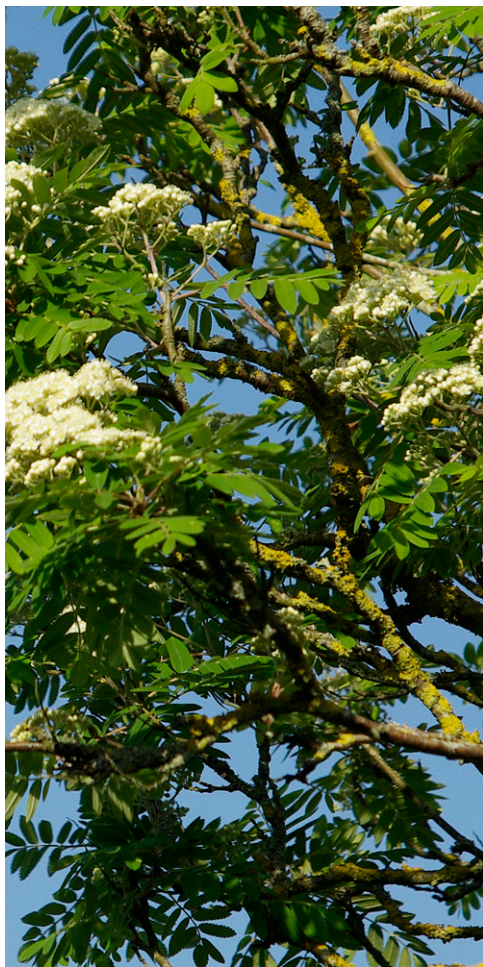


The Ash Tree

anon

fourteenth century English retelling of a twelfth century Breton lai by Marie de France

We redeth oft and findeth ywrite · and this clerkes wele it wite · layes that ben in harping · ben yfounded of ferli thing · sum bethe of wer and sum of wo – Often, we come across tales – and scholars are very well aware of this – that deal with some very strange things. They were written to be sung to a harp and tell of war and suffering, joy and laughter, treachery, subterfuge and other notable things that happened a long time ago. Some are hilariously funny and there are many that deal with the faery world, but most of all they concern love. These lays were written in ancient times. Whenever a king heard of marvels that had taken place, he took up a harp and amused himself by composing a lay about it, and gave it a name. Now, of these old adventures I can relate some but not all. So listen, my lords, as



I tell you a true tale called the Lay of the Ash Tree. It's a moving little story about something that happened a long time ago. It took place in Britain and was made into the Lay le Freine, which is to say, an ash tree in English.

In the West County lived two knights who were very good friends; they were both in the prime of life and comfortably well off, and both of them were married. One of them had made his virtuous lady pregnant and when her time came, she gave birth and was soon out of danger. The knight thanked God Almighty and called for his messenger.

‘Go at once to my neighbour, greet him many times on my behalf and ask him to come and visit me. Tell him that I want him to be a godparent.

The messenger made the journey, didn't forget what he had been asked to say and found the knight eating in his hall. He greeted the lord and lady and everybody there, then went down onto his knees and after addressing the lord more particularly, delivered

the message his master had entrusted him with: ‘He asks if you would go to see him and for his love, to agree to be a godparent,’ he said.

‘Is his lady in good health?’

‘Yes sir, thanks be to God.’

‘So was it a boy or a girl?’

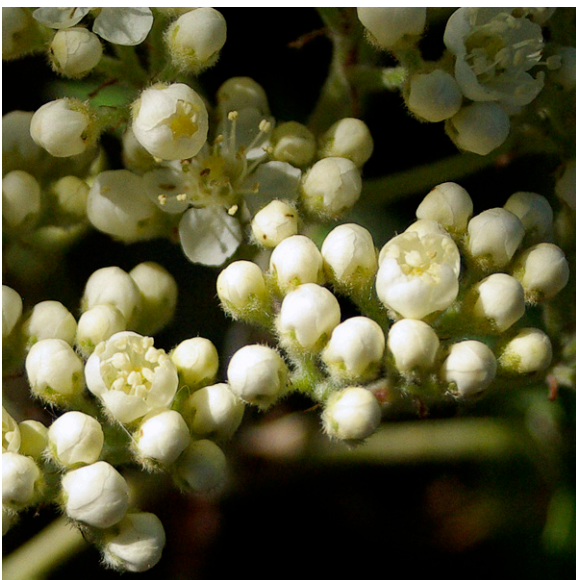
‘Two sons, sir, may God protect them.’

The knight was very pleased to hear this, quickly thanked God for his mercy and said that he’d be delighted to go. He gave the messenger a riding horse as a gift for coming. But the lady of the house was a proud and jealous woman, envious of all her female acquaintances and rather fond of malicious gossip, and she said, accusingly: ‘I’m wondering, messenger, what your lord’s advisor could have been thinking of, to encourage the news to go everywhere announcing the shameful fact that his wife has given birth to twins! Everyone should realise that she must have had two men in her chamber, to the dishonour of both she and her husband!’

The messenger didn’t know what to reply, and her husband didn’t know where to put himself! He sternly rebuked his wife for castigating a woman in this way, and all the women who heard this might well have cursed her with one voice and asked God in heaven, by his seven names, that if she should ever give birth to offspring herself, that something worse might happen to her!

A faithful translation into Middle English of Marie de France’s Breton lai Le Fresne, this story includes many elements found elsewhere in medieval storytelling, including an abandoned baby (as in Sir Degaré and Cheuelere Assigne, not to mention the abducted children in Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Isumbras, William and the Werewolf and Octavian), an article of clothing or cloth by which a person who has been lost may be recognised again (as in the tales of Sir Degaré, Emaré, Guigemar and Generydes) and a happy reunion at the end. Unique to this tale, however, is an ash tree, within whose trunk the abandoned infant is found. Did Marie intend an allusion to the Norse world tree Yggdrasil, in her original Anglo-Norman French verse?

This Middle English version, known as Lay le Freine (lai, the Ash Tree), is found elsewhere only in MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auchinleck Manuscript, lying in the National Library of Scotland.



Not long afterwards, she did, in fact, become pregnant. As God willed, she had a successful delivery, remained safe and well throughout the ordeal and gave birth to two healthy daughters. But she was not as overjoyed as she might have been.

‘Alas!’ she cried in distress. ‘What am I to do? I’ve passed judgement upon myself! I accused a woman falsely and now everyone will see me in exactly the same light. Alas, that I was born! I’m lost forever! Either I have to falsely confess that two men have slept with me or admit to being a malicious liar. Or else – God

forbid! – I could kill one of these babies. But I must do one of these three things, there’s no other way out. Oh, why was this allowed to happen!

‘If I say that I had a lover then I’ll be lying before God, and everybody who sees me will think they’re looking at a slut. But if I admit that I was lying when I said those things,

everybody will brand me as being malicious, evil-tongued and untrustworthy. I think it's best to take my opportunity now and kill one of these babies; I can do a suitable penance for it later.'

She called her midwife to her. 'Kill this child at once,' she said. 'Then swear for evermore, wherever you are, that I gave birth to only one baby.'

The midwife flatly refused.

The lady had a freeborn maiden who had been brought up in her household for many years. This young maiden could see that her lady was very distressed, weeping, sighing and crying: 'Alas!' and saw an opportunity to help if she could, so she said: 'I wouldn't be so upset if I was you. I can carry this child away and leave it outside a convent. There'll be no need for you to be ashamed at all. Whoever finds this small baby, by Mary, blissful Queen of Heaven, will surely help it, for God's love.'

The lady was pleased with what the maiden had said and agreed to it at once. She took a cloth embroidered with fine silk and yarn that her husband had brought back from Constantinople and wrapped the little girl in it, then took a ring of pure gold and fastened it onto the baby's right arm plaited into a silk cord, so that whoever found the little girl would know that she came from a noble family.

That evening, the maiden took the baby in her arms and stole away. She carried the infant over a wild and windswept heath, through woods and across fields on that clear, moonlit, winter's night until, near to dawn, she came to the edge of a forest and was so weary that she had to rest for a while. Shortly, she heard a cock crow and a dog bark, so she got up and pressed onwards and soon noticed walls and houses coming into sight, then a church with a tall steeple. But she didn't find herself approaching a main road or

a town but a house of religion, occupied by an order of nuns who were well enough provided for to serve God night and day.



The maiden didn't pause but carried the baby straight to the church door and fell onto her knees in tears, and in prayer: 'Oh Lord Jesus Christ, who hears the prayers of sinful folk, accept this gift and look after this helpless and innocent baby and let it be christened, for the love of Mary, your generous mother.'

When she had finished her prayer, she looked up and saw, towering over her, a lovely ash tree with many branches. It had a hollow trunk, as is often the case with old trees, and she laid the child inside this ash tree to protect it from the cold, wrapped in the cloth that its mother had given to it, and blessed the baby with all her might.

By now, it was beginning to get light, the birds were singing on the boughs of the trees and husbandmen were tramping towards the fields, so the maiden quickly turned for

home.

The abbey porter got up and began to carry out his duties. He rang the bells, lit the candles and laid out all the books, got everything ready, and then went to the main door of the church to open it. When he opened this door, he saw the cloth in the ash tree outside and thought at first that thieves must have abandoned some ill-gotten gains there during the night, so he went over, unwrapped the bundle, and found the baby girl inside. He took the baby into his arms, gave thanks to Jesus Christ for his generosity, took the baby home to his house and gave it to his daughter, asking that she might try to revive it as best she could, for she had milk and was able to nurse it. His daughter put the baby to her breast but it wouldn't suck, it was so nearly dead with cold, so she lit a fire and warmed the infant, then she suckled the child successfully and put it back into the warmth to sleep.

When the Mass was finished, the porter went to the abbess.

'Madam, he said. 'What do you think? Early this morning I found a little baby girl hidden in the hollow ash tree outside the church, wrapped in a cloth. There was a gold ring fastened to her. I've no idea how she got there.'

The abbess was astounded and very curious. 'Go at once and bring the baby to me, please' she said. 'She shall be welcome as much to me as she is to God. I'll help the child in every way that I can. I'll say that she's related to me.'

The porter went to fetch the baby, collected the cloth and the ring as well, and the abbess had a priest called. When the child arrived, it was christened at a font, and because it had been found in an ash tree, the abbess called the child Freine, for 'le freine' is French for 'the ash tree', derived from the Breton word, therefore men call this story *Le Freine* rather than *The Ash Tree* in most countries.



Freine grew into a happy and healthy child, as the years passed. Everybody was told that she was the abbess' niece and the abbess looked after her attentively and taught her well, so that by the time she was twelve years old there was no fairer maiden in the whole of England. When she began to take an interest in men, she asked the abbess to be frank with her and to tell her who her relations were, especially her father and mother, and whether she had any brothers and sisters. The abbess took her aside, did not shirk her responsibilities but explained how she'd been found outside the church and cared for, and showed her the cloth and the ring and gave them to her to keep; which Freine did, for as long as she remained there.

Living in that district was a young knight who was valiant and held in great respect; he had lands and rents and his name was Sir Garoun. Young and proud, full of life and not yet married, he heard people singing the praises of this young lady and decided that he wanted to meet her, so he pointed himself in the right direction and arrived one day in jovial mood, getting his man to say that he was on his way to a tournament. The abbess and all the nuns greeted him welcomingly in the guest hall, and the damsel Freine, who was by now a very well-spoken and courteous young lady, greeted him very correctly and with great friendliness. It didn't take him long to notice her beauty and her refinement, her lovely eyes and bright complexion, and straight away he fell in love with her and began to ponder how he could best bring her to his bed.

He thought: 'If I come here more often than I can think up reasonable excuses for, the abbess will suspect the truth and get rid of her very quickly.'

So he thought of another strategy: to become a lay brother of that order.

'Madam,' he said to the abbess. 'I love you for your goodness so much that I shall give you lands and rents in order to become your brother, and this will be greatly to your benefit, as long as I can come here often to deal with the finances.'

It took little time for them to come to an agreement. He prepared his horse and went away.

After that, he visited often, by day and by night, in order to speak with that beautiful maiden; so that, with his fine promises and generous words, she allowed him at last to make love to her in any way he wished, whenever he wanted.

'Darling,' he said, 'you must leave the abbess, your aunt, and come to live with me. I'm rich and I wield such power and authority that your life will be much better with me than it is here.'

The maiden agreed, and they set a time. Then she stole away with him, unseen by anybody, taking only her cloth and her ring with her. When the abbess realised that Freine had run away with the knight, she grieved, but there was nothing that she could do about it.

The maiden stayed in the knight's castle and everybody began to grow very fond of her. She was pleasant to both rich and poor alike and they all began to love her as though she was their true mistress. She lived her life with Sir Garoun as though they were married. One day, however, his knights came to implore – and Holy Church insisted also – that he marry a lord's daughter and send the girl away. They said it was better by far to produce an heir in lawful wedlock than to live his life in sin with a woman they knew nothing about. They told him: 'Nearby lives a knight who has a very attractive daughter. She'll inherit her father's lands in due course. Marry her!'

He was very reluctant to do as they wished, but in the end, he agreed.

Arrangements were made, commitments affirmed, pledges taken – Oh, if only he'd

known, before the deal was struck, that this knight's daughter and his lovely Freine were sisters, twins even! Both with the same father and the same mother. Nobody but God knew this, and that's the truth.

The new bride was dressed in her wedding gown and brought to the lord's hall, her new home. Her father accompanied her, along with her mother and many others as well. The bishop of the diocese arrived to conduct the ceremony. This maiden was called Codre. Hazel. All the guests were merry and said joyfully to Sir Garoun: 'We've never see a prettier maiden. The hazel is more beautiful than the ash, that's for sure!'

They made this joke because Codre is the French for 'hazel' and le Freine is 'the ash'. They held a feast with much jollity and entertainment, and Freine worked harder than any of the servants to see that things were properly prepared. Although her heart was aching with despair she gave nothing away to betray her grief. The bride's mother noticed her quiet efficiency and felt a strange affection for the girl. Scarcely could she have

felt more pity if she'd been looking at her own daughter!



Freine went to the bed chamber to check that the bed had been arranged properly and thought that it had been very poorly done. It wasn't appropriate at all for such a beautiful maiden, so she hurried to her chest, brought out the embroidered cloth that she had been wrapped in as a baby, which the abbess had given to her, and, deciding that it would make a lovely coverlet, laid it deftly onto the bed, imagining that her lord would be very pleased with it.

Codre and her mother entered the chamber and when the lady saw this cloth draped over the bed, she almost fainted with surprise. She shouted for the chamberlain, but when he arrived, he could tell her nothing about it at all. Freine came back into the chamber, and the lady asked her where the coverlet had come from.

'It's mine,' she replied. 'I was given it along with this ring. My aunt told me that I was wrapped in this cloth when they found me, and that I had this ring fastened to my arm.'

The lady was astonished. 'Fair child!' she cried. 'My daughter! I'm your mother!'

She fainted onto the bed and lay there. Her husband was summoned and she was able to speak to him when he arrived – she told him the whole story, how she'd castigated a neighbour for giving birth to twins and then produced twins herself.

'I had one of the babies carried off to a convent, and this is her. Our daughter! This is the cloth that you gave to me long ago, as a love token. This is the ring!'

The knight kissed his daughter graciously, many times, and then went off to speak urgently with the bishop. The marriage was annulled immediately. Sir Garoun was married to the beautiful Freine instead, the woman he truly loved.

Codre departed with all the guests and was soon married to a knight of that district. And so ends the lay of these two maidens, whose names were Ash and Hazel.