

Women's Identities and Plant Names in Marie de France's Lais

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Summary

The essay deals with names of plants in literature when given to female characters. The idea that a tree name brings the main plant qualities to the lady bearing the name is thoroughly underlined. The focus is on Medieval French Literature, in particular on two *lais* by Marie de France, *Fresne* and *Chievrefoil*. The trees and plants studied are the *Ash Tree*, the *Hazelnut shrub* and the *Honeysuckle plant* related to the twin sisters called *Fresne* and *Codre*, and to *Iseult* who is represented by the honeysuckle that embraces the hazel twig which is *Tristan* in a love-death bond. The main characteristics *Fresne* bears from the tree are resistance, elasticity, adaptability, the ability to feed children as *Codre* does, who is also related to the idea of marriage as the hazelnut is often a symbol of it. The three Mediaeval ladies are introduced by a section dedicated to the *Laurel tree* and the metamorphosis *Daphne* undergoes, as an example of the many legends, myths and stories told on women and trees since ancient times.

1. General Introduction: Worshipping Trees

'In the religious history of the Aryan race in Europe the worship of trees has played an important part.'¹ (Frazer, 1890, p. 82.) This is how the author starts his chapter dedicated to the cult of plants and trees and we know woods and forests covered most of the European territory: in the first century before our era, the forest spread from the Rhine to such an immense distance that it could be travelled through for two months without reaching the end. Archaeological excavations revealed that the North of Italy was a dense forest of elms and chestnuts and oaks while history witnessed the rise of Rome. During the reign of King Henry II Plantagenet, from 1154 to 1184,² the area around London was spread over by a deep forest where citizens hunted the wild bull and the boar.

However spread they were, woods were also the chosen and elected places where any clearings could become a temple. The evidence of such a statement comes from the examination of the Druids' oak-worship in the *locus consecratus* as Ceasar defines it (*De Bello Gallico*, VI, 13,16). As far as our knowledge allows us to comprehend, a temple built with stones was unknown to Celtic people, and Cassio Dione speaks about *Holy Woods*, using the word ἄλλσος, which means *lucus* and *nemus* in Latin. The four Latin words to say wood or forest have different origins, they are *silva*, *saltus*, *nemus*, *lucus* and the last one is of Oscan origin and mainly means holy wood: 'mentre l'arrivo di lucus dall'osco offrì in più la possibilità di dar nome alle 'radure sacre' e ai 'boschi sacri'³ (while the derivation of *lucus* from the Oscan language offered the chance to give the name to holy clearings and woods.) (Malaspina, 2000, pp. 145), while *silva* kept its secular meaning. *Nemus* was barely used in poetry and there are several occurrences in Virgil. Interesting to be noticed is that the Ancient Greek νέμος which means pasture, but also wood and forest, and the Celtic

¹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 82.

² During his reign Marie de France wrote her works.

³ 'Nemus come toponimo dei Colli Albani e le *differentiae verborum* tardo antiche', di Ermanno Malaspina, in *Nemi - status quo: recent research at Nemi and the sanctuary of Diana*, J. Rasmus Brandt, Anne-Marie Leander Touati, Jan Zahles e Soprintendenza archeologica per il Lazio (edited), Roma, "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2000, pp. 145-150., p. 145. <http://books.google.it>, Jacques Brosse wrote in one of his books dedicated to plants and their mythology that the word *lucus* shares the same Indoeuropean root *leuk-* with the Sanskrit word *lokah* which means room, space, place, country.

**nem-et-* share the same root with *nemus*, but the three developed independently and that just the Celtic word got the meaning of sacred wood. Indeed the Celtic temple seems to be the *nemeton* that is to say a sacred clearing in the wood, in the middle of the forest where you could see the sky. Among the tribes of the Finnish-Ugrian stock their rites were held in sacred groves, enclosed by a fence, and the elected place was a glade with some trees about. The centre of the holy clearing could be represented by a sacred tree which embodied the *omphalos* of the world.⁴

However, the worshipping of trees and plants is proved to be prevalent in ancient Greece and Italy, too. There are several evidences of this antique form of religion, one of which was the sanctuary of Ἀσκληπιός at Κως. The Greek God of medicine and healing was related to the snake, but in the area of his sanctuary nobody could touch or cut any cypress-trees, under the penalty of a thousand drachms. In the centre of the *Forum*, in ancient Rome, the sacred fig-tree of Romulus was venerated down to the times of the Roman Empire, while the cornel-tree on the Palatine hill was considered one of the most sacred entities of the city:

Whenever the tree appeared to a passerby to be drooping, he set up a hue and cry which was echoed by the people in the street, and soon a crowd might be seen running helter-skelter from all sides with buckets of water (Frazer, 1890, p. 83).

James Frazer suggests that people in ancient times saw trees as spiritual objects as well as any other living beings on Earth. They worshipped the cycle of death and rebirth they could witness in every tree or bush they saw and the mystery of renewal at every springtime. Animistic beliefs base their creed on the assumption that the world is animate, everything possesses a soul, also called shade in some religious systems, as the one of the Siouan people. Indeed the Hidatsa Indians divide the world of trees, plants and bushes and assign a different value to them:

The shade of the cottonwood, the greatest tree in the valley of the Upper Missouri, is supposed to possess an intelligence which, if properly approached, may help the Indians in certain undertakings; but the shades of shrubs and grasses are of little account (Frazer, 1890, p. 84).

2. Trees in mythologies: women and plants

The tree has always represented the idea of a regenerating energy, a force able to reinvigorate by sucking strength from the ground and raising its branches and boughs to the sky. Ancient people watched the miracle happening in nature and starting believing that trees were animated. Among all the legends, myths, stories there are so many told on trees; however the main focus of my work is the superposition of the tree name and the female deity, as to underline which elements of the tree are thought to be emblematic of the nymph or goddess, too.

⁴ The Celtic love for trees is well witnessed by the relationship Celtic people created between trees and words, in fact in all Celtic languages trees mean letters and this superposition of plants and alphabet was shown by the Beth-Luis-Nion (*'Birch-Rowan-Ash'*) which is the most ancient Irish alphabet and 'takes its name from the first three of a series of trees whose initials form the sequence of its letters'. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 33.

As I have already written in the previous section of this introduction, trees were believed to be animated beings; this brings to the idea of treating them as male and female, who can also be married to each other. This is related to the fact that plants may reproduce by the union of male and female elements:⁵

Nature, ever wise in purpose, has placed male and female plants sufficiently near to each other that they may easily celebrate their *amours* by the wings of the wind (Ryan M.D., 1835, p. 815).⁶

Sometimes this differentiation included the concept of the tree as the abode of the tree-spirit, being a nymph or a sylvan male spirit. As James Frazer reminds his readers, in classical art the sylvan deities were depicted in human shape with some woodland characteristics as branches or leaves or roots or bark: 'but this change of shape does not affect the essential character of the tree-spirit' (Frazer, 1890, p.85) which maintained the same powers. Very often they were related to fertility, as they were believed to help the crops grow and to bless women with easy deliveries. One of the common traditions in Europe was to place a green bush on May Day near the house of a beloved maiden believing in the fertilizing power of the tree-spirit.⁷ As a matter of fact, several deities connected to plants are *nymphs*, they are female divinities or spirits, while male spirits appear but seem to be fewer.

2.1. The Laurel-tree (*Daphne*)

The Laurel Tree⁸ or *Laurus Nobilis* is of the plant family *Lauraceae*. It was spread all over the Mediterranean Basin in the laurel forest flora, but as the climate became drier, it gradually retreated. Its diffusion made the tree known in all the Mediterranean area, also because of its glossy leaves which contain a high content of essential oils used in cuisines and in massage therapy. It is a quite big tree: its height may reach 18 meters tall. Being a dioic plant, individual trees are either male or female bearing pale yellow-green flowers, while the fruit is a small black berry. Its main characteristic seems to be the fragrance that is sent out from its leaves, that might have attracted ancient people creating a myth on this glorious plant.

⁵ The sexual reproduction in Angiospermae plants involves two fundamental processes: meiosis, which rearranges the genes and reduces the number of chromosomes, and fusion of gametes, which restores the chromosome to a complete diploid number. In between these two processes, different types of plants vary: 'The way plants reproduce is a totally fascinating process. Out of the more than 300,000 different kinds of plants, more than half are seed plants. Seed plants make their own seeds from which new plants grow. Other ways plants can make new plants are from spores, rhizomes, bulbs, tubers, corms, cuttings, grafts, and buds.' from <http://www.essortment.com/plant-reproduction-55225.html>. In fact botanists classify the reproduction of plants as ones with perfect and imperfect flowers⁵. Perfect flowers are the ones that contain both the male and female parts and the plant is called monoic, while imperfect flowers are the ones that contain only male or only female parts and the tree is dioic.. Thus some plants bear male and female flowers on the same individual as well as flowers containing both male and female gametophytes, while other trees are distinct male and female individuals

⁶ The London Medical and Surgical Journal exhibiting a view of the improvements and discoveries in the various branches of the Medical Science, (edited by) Michael Ryan M.D., Vol VII, London, Henderson, 1835, p. 815. <http://books.google.it>

⁷ Interesting about the relationship between women and plants is the link with agriculture. As a matter of fact most deities that govern fertility or some of the most important plants for agriculture, as cereals, are women. The Greek Goddess Demeter is the Corn-mother as Cerere in the Roman Pantheon. Her symbols were a spike crown and a basket full of wheat and fruits. Several legends in Central Europe speak about the Corn-mother, the Barley-mother or the Rye-mother, while in America we may meet the Maize-mother and in East Indies the Rice-mother. See Book II, Chapters 17 and 18 in James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 411-434. Moreover, this relationship between trees and maternity also recalls the use of Latin terms for plants which are all feminine, as *malus*, *corylus*, *fraxinus*, *quercus* and the Greek words like *μελία* which means ashtree and is a feminine noun as well as *δρῦς* (oak), and *δάφνη* (laurel tree) to quote a few.

⁸ It is also known as sweet bay, bay tree, true laurel, Grecian laurel, laurel tree, or simply laurel.

Jacques Brosse tells the story of Δάφνη and Phoebus connecting several myths related to this couple and to the laurel tree, of which Daphne bears the name. In the *Ovidian Vulgata* Daphne seems to be a priestess of the Earth-goddess⁹ (Brosse, 1998, pp.168-170) and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she is called *aemula Phoebes*, that is to say like Phoebus, which is another name for Ἄρτεμις,¹⁰ and it is well-known that Phoebus is another name for Ἀπόλλων. When Apollo felt jealous of the friendship between Daphne and Leucippus, he found a trick to make the nymphs kill him. Leucippus fell in love with Daphne, but he knew that she rejected male company. Hence he decided to disguise his body to follow her in the woods.¹¹ As far as Brosse's interpretation is plausible, this story tells us that the Laurel tree could be worshipped by women, or better maidens, and not men. That is the reason why Apollo could not reach Daphne in her escaping run before she was transformed into a Laurel tree. This is how Ovid narrates her metamorphosis:

Her prayer was scarcely done when a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy. Only her shining beauty was left.¹²

Anyway Apollo decides to connect his own cult to the one of the plant, if fact he declares, while embracing Daphne in her tree-shape:

'Since you cannot be my bride, you must be my tree! Laurel, with you my hair will be wreathed, with you my lyre, with you my quiver. You will go with the Roman generals when joyful voices acclaim their triumph, and the Capitol witnesses their long processions. You will stand outside Augustus's doorposts, a faithful guardian, and keep watch over the crown of oak between them. And just as my head with its uncropped hair is always young, so you also will wear the beauty of undying leaves.¹³

⁹ Jacques Brosse, *Mitologia degli alberi. Dal giardino dell'Eden, al legno della croce*, Milano, Bur, 1998, pp.168-170.

¹⁰ She is Phoebus's twin-sister.

¹¹ This is how Pausanias reports the events: Oenomaus, prince of Pisa, had a son Leucippus. Leucippus fell in love with Daphne, but despaired of winning her to be his wife by an open courtship, as she avoided all the male sex. The following trick occurred to him by which to get her. Leucippus was growing his hair long for the river Alpheius.

[3] Braiding his hair as though he were a maiden, and putting on woman's clothes, he came to Daphne and said that he was a daughter of Oenomaus, and would like to share her hunting. As he was thought to be a maiden, surpassed the other maidens in nobility of birth and skill in hunting, and was besides most assiduous in his attentions, he drew Daphne into a deep friendship.

[4] The poets who sing of Apollo's love for Daphne make an addition to the tale; that Apollo became jealous of Leucippus because of his success in his love. Forthwith Daphne and the other maidens conceived a longing to swim in the Ladon, and stripped Leucippus in spite of his reluctance. Then, seeing that he was no maid, they killed him with their javelins and daggers.

¹² Ovid's *Metamorphoses* text is taken from this website: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met1.shtml> while the English translation is proposed by <http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph.htm>.

This is the Ovidian Latin text:

*vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus,
mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,
in frondem crines, in ramos brachia crescunt,
pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,
ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa.* (vv. 548-552)

¹³ This is the Ovidian Latin text:

*'at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
arbor eris certe' dixit 'mea! semper habebunt
te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae;
tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta Triumphum
vox canet et visent longas Capitolia pompas;
postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos
ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum,
utque meum intonsis caput est iuvenale capillis,
tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores!'* (vv. 557-65)

It seems that the main characteristic of this nymph is her ruffled hair blown by the wind that becomes her long foliage after the metamorphosis. Apollo thought about her hair while running after her, wondering how it would be if combed ('quid, si comantur?' – v. 495)

The winds bared her body, the opposing breezes in her way fluttered her clothes, and the light airs threw her streaming hair behind her, her beauty enhanced by flight.¹⁴

Thus we can say that leaves are the main feature of this plant worship; in fact Apollo's Delphi priestess, the Πυθία (Pythia), was the only one who could chew the sacred bay laurel leaves to prophesize: again a woman again the leaves. The legend tells that Apollo brought this tree from the Vale of Tempe¹⁵ where the Pineois river flows, and this river is Daphne's father. But there, a group of Maenads celebrated an orgiastic cult after chewing laurel leaves dedicated to a certain deity called Dafene. She is referred to as the Bloody one, the red goddess with a mare head. As far as Plutarch narrates, these priestesses were evicted from Thessaly and found shelter on Crete where they venerated the Goddess under the name of Pasifae (the one that enlightens everyone) that is to say: the moon.

The Red Goddess is connected to the first and the last quarters of the moon when the sky becomes flushed with red as well as to two of the phases in women's life: the one that precedes and the one that belongs to sexual maturity. Its hue is an allusion to blood: menstrual blood and the one of the defloration, but also someone else's blood. Dafene governed over a king, whose name was Leucippus, that was supposed to reign just for one year; at the end of it he was slaughtered by the furious Maenads.

3. Fresne: Marie de France's lai

The *lai Fresne* is the third of the collection of poetic short stories written by the author known as Marie de France.¹⁶ A short synopsis of the text would be useful to understand the analysis: It is the story of a baby-born left by her mother's trustworthy damsel on the branches of an ash-tree outside a monastery. After finding her, the abbess raises the baby as if she were her niece and makes her a beautiful and refined young lady who bears the name of the tree that has hosted her: *Fresn*. A young noble man whose name is Gurun falls in love with her and brings her to his manor. But his companions start asking about a heir and so they spur him to get married to a noble lady. Fate brings Fresne's twin-sister, *Codre* (Hazel nut shrub), to be Gurun's right wife. She is accompanied by her mother who recognizes the young lady as the abandoned baby, so that Gurun may marry Fresne and they will live happy ever after.

3.1. The Ash Tree

Among the *genus* of the *Oleaceae*, there are several species called *Fraxinus* spread all over the globe. However, analysing the distribution of the different species, I have identified the *Fraxinus Excelsior* as the one that hosted the little baby of Marie's *lai* when left outside the monastery, as it is native of Europe.¹⁷

¹⁴ The Ovidian Text tells:

*um quoque visa decens; nudabant corpora venti,
obviaque adversas vibrabant flamina vestes,
et levis impulsos retro dabat aura capillos,
auctaque forma fuga est.* (vv. 527-30)

¹⁵ The Vale of Tempe (Greek: Τέμπη) is a gorge in northern Thessaly, Greece.

¹⁶ As far as we know, it is not possible to give a sure identity to the writer of these *lais*, even though Carla Rossi proposes a new possible hypothesis in her *Marie, ki en sun tens pas ne s'oblie*, Rome, Bagatto, 2006.

¹⁷ It covers all the continent till Turkey, apart from Scandinavia and southern Iberia.

The *Flora Europaea* lists four species of *Fraxinus* native to Europe including *F. ornus* and *F. excelsior*, [...]. *F. excelsior* is the only species which grows in northern Europe, It grows only as far south as what the ancients called Macedonia. However *F. ornus* is widespread in Greece, and the two remaining European species of ash are found there also¹⁸ (Dumont, 1992, p. 324).

It is a large deciduous tree that may be 25-30 meters tall and whose leaves flourish after the flowers and fall at the beginning of autumn almost without changing colour, not undergoing several different aspects, as maples do. The flowers are dark purple and open before the leaves, but both male and female flowers can occur on the same tree; however it is more common to find all male and all female trees: a tree that is all male one year can produce female flowers the next, and similarly a female tree can become male. The ash-tree is quite resistant to floods and can live with its roots under water without suffering much. It may be a little fragile in its first years, but then it gains strength and resistance which maintain it against weather adversities: «Resiste al freddo, al vento, alla neve, alle nebbie e abbastanza bene all'atmosfera inquinata delle nostre città.»¹⁹ (It is resistant to cold, wind, snow, fog, and it quite well resists to the polluted atmosphere of our cities.).

One of the characteristic of this plant is the production of *manna*, that is to say a concrete saccharine exudation of *Fraxinus ornus* and *F. excelsior* and *F. parvaflora*. It exudes spontaneously or by incisions during the hottest and driest weather in July and August. It comes from the presence of true sugar and dextrin that manna is capable of fermenting. Manna, when long kept, acquires a deeper colour, softens, and ultimately deliquesces into a liquid. It is quite interesting to notice that classical writers used the same word μέλι for:

honey made by bees, honeydew (which we now know is produced by aphids and scale insects), and manna secreted by trees, and that these substances were not necessarily felt to be different in nature. Both the Greeks and the Romans felt that bees' honey resulted from the bees' collection of the other two substances. (Dumont, 1992, p. 325).

The word *melíai* means ash trees in ancient Greek, and there might be a connection between the words honey and ash-tree because of the manna. Anyway, *melíai* were also tree nymphs who were created when Ouranos was overthrown by Kronos, together with the Giants, and the Furies. The specific activity these nymphs were devoted to was the nourishment of Zeus with manna or honey. These nymphs were told to govern babies who were abandoned by their mothers, because of their attitude towards feeding little newborns with their *honey* and taking care of them. This is how Zeus was cared for as Callimachus says: the Diktean Meliai and Adrastea took him into their arms, laid him in a cradle of gold, and gave him honeycomb to eat and the udder of the she-goat Amalthea to suck.

The *melíai* with their name that relates them to the ash-tree are linked to the story of Fresne who was abandoned on a *Fraxinus Excelsior* outside a monastery:

Un freisne vit, lé e branchu,
E mut espés e bien ramu:
En quatre furs esteit quarrez.
Pur ombre fere i fu plantez.
Entre ses braz ad prist l'enfant,
De si qu'al freisne vint corant,
Desus le mist, puis le lessa (vv. 167-73)
(She saw a big and branched ash-tree
Well leafy and twigged:

¹⁸ Darl J. Dumont, The Ash Tree In Indo-European Culture, *Mankind Quarterly*, Volume XXXII, Number 4, Summer 1992, pp. 323-336. p. 324.

¹⁹ <http://www.mannadellemadonie.com/html/nsfrassini.cfm>

it ramified in four branches.
 It had been planted for its shade.
 She held the baby in her arms,
 And rushed to the ash-tree
 On it she put and left her.)²⁰

It is not strange to see an ash-tree planted just outside a monastery, as these plants are often put into the ground close to houses or manors.

«Vicino alle vecchie case, a Levante, c'era sempre un frassino. Qualcuno è sopravvissuto anche alla Grande Guerra e ora allarga i suoi rami sui tetti e sui prati intorno. [...] Sarà per tutto questo che a nord dell'orto ho voluto piantare anch'io un giovane frassino che ho levato dal bosco? [...] Crescerà da diventare come i vecchi frassini secolari accostati alle antiche e piccole case?»

(Close to the old houses, to the East, there has always been an ash-tree. Some of them survived the Great War and now spread their branches on the roofs and the meadows around. It might be for this that, north of the kitchen garden, I've planted a young ash-tree taken from the wood? Will it grow to become like the century-old ash-trees close to the old and little houses?) (Rigoni Stern,, 1991, p. 43)

Back to honey, manna and *melíai*, it is not surprising that honey is always part of stories related to raising children, and as far as we know honey was the first food given to infants by the Greeks and the Romans. If we accept the idea that *melíai* are considered to be both honey nymphs and ash tree nymphs due to their production of manna and honeydew, we can read several other stories and legends which connect the ash-tree to nymphs and children. We can also underline the German and Scottish habit consisting in giving newborns manna from ash-tree as the first food.

As Zeus was nursed by the *melíai* and the she-goat Amalthea, the Norse mythology shows us a link between the world ash-tree called Yggdrasill and the goat, whose name is Heidhrun. This she-goat is hosted by the huge tree on its foliage and bears the duty to feed Odin's warriors with her milk.

Yggdrasill is described by Snorri Sturluson²¹ in his *Edda*, a sort of recollection of oral previous traditions on cosmology and mythology of Icelandic origin.²² The world ash-tree is huge and immense and its branches cover all the worlds reaching the sky; it has three wide roots that keep it standing: the first from the lower *æsir*'s world, the second from the world of ice giants that originate mankind and the third proceeds to the world of the dead, Niflheim or Niflhel. Yggdrasill is inhabited by several creatures, both animals and deities, such as the Norns who rule the fate of Gods and Men,²³ a couple of swans living in one of the springs at the foot of Yggdrasill, Nioggrh the snake who gnaws the third root and fights with the Eagle living on the highest branches, four deer and the squirrel Ratatosk. This is how The *Poetic Edda* (*Völupsá* or The Wise-Woman's Prophecy) presents the three Norns:

²⁰ Maria di Francia, *Lais*, Giovanna Angeli (edited by), Parma, Pratiche, 1992, p. 128-9. The translation is mine.

²¹ Snorri Sturluson (1179 – 23 September 1241) was an Icelandic historian, poet, and politician. As a historian and mythographer, Snorri is remarkable for proposing the theory (in the Prose Edda) that mythological gods begin as human war leaders and kings whose funeral sites develop cults. From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snorri_Sturluson

²² The *Prose Edda* begins with a euhemerized Prologue followed by three distinct books: *Gylfaginning* (consisting of around 20,000 words), *Skáldskaparmál* (around 50,000 words) and *Háttatal* (around 20,000 words). Seven manuscripts, dating from around 1300 to around 1600, have independent textual value.

²³ The three most important Norns, Urðr(Wyrd), Verðandi and Skuld. They live near the first root and water the ash-tree. They are related to the three phases of the moon: Crescent, Full and Waning Moon and share the same duty with the Greek μοῖραι and the Latin *Parcae*.

19. An ash I know, | Yggdrasil its name,
 With water white | is the great tree wet;
 Thence come the dews | that fall in the dales,
 Green by Urth's well | does it ever grow.
 20. Thence come the maidens | mighty in wisdom,
 Three from the dwelling | down 'neath the tree;
 Urth is one named, | Verthandi the next,--
 On the wood they scored,-- | and Skuld the third.
 Laws they made there, and life allotted
 To the sons of men, and set their fates.²⁴

The name Yggdrasill seems to mean Ygg's horse, and Ygg is one of Odin's names. He is a war god, but he is master in wisdom and supernatural knowledge. Odin gave his eye to Mimir, the guardian of the Mimir's spring, the wisest person Odin meets in his wandering, among elves, giants and demons.

28. Alone I sat | when the Old One sought me,
 The terror of gods, | and gazed in mine eyes:
 "What hast thou to ask? | why comest thou hither?
 Othin, I know | where thine eye is hidden."
 29. I know where Othin's | eye is hidden,
 Deep in the wide-famed | well of Mimir;
 Mead from the pledge | of Othin each mom
 Does Mimir drink: | would you know yet more?²⁵

The idea of a huge tree as a link between the different regions of the creation is shared with shamanic beliefs. Siberian populations give a chromatic connotation to their shamans: white shamans ascend the sky while black ones visit the underworld. The means used by the shaman to reach their spiritual destination may be many, such as fire and smoke, a mountain or the rainbow or a simple ladder to be climbed. However one of the most frequent instrument to reach the different worlds is a huge tree, symbol of the *axis mundi*.

The Altaic shaman sacrifices a horse to *Ülgän*, the sky spirit who lives on the golden mountain in the sixteenth sky. This rite lasts three days and starts the first evening with the choice of a wood where a *yurta* is erected. In the middle of the tent a young birch²⁶ is planted so that it may become the ladder for the shaman. The same happens in North America, where the Pomo people²⁷ participate to a four-day rite during which they have to climb a ten-meter-tall tree as initiation. In the *Ikânipkâ* rite of the Western Evenks²⁸ there is a pole called *turu* in the middle of the *cum* (a tent), which is the symbol of the cosmic tree: it is decorated with leather, tissue, halters by the participants to the rite. Another plant decorated for the rite is the *Yiyas* tree of *Sanisqap*, a shaman of the Uyghur people:²⁹ they use ribbons of various colours like white, green and light blue.

Odin spends nine nights hung on Yggdrasill as his third test to obtain magical powers from the huge ash-tree. This is how it is described in one of the Eddic poems, the *Havamal*, in stanza 138:

²⁴ <http://www.voluspa.org/voluspa21-25.htm>

²⁵ Ibidem. <http://www.voluspa.org/voluspa26-30.htm>

²⁶ The birch is one of the most important trees in Siberian shamanism.

²⁷ The Pomo people are one linguistic branch of Native American people of Northern California.

²⁸ The Evenks (Ewenti or Eventi) are a Tungusic people of Northern Asia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evenks>

²⁹ The Uyghur are a Turkic ethnic group living in Eastern and Central Asia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uyghur_people

I know that I hung
 upon a windy tree
 for nine whole nights,
 wounded with a spear
 and given to Othinn,
 myself to myself for me;
 on that tree
 I knew nothing
 of what kind of roots it came from.³⁰

Odin shares his link to the ash-tree with Poseidon to whom the plant was dedicated.³¹ In the chapter on the *Tree Alphabet*, Robert Graves (1948, p. 163) analyses *N for Nion* which is the third letter and the ash-tree. He writes: «In Greece the ash was sacred to Poseidon, the second god of the Achean trinity, and the Meliai, or ash-spirits, were much cultivated».

Much more, Hesiod in his *Works and Days* deals with the descendants of the ash-trees as the third race, the bronze one:

Zeus the Father made a third generation of mortal men, a brazen race, sprung from ash-trees ; and it was in no way equal to the silver age, but was terrible and strong. They loved the lamentable works of Ares and deeds of violence; they ate no bread, but were hard of heart like adamant, fearful men. Great was their strength and unconquerable the arms which grew from their shoulders on their strong limbs. Their armour was of bronze, and their houses of bronze, and of bronze were their implements: there was no black iron. These were destroyed by their own hands and passed to the dank house of chill Hades, and left no name: terrible though they were, black Death seized them, and they left the bright light of the sun.³²

The connection done by Hesiod between the ash-tree and bronze shows the two materials that composed the weapons of the ancient Hellenic people. They were both symbol of hardness, but of tenacity and elasticity too, and ash-tree wood is still recognized for these qualities.

Il legno di frassino è bianco-rosato con riflessi madreperlacei; viene usato per manici di attrezzi da lavoro o da sport, per costruire mobili, carri, recipienti. Dai tronchi grossi e dritti si ricava un bel tavolame e dei pedali mazzati un pregiato “ebano grigio”.

(Ash-tree wood is white-pinky with pearly nuances; it is used for tool handles or of sport kit, to build furniture, carts, bowls. From its big and straight trunks you can get good boards and from its veined roots a fine ‘grey ebony’) (Rigoni Stern, 1991, p. 44)

Recollecting ideas on the main characteristics of the ash-tree from both botany and mythology, we may see that they are reflected in Fresne’s identity, as we read about her. If we consider that ash-tree wood shows a good level of elasticity, together with tenacity, we may see that our lady represents these two qualities in an excellent way: she is able to accept her fate, when she is kindly obliged to leave her position to the new bride destined to Gurun. The following passage shows how she is able to accept her fate and the way she flexibly reacts to the news, as the ash-tree is resistant to big amounts of water without rotting its roots.

³⁰ English translation of the Norse Texts taken from <http://www.beyondweird.com/high-one.html#104>

³¹ Another similarity between the two gods is the fact that they both became gods of seafarer when their people took to the sea. Then we can also add that both were related to the horse and that Yggdrasil means Ygg’s horse, while Poseidon was substituted by his mother Rhea with a fowl so that his voracious father, Kronos, couldn’t devour his child. Both the gods were also able to prophecy: Odin after gaining supernatural powers and the Runes from Mimir at his spring and Poseidon in Delphi before Apollo.

³² Works and Days, translated by Evelyn-White in:

http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_text_hesiod_worksanddays.htm

«Quant ele sot ke il la [Codre] prist,
 Unques peiur semblant ne fist:
 Sun seignur sert mut bonement
 E honure tute sa gent.»(vv. 351-54)
 (When she came to know that he was marrying her,
 She didn't show to be offended:
 She kindly served her master
 And honoured all his people)³³

But she is steady and reliable too. She doesn't hide, however she tries to make her best for Gurun's future: she prepares the bed for the couple adding the only precious thing she owns, her *palie roé* with which she was wrapped up when left on the ash-tree branches.

La noit, al lit apareiller
 U l'espuse deveit cuchier,
 La damisele i est alee; [...]
 La maniere lur enseigna
 Cument sis sires le voleit,
 Kar meintefeiz veü l'aveit. [...]
 Un cofre ovri, sun palie prist,
 Sur le lit sun seignur le mist.
 Pur lui honurer le feseit (vv. 389-404)
 (At night, in order to get the bed ready
 Where the bride was to lie,
 The damsel went there. [...]
 She taught them
 How her master wanted it,
 As she had seen it many times. [...]
 She opened a cachet, took her cloth,
 On her master's bed she put it,
 In order to honour him.)

Her reliability seems to be synonym of her constancy: she is like this deciduous tree that never changes colour even when Autumn comes; its leaves fall when they are still light green with yellow nuances at the beginning of the season, very different from the reddish maples and oaks that colour woods and forests.

Particularly interesting is the fact that she is moved from her position by her sister whose name is Codre (hazelnut shrub) because she may give a heir to Gurun, as Marie narrates:

«La Codre ad nun la damesele;
 En cest país nen ad si bele.
 Pur le freisne que vus larrez
 En eschange le codre avrez;
 En la codre ad noiz e deduiz,
 Li fresnes ne porte unke fruiz!» (vv. 335-40)
 (The damsel's name is Hazelnut shrub
 There no girl as beautiful as her in this land.
 For the ash-tree that you will leave
 You'll get the hazelnut shrub in exchange.
 The Hazelnut shrub bears nuts and pleasures,
 While the ash-tree has no fruits.)

³³ Maria di Francia, *Lais*, p. 138-40. The translation is mine.

But when Gurun's companions discover that Fresne is of high lineage and that she is Codre's sister, so that she may bring land and a legal heir as her sister, they accept her as Gurun's bride. This means that she may bear a child and feed it with her *manna*:

«Li chevaliers, quant il le sot,
Unques si grant joi«e nen ot! [...]»
Aprés ad s'amie espusee;» (vv. 499-505)
(When the knight came to know it
He felt such a big joy[...]»
Then he married his damsel.)³⁴

3.2. The Hazel

The hazels (*Corylus*) are a genus of deciduous trees and large shrubs native to the temperate northern hemisphere. The genus is usually placed in the birch family *Betulaceae*, though some botanists split the hazels (with the hornbeams and allied genera) into a separate family *Corylaceae*. As spontaneous shrubs they are well spread all over Europe and in Italy in particular. The name *Corylus avellana* gets its origin from *Abella*,³⁵ in the Italian region of Campania, a town known since ancient Roman times for the production of hazelnuts.

They have simple, rounded leaves with double-serrate margins and become dark green. The flowers are produced very early in spring before the leaves, and are monoecious, with single-sex catkins, the male pale yellow, the female very small and largely concealed in the buds, with only the bright red 1–3 mm long styles visible. The seeds are nuts, surrounded by an involucre (husk) which encloses the nut. Its twigs are flexible and they were woven to make baskets. *Corylus* loves shade and cannot stand too much sunlight, but it resists to low temperatures, so it may be found on slopes on the northern side of the mountains or hills.

In the Celtic *Tree Alphabet* its name is *Coll* and it is in the ninth position, so the month³⁶ is the nutting season, while the number is replicated in the fact that hazels usually fruit after nine years. In Celtic legends the hazelnut is the emblem of concentrated wisdom: «Something sweet, compact and sustaining enclosed in a small hard shell» (Graves, 1948, p. 176)

Close to Tipperary there was a fountain called *Connla's Well* which hosted the nine hazels of poetic art; like Mimir's spring at the roots of Yggdrasil, this well was the source of inspiration and knowledge:

«Over it grew the nine hazels of wisdom, 'out of which were obtained the feats of the sages'. The hazelnuts dropped into the well and caused bubbles of mystic inspiration to form on the streams that issued from it. Alternatively, the nuts were eaten by the salmon in the well [...] Those destined to partake of the nuts or of the salmon obtained the gifts of the seer and the poet.»³⁷ (A. Rees – B. Rees, 1989, p. 161).

³⁴ Also Snorri Sturluson reminds us of the production of manna that the *Fraxinus Excelsior* may do and that also the world tree, Yggdrasil, may carry out:

*I know an ash-tree
known as Yggdrasil
a tall tree and sacred
besprent with white clay
thence comes the dews
that fall on the dales
it stands ever green
over Urð's spring.*

That dew which falls from it onto the earth is called by men honey-dew, and thereon are bees nourished. Two fowls are fed in Urdr's Well: they are called Swans, and from those fowls has come the race of birds which is so called. <http://www.voluspa.org/gylfaginning11-20.htm>

³⁵ It is known as Avellino.

³⁶ 'It extends from August 5th to September 1st'. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 177.

³⁷ Alwyn Rees and Brinlet Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, USA, Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 161.

In the stories told about the salmon and the hazelnut, *Fionn*,³⁸ who is studying under a master druid, burns himself while preparing the salmon of wisdom one day. Licking his burnt thumb, he accidentally takes in a drop of the magic juice and so gains the gift of prophecy. Bardic inspiration is associated with hazel, and Scotland's other name, Caledonia, derives from *Caldun* (fort of the hazel), as does *cnocach* (wisdom) which comes from the more common word for hazelnut, *cno*.

In the *Mabingion*,³⁹ it is the magic salmon who directs Arthur and his companions upstream to find *Mabon ap Modron*, the Son of the Great Mother. Perhaps the most famous association that combines hazel, salmon and magic power is Taliesin. Known in youth as Dylan, he was born when his mother, *Arianrhod*, stepped over a hazel branch. This branch, or wand, was laid before *Arianrhod* as a trick by Dylan's father *Gwydion*, who knew the mother did not want him. The boy grew up with his father and became in time possibly the most famous Celtic bard, known as Taliesin. Taliesin had many shapes: "I am a blue salmon" and was famed for his teaching.

In the *Enciclopedia illustrata dei simboli*, Cecilia Gatto Trocchi writes about hazelnuts as symbol of fecundity and fertility connected to marriage: German people used to shout the word hazelnuts at the bridegroom and bride just outside the church, and the bride was to distribute these fruits three days after the wedding, while in Ukraine the bride's mother dropped hazelnuts and oat on the bridegroom's head.⁴⁰

In Greek and Roman myth, Hermes had a staff or rod made of hazel known as the *caduceus* - two intertwined snakes on a hazel rod - which still remain the symbol of the healing arts, although the original hazel leaves are generally transposed with the wings of Hermes. Traditionally hazel is generally believed to be governed by Mercury, which is the Latin name for Hermes, and Venus. White hazel wands, wrapped in a crane skin bag and carried by druids, hints at the legend of the crane who brought the tree alphabet from Egypt. Hazel's healing and dowsing power are still used, while its knowledge and inspiration are closely associated with the salmon.

Thus how wisdom, flexibility of twigs, fecundity and fertility, marriage come into Codre's existence?

Codre is as flexible as her sister is, and she accepts her fate without saying a word: she is married to Gurun and the following day she is separated from him, in order to leave her place to her sister Fresne, who has been recognized by their mother:

«L'ercevekes ad cunseilié
Que issi seit la nuit laissié;
El domain les departira»(vv. 501-3)
(The Archbishop advised
To leave things that way that night;
Next morning he will separate them.)

³⁸ A mythical hero of Celtic legends. His full name is Fionn mac Cumhail and he was a hunter-warrior, arts he learnt from the warrior woman, Liath Luachra, who brought him up in secret in the forest of Sliabh Bladma. His name seems to be related to his white hair.

³⁹ It is a collection of eleven prose stories taken from Welsh lore. They were recollected during the Middle Ages, but they recall pre-Christian Celtic myths and legends.

⁴⁰ In England a forked hazel-stick was used to discover gold, treasures and water, as we know from botany, hazels may undergo water stress, so the search for water with their superficial roots. Hazels were also believed to help cows in the production of milk, just pointing a hazel-stick to them. These magic powers of the hazel-stick relate this plant to the witches: it is said that the twigs were used to make witches' wands.

Her arrival in the story brings the idea of marriage: hers, but Fresne's as well, with the prospective of bearing children as hazels represent fertility and fecundity:

«En la codre ad noiz e deduiz,
Li fresnes ne porte unke fruiz!» (vv. 338-40)
(The Hazelnut shrub bears nuts and pleasures,
While the ash-tree has no fruits.)

Interesting is the meaning of hazel flowers as it is said in *The language of flowers* by Vanessa Diffenbaugh, where hazel represents reconciliation. It is true that the language Diffenbaugh refers to is the one used in Victorian times in order to express feelings and send messages through a secret code, and so it pertains to the XVIII century, while our *lai* is dated around the XII century; however it is quite impressive that Codre brings true reconciliation in her family, bringing her mother to Fresne's and creating the right situation for the agnition and the recomposition of the family.

We can suppose the young lady to be wise, as she understands the situation and leaves her place to her sister, but we do not hear a word from her, hers is a silent attitude that she shares with her sister who has been compared to Griselda of Boccaccio's *Decameron*,⁴¹ the young lady able to undergo several pains without complaining to show her love and devotion to her husband:

«Fin dall'inizio della novella Dioneo mette in risalto l'estrema crudeltà del marchese, che si contrappone all'enigmatica saggezza della povera Griselda. Gualtieri è descritto come un uomo protervo, quasi disumano [...], che ha paura delle donne e, per questo, tortura la giovane pecoraia con angherie sempre più crudeli.»⁴²

(Since the beginning of the story, Dioneo shows the marquess's extreme cruelty, which is the opposite of poor Griselda's wisdom. Gualtieri is described as a haughty man, almost inhuman who is afraid of women and for that he tortures the young swineherd with crueller and crueller tyrannies).

4. Chievrefoil: Marie de France's lai

This is the eleventh *lai* of the collection and adds a new episode to Tristan and Iseult's love affair.⁴³ In this occasion, Tristan used a symbol in order to attract Iseult's attention: a hazel twig with his name on it «De sun cutel escrit sun nun» (v. 54) And he wrote his name with his knife.

Anyway the twig is associated to a honeysuckle sprig:

«D'euls dues fu il tut autresi
Cume del chievrefoil esteit
Ki a la codre se perneit:
Quant il s'i est laciez e pris
E tut entur le fust s'est mis,
Ensemble poënt bien durer,
Mes ki puis les voelt deserver,
Li codres muert hastivement
E li chievrefoil ensement.» (vv. 68-76)
(For the two of them it happened
Like the honeysuckle
Which winds itself around the hazel:

⁴¹ The readers meet Griselda in the last short story of the *Decameron*: it is the tenth story of the tenth day.

⁴² http://www.griseldaonline.it/archivio/Chi_Griselda.htm#ref2

⁴³ The two sad lovers had been separated by king Mark, angry with his nephew for his love for the Queen. Tristan went back to the South of Wales, but as the love pain was so pungent, he left for Cornwall where he found shelter in the woods. There he asked about the king and the Queen and he came to know about a Whitsun Assembly where the Queen would participate.

When it is tied and tightened
 And intertwined around the trunk,
 Together they can live long,
 But if someone wants to separate them,
 The hazel immediately dies,
 And the honeysuckle too)

The *Lonicera periclymenum* is a climber that tangles around small trees and shrubs, with narrow spirals moving clockwise around their twigs and sprigs. This is its main characteristic and the fact that its flowers spread such sweet perfume in the air. For that reason it was told to provoke marriage if brought inside a house, and to favour sweet love dreams if its flowers were put in the room of a damsel.

So its qualities are all related to love and its tendency to create tight links and bonds.

It is quite interesting to see that Tristan chose the hazel to represent his identity in this love affair and that Iseult is described by the honeysuckle: even if it is not a case in which the name bears the qualities of the shrub, it is evident that the honeysuckle becomes the emblem of Iseult in her relationship with Tristan, that the link created by the *Lonicera periclymenum* with the hazel is a undying love bond and that life and death are one single entity in their story.

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