

Marie de France's *Yonec*: Sex, Blood and Shapeshifting in a Twelfth-Century Verse.

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Abstract

The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poem *Yonec* tells the story of a young woman imprisoned by a jealous older husband. Scared for her life, the woman wishes for the intervention of a supernatural being who will love her and end her suffering. Although Marie de France does not use the word 'fairy', Muldumarec, the man who enters the woman's bedroom, is clearly such a creature. His ability to transform fluidly between the bodies of hawk and man suggests that his identity is not bounded by any particular corporeal reality. However, it is in his transformation into the body of his lover that his potential for breaching boundaries is most fully realised. Not only does the fairy appropriate the physical form of the woman - being 'lady' and 'knight' simultaneously - he does so in order to take communion. The body of the woman, the identity of the fairy and the *corpus domini* become fused in what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has termed a 'transsexual moment'. Moreover, the emphasis on blood - in both the Eucharist episode and the subsequent murder of the fairy lover - suggests notions of transfusion and transference. Blood is more than a physical phenomenon in this narrative; it is a supernatural sign. The mobile circuit of identities facilitated by the flow of blood allows for us to read Muldumarec as both magical and divine. Although he is a 'fairy', he is also a Christ-like saviour, who dies for his mortal lover. These identity positions need not be read as contradictory. Marie's poem presents its audience with a world in which shapeshifting is not only possible, but an intrinsic part of sexual and spiritual devotion.

Key Words: Adultery, Anglo-Norman, blood, Christianity, Eucharist, fairy, *lais*, Marie de France, shapeshifting, *Yonec*.

Yonec is a short narrative poem, around 560 lines long, that was written in England in the twelfth-century. The poem is in Anglo-Norman, the dialect of Old French spoken by the aristocracy in England following the Norman Conquest. The composer of the poem is Marie de France, a noble woman with connection to the Plantagenet court. Marie wrote a number of such narrative poems, known as *lais*, and these stories were, on the whole, concerned with courtly adventure, love and the supernatural. As is common in medieval romance writing, Marie was keen to authorise her texts, through reference to a putative source. While other medieval writers may have claimed French or Latin written authority for their narratives - though often, it seems, such 'source' texts may have been as much a part of the fiction as

anything else in the tales - Marie claims Breton folklore and oral tradition as the antecedent of her *lais*. Indeed, *Yonec* opens with a direct address from the story-teller:

Since I started to write *lais*, I have spared no effort. I will put all the stories that I know into verse. I would like very much to talk now about Yonec, how he came to be born, and of how his father first came to know his mother. The man that fathered Yonec was known as Muldumarec.¹

Whether or not this narrative has folkloric roots, and whether or not Marie was indeed recounting a story she had heard elsewhere, are not the concerns of this paper. Much other work has been done on exploring those questions. My paper will focus on the presentation of the supernatural - here, and importantly, understood to mean that which is outside nature - and will examine the ways in which this intersects with the social, sexual and spiritual mores of twelfth-century Britain.

As the opening to Marie's *lai* makes clear, although Yonec is a character in the tale, he is not the primary focus. The main concern of the narrative is the relationship between the young man's parents. Yonec himself does appear until relatively late in the story, and his main narrative function is to avenge the death of his father. The main story concerns Muldumarec - Yonec's father - his unnamed lover and her husband. There was once a very rich old man, the story tells us, who married a beautiful young woman in order to beget a worthy heir to his fortune and lands. Once married, this man becomes jealous and possessive of his beautiful wife, and locks her in a large room lined with stone, in order to keep her under surveillance. He entrusts his young wife to the care of his old sister, and, although there are other women in adjoining rooms, the wife is not permitted to speak to anyone apart from her sister-in-law and, we discover later, the chaplain. Needless to say, the young woman becomes very depressed by the turn of events, criticising both her husband's excessive jealousy and the cruelty of her family in giving her in marriage to this horrible man.² The woman's unhappiness affects her physically; her beauty begins to fade, and, despite the intentions of her husband, she does not become pregnant. In a state of complete desperation, she can only hope for a speedy death.³

Alone in her prison, the young wife starts to remember local stories - the very stories Marie claims as authority for her *lais*:

I often heard stories of times past in this land, stories of marvellous adventures that brought joy to the unfortunate. Knights would seek the women of their dreams, noble and

beautiful women; and women would find handsome and courteous lovers, valiant and brave knights, without facing the slightest reproach, because no-one could see these lovers save the women themselves. If it is possible, and if someone has already had such an adventure, all-powerful God, grant me my wish!⁴

As soon as the woman declares her wish to God, she sees the shadow of a large bird appear at a window. The bird - presumably a hawk or other hunting bird, given that it is wearing jesses on its legs - enters the stone room and, to the amazement of the young woman, transforms into a beautiful and noble knight. This man - Muldumarec - declares that he has been in love with the woman for many years, and the two begin an affair. Eventually, the couple are discovered by the woman's suspicious husband. The old man places iron spikes on the window, which pierce Muldumarec as he enters one day and mortally wound him. By this point, his lover is pregnant, and the son she bears - named Yonec - ends the narrative by killing his murderous step-father and avenging Muldumarec.

In considering the question of the supernatural in *Yonec*, I intend to concentrate on two episodes in particular. Firstly, I will look at the death of Muldumarec and the questions of transformation and shapeshifting that are raised in these lines. Secondly, I will look at an earlier episode in which the hawk-knight hears Mass and takes communion in order to prove his Christian identity to his lover. As I will show, these episodes are inextricably connected to one another, but also to wider questions of sexual and spiritual identities in the text. While the introduction of a supernatural lover points towards a folkloric, or even pre-Christian, context for the tale, I will argue that the symbolism of blood links the narrative to twelfth-century doctrinal concerns - while at the same time problematising Muldumarec's identity further.

It has become reasonably common for scholarly considerations of *Yonec* to refer to Muldumarec as a 'fairy' or 'fairy-knight'. Although Marie does not use the word 'fairy' - and this is significant, as the word appears in other Anglo-Norman texts - it is clear that Muldumarec shares many features with the medieval romance fairy.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, the late medieval fairy is a curious mixture of the supernatural and the human, and it is sometimes difficult to put one's finger on what is *not* human about such creatures.⁶ However, whether we class him as a fairy or not, there is something undeniably supernatural or magical about Muldumarec. After his initial entrance in the guise of a bird, the man tells his lover that he will return to her at any point, *if she wishes it*.⁷ As the only possible means of entrance and exit is the window, one assumes that the man will continue to

arrive as a bird. However, as the narrative progresses, it is not always evident whether or not such a transformation has actually occurred. When the old husband discovers his wife's infidelity, he lays a trap for her lover and places metal spikes on the window, which mortally wound Muldumarec. It is not made clear whether the fairy is in the form of a knight or a hawk at this point. One assumes that he arrives as a hawk: line 313 states that "he came flying through the window".⁸ Yet as soon as he arrives, he is wounded, sits on the bed, and speaks to his beloved. Until this point in the narrative, the fairy does not speak while in the form of a hawk, so it seems he has transformed back into a human body. And yet there is no mention of this transformation, nor is there any clue in the manner of the fairy's departure from the tower: the narrative simply states that "with great pain, he departed".⁹ Does he walk or fly? Does he leap from the window, as his lover later does? Is he human or bird here? Or both?

There is a suggestion, at this moment in the text, that these questions are not particularly important. Their answers are not central to the narrative, which here concerns itself with the force and implications of actions, rather than with technicalities. What matters is that Muldumarec is seriously injured and must return to his home. The vagueness of his departure suggests that, perhaps, we should not seek to define the fairy's body at all *at this point*, nor try to determine where the 'bird' ends and the 'man' begins. He leaves as he arrives - as Muldumarec.

The subsequent slow death of the fairy and his lover's journey to find him highlight several key themes of the piece. As I have shown, it offers an example of problematic shapeshifting; it also uses the motif of blood loss to further complicate the fairy's identity. After being injured, Muldumarec sits on his lover's bed, "so all the coverings became bloodied".¹⁰ Aware that he is dying, he leaves the chamber to return to his own home, leaving his lover to follow him. The young woman is able to do this by tracing the path of his blood. However, as the woman follows this trail, Muldumarec's blood does not cease to flow. There is emphasis on its vivid colour: the entrance to the hill "was totally *reddened* by his blood".¹¹ Furthermore, this blood does not appear to coagulate. The woman finds the grass *wet* with blood. Despite traversing meadows and a large town, the woman discovers a track of "fresh blood", and the entrance to a palace "completely covered in blood".¹² The repetition of the words "sanc" and "sanglent" - "blood" and "bloodied" - is insistent. Moreover, the stress placed on 'living' qualities - red colour, liquidity, copious flow - is significant. Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that medieval writers often draw a distinction, not between spilled and contained blood, but between "living (which includes inside and outside) blood versus blood that is sick or dead - that is, decaying or decayed".¹³ She goes on to state that, "[i]n medieval medical theory, blood is the fluid from which all

other body fluids are formed; it is the only body part that is in any sense capable of retaining life while separated from the body".¹⁴ This medical theory both drew on, and offered support to, the biblical equation of blood with life: "quia anima carnis in sanguine est" [for the life of the flesh is in the blood].¹⁵ Bynum's argument, however, refers to 'holy blood', specifically the exsanguination of Christ, which was frequently figured as occurring through the spear wound in his side. However, it is clear that, in *Yonec*, the fairy's 'living blood' can also exist both "inside and outside" the body. Muldumarec's blood, which is spread across the huge distance his lover must travel, is a sign of his continued life. When she eventually reaches the end of the trail, the woman discovers her lover still alive and able to talk to her one last time. Although the text offers no explicit explanation of the magical means through which Muldumarec's massive blood loss is effected, it is clear that blood here should be read as more than a material phenomenon. It is a supernatural sign.

I would like to turn now to a consideration of some of the valences and implications of the blood motif in *Yonec*, and to explore the ways in which this is connected to devotional practices. When the knight first arrives in the stone chamber, the woman is frightened. To reassure her, Muldumarec insists that he is a Christian man who believes in God. To prove this, he says that he will take communion. Obviously, as the woman is supposed to be alone in her room, Muldumarec cannot openly call for the chaplain. Instead, the woman feigns illness and calls for the priest herself. Muldumarec transforms himself into the likeness of his lover and receives the Eucharist. Here, again, the narrative demonstrates that Muldumarec can be more than one thing at once. He changes himself into the form of his lover, but remains a knight: on the ingestion of the Host, the narrative states that, "the *knight* received it; *he* drank the wine from the chalice".¹⁶ The *corpus domini*, the woman's body and the knight's body combine here to create what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has termed a "transsexual moment".¹⁷ Cohen uses this phrase to highlight the fact that Muldumarec does not only alter his own physical form, but, in doing so, breaks through the ostensibly inviolate categories of male/female as easily as he had through those of human/bird in his transformation into a hawk.

Yet I would argue that for this "transsexual moment" to occur, certain 'necessary' truths must be assumed. Firstly, one must accept that the body of the fairy is a separate entity to that of his lover, however porous the boundaries between them. He may be able to cross over into her form, but there would be no significance in this if they were not conceived of as corporeally discrete. Secondly, for the moment to be "transsexual", pre-existing classifications of male and female must be assumed by the reader. The metamorphosis only evokes wonder if one accepts that male and female

are separate categories, and that a subject must belong to one, and only one, of these categories.

The ingestion of the Host - Christ's body - by Muldumarec also raises questions about the importance of boundaries in the presentation of this character. Acceptance of the Eucharist is the means by which the fairy's orthodoxy is affirmed. As he accepts it, he says:

I well believe in the Creator who freed us from the sadness
into which our father Adam put us, through his bite of the
bitter apple.¹⁸

Taking the Eucharist is an outward performance of his belief, enacted to reassure his lover that he is Christian, and to assuage her doubts enough to get into bed. Thus the convergence of bodies here relies on preset categories and patterns of behaviour for its intelligibility; it is not simply a set of free-flowing incidences.

The ingestion of the Host by Muldumarec can, therefore, be read as his adherence to formulaic behavioural rituals, in order to perform correctly as a 'Christian' man and placate his would-be lover. However, the episode of Eucharistic devotion in *Yonec* has further implications for an understanding of the mechanisms of transformation. Here, Muldumarec not only hears Mass and recites his prayer, but also ingests both the body and the blood of Christ. As I have already argued, blood functions as a powerful supernatural symbol in *Yonec*. The fact that the narrative makes specific reference to the communion wine, as well as to the *corpus domini*, is significant. Bynum has argued that, in Eucharistic writing, "references to blood [of Christ] have a very different valence from reference to body [of Christ]".¹⁹ She adds: "Body tends to signify community, inclusion, gathering in".²⁰ Thus, Muldumarec's ingestion of the body could be read as his "inclusion" into the "community" of Christian humanity, further indicated by his evoking of Adam, "*our* father". However, the blood which the fairy drinks has a somewhat different significance within this text. In analysing Eucharistic and devotional texts of the fifteenth century, Bynum asserts that "blood is here quite literally a transfusion: a gift of life itself".²¹ By the late fifteenth century, doctrines of transubstantiation were an integral part of Eucharistic devotion, and these were first formalised in the twelfth century - not long after Marie's text was composed.²² Although *Yonec* predates such formal developments in theology, the text draws on ideas of the Eucharist that had been discussed in England since Anglo-Saxon times.²³ I would therefore argue that Bynum's model of "transfusion" is useful for a consideration of the fairy's devotions. As I have already explored in this paper, Muldumarec's own blood will come to take on the 'living' qualities associated with the *sanguis Christi* after he is pierced in

his side by the iron spikes. Moreover, the narrative focuses on blood, rather than body, as the fairy dies. As I noted, there is biblical authority for this equation of 'life' with 'blood', and this is highlighted by the introduction of the 'living' holy blood of Christ into the fairy's body. Through the transformation of the Muldumarec's body into that of his lover, and the subsequent transfusion of the blood of Christ, the reader or audience is led to view the fairy as an ever-changing body that resists categorisation. Kathleen Biddick argues that the medieval Host was a unique "fluid body that troubled any container".²⁴ Yet the "container" into which it is placed in *Yonec* is "fluid" itself, moving as it does from hawk, to fairy, to woman, to Christian man, without any discontinuity in the identity of 'Muldumarec'.

So what can we make of the fact that Muldumarec, like the blood of Christ which he ingests, is a fluid entity capable of moving between identity positions with ease? It should be remembered at this point that he first appears to his lover as an answer to her desperate - and very Christian - prayer. His arrival allows the young woman to enter into a relationship with him that transcends the barren and unnatural 'earthly' marriage in which she is suffering. On being discovered, Muldumarec is pierced in his side, allowing his living blood to flow and signal both his supernatural survival and the potential for his lover to join him again. The woman's discovery of her dying lover in his ornate bedroom has clear echoes of the biblical *Song of Songs*, as well as the Middle English 'Corpus Christi Carol', in which a "faucun" [falcon] bears the speaker's "make" [mate] away, and a knight with an ever-bleeding wound is found on a sumptuous bed being mourned by a weeping maiden.²⁵ In this latter text, the relationship between the bleeding knight and Jesus is made clear:

And by that beddes sid ther standeth a stoon
Corpus Christi written thereon.²⁶

Given the undeniable resonances between these texts, the question must be asked - is Muldumarec Christ?

And yet, Muldumarec also clearly belongs to a tradition of fairy lovers - the very tradition that the lady invokes in her original prayer. Elsewhere in twelfth-century romance texts, we find other examples of women imprisoned and entering in adulterous relationships in order to escape - with no hint of the lover assuming a Christ-like role.²⁷ Muldumarec's relationship with the young woman is clearly sexual - and procreative. So is he a Christ-like saviour who dies for his mortal lover? Or an adulterous fairy selfishly fulfilling his own desires? Is he supernatural? Or divine? I conclude by arguing that Muldumarec is all of these things. Marie's poem presents its audience with a world in which shapeshifting, and the elision of identity

positions, is not only possible, but an intrinsic part of both sexual and spiritual devotions. This is a world in which Muldumarec can be hawk and knight, Christian fairy, divine saviour and secret lover. He is the answer to the young woman's prayers - but only she can truly see him.

Notes

1 “Puis que des lais ai comencié,/ ja n’iert per nul travail laissié ;/ les aventures que j’en sai,/ tut par rime les cunterai./ En pensé ai e en talant/ que d’Yonec vus die avant/ dunt il fu nez, e de sun père/ cum il vint primes a sa mere./ Cil ki engendra Yonec/ aveit a nun Muldumarec.” Marie de France, ‘Yonec’, in *Lais de Marie de France*, K Warnke (ed), Librairie Générale Français, Paris, 1990, pp. 183-210, ll. 1-10. All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited in the notes. For convenience, I will offer my own modern English translations of Anglo-Norman quotations in the body of this paper.

2 See ll. 71-88.

3 See ll. 41-54.

4 “Mult ai oï sovent cunter/ que l’em suleit jadis trover/ aventures en cest païs,/ ki rehaitouent les pensis./ Chevalier truvoënt puceles/ a lur talent, gentes e beles,/ e dames truvoënt amanz/ beals e curteis, pruz e vaillanz,/ si que blasmees n’en esteient/ ne nul fors eles nes veeient./ Se ceo puet ester ne ceo fu./ se unc a nu lest avenu,/ Deus, ki de tut a poësté,/ il en face ma volenté!” ll. 95-108.

5 The Anglo-Norman word from which the English ‘fairy’ is derived is ‘fee’. For an example of a narrative which uses this word, see ‘Le Lai du Cor’, in *Mantel et Cor: Deux Lais du XII^e Siècle*, P Bennett (ed), University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 1975.

6 See my article, “‘The king o fairy with his rout’: Fairy Magic in the Literature of Medieval Britain’, *Hortulus*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2008).

7 See ll. 203-204.

8 “En la fenestre vint volant,” l. 313.

9 “A grant dolur s’en est partiz,” l. 339.

10 “que tuit li drap furent sanglent,” l. 320.

11 “de cel sanc fu tute *arusee*,” l. 352; my emphasis.

12 “sanc novel,” l. 377; “tut sanglent,” l. 382.

13 C W Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2007, p. 168.

14 *ibid.*, p. 172.

15 Leviticus 17:11.

16 “Li chevaliers l’ad receü,/ le vin del chalice a beü,” ll. 191-92.

17 J J Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2003, p. 72.

18 “Jeo crei mult bien al creatur,/ kin us geta de la tristur/ u Adam nus mist, nostre pere,/ par le mors de la pume amere,” ll. 153-56.

19 Bynum, p. 10.

20 *ibid.*, p. 10.

21 *ibid.*, p. 163.

22 See M Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 14-35.

23 *ibid.*, pp. 14-20.

24 K Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 1998, p. 153.

25 Song of Songs 3:1-5; 'The Corpus Christi Carol', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 1, 7th ed, W. W. Norton and Co., London, 2000, p. 55. Much work has been done on the relationship between 'sexual' and 'spiritual' discourses in the Middle Ages, and the shared imagery and language of these two forms of writing. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this question. See, for example, S Salih, 'When is a Bosom not a Bosom? Problems with "Erotic Mysticism"', in *Medieval Virginites*, A Bernau, R Evans and S Salih (eds), University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2003, pp. 14-32.

26 'Corpus Christi Carol', ll. 13-14.

27 See, for example, G d'Arras, *Eracle*, G R de Lage (ed), Librairie Honoré Champion, Paris, 1976.

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