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True Love and Devotion as Defining Characteristics of the Women in *The Lais of Marie De France*

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The *Lais of Marie de France* is a collection of courtly love poems written in the twelfth century by a French woman known only by the name, Marie. This collection of lais belongs to the larger genre of courtly romance, and each of these tales tells a fairly similar story of tragic and forbidden romance. This concept of forbidden love was a defining characteristic of the genre of courtly love and is present in stories such as Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and several popular Arthurian tales. Courtly romances generally focus on a male character, usually a knight, who falls in love with a beautiful but unattainable woman. The knight has to undergo various trials to prove himself worthy of the woman's love. Love is depicted as a constant struggle which only the most worthy and admirable characters are willing to face. Female characters play key roles in stories of courtly romance by driving the actions of the male characters, however, their perspectives and personalities are limited to their roles as objects of male affection. Women rarely take on active roles in these stories, serving as a passive reward for the struggles and achievements of the male characters.

Several of the stories in *The Lais of Marie de France* do not fit these standards and provide more fully-developed and active female characters than the typical romance, like the women in the lais *Equitan* and *Bisclavret*. This has led many historians and literary critics, like Judith Rice Rothschild and Sarah-Jane Murray to view Marie's lais as a subversion of the genre. However, this is not evidence that Marie is in any way challenging the conventions of courtly romance. In fact, *The Lais of Marie de France* reinforce the traditional depictions of women in

courtly romances through both their contrasting depictions of good and wicked women, as well as the resulting punishment for women who are not able to uphold the feminine ideal.

In order to understand how Marie's less traditional female characters fit into her depiction of women as a whole, it is important to understand how women were typically depicted in courtly romances. This is difficult to establish, as many works which are considered courtly romances do not fit the common definition of courtly love relationships. Courtly romances are often defined as depicting female character who, through their great beauty, command control over a man who must work to win her love, "for love of her he must become pale thin and sleepless" (Capellanus 5). However in her introduction to *The Lais of Marie de France*, Glyn Burgess challenges the idea of a concrete definition of courtly love, writing that "love in medieval literature, as in any other period, is too complex to be reduced to a single model which will not admit of variation" (Marie de France 27-28). Burgess goes on to say that while they certainly differ in characterization from classic tales of courtly love like the stories of Guinevere and Lancelot, some of the *lais*, like *Guigemar*, do fall into the category of courtly romances. Defining the role of female characters in courtly romances is equally problematic, and scholars frequently disagree on whether courtly women should be defined by their physical passiveness or their emotional influence over male characters (Wollock 6-7).

With such conflicting definitions of how women should be understood in courtly romances, how can a working definition of the traits of courtly women be created? Despite their often vast differences in characterization, the women of courtly romances are strongly characterized by their desirability and passiveness, in that they do not take action against male characters. Women in courtly romances are always depicted as an object of desire for the male character(s) in the story. Courtly love stories, like Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale," place great

importance on the beauty of the female character, with extensive descriptions of her kind demeanor and exceptional looks. Chaucer describes the object of affection in this tale, a woman named Emelye, writing that she was “that fairer was to sene/Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene” (Chaucer). In addition to her beauty, the woman proves her good character by remaining a passive bystander to the fighting of the two knights in the story, who both want to win her love. Whether or not they return the love of the knight, and some of them do not, these women never become the enemies of the male characters. They can be indecisive and sometimes unlikable characters, and, like Guinevere, a source of conflict in the story, but they themselves rarely take active actions against other characters.

Marie’s *lais* contain their own definition of the ideal courtly woman, defining her as, in addition to being beautiful and passive, faithful to her lover. While mutuality in love is not a necessary feature of courtly romances, Marie consistently depicts the ideal young lovers as being faithful to one another. These two lovers are “nearly always on their own and pitted against evil in various forms: a jealous husband an envious society,” and “it is in fact by virtue of their loving that the protagonists are set apart from the rest of society and privileged” (Marie de France 27). In these *lais*, devotion and mutuality in love are key characteristics in defining the ideal courtly woman.

Upon an initial reading of these stories, the quality of faithfulness does not seem to play a part in any courtly romances. In fact, women in medieval romances were typically already married before they met the young knights who would become their lovers. Marriage is often depicted as an obstacle that prevents the two lovers from being together. Embodying the quality of faithfulness in courtly romances does not require a woman to be faithful to the man she is

married to, but rather, the man who loves her. In being faithful to love, even despite obstacles like marriage, a woman embodies the courtly feminine ideal.

This view of love and marriage can be traced back to the origins of courtly romance in the writings of the Roman poet, Ovid. In his work, Ovid defines love as purely extramarital “and (it) does not contemplate matrimony as its object” (Capellanus 4). While the writings of Ovid were satirical, and present a view of love that is much too cynical to be truly romantic, these ideas were taken very seriously by medieval authors of courtly love stories and provided much of the basis for these works (Capellanus 4). The concept of love as a constant struggle to be overcome is present throughout courtly romances of the Middle Ages, and has a clear influence in *The Lais of Marie de France* as well.

Several of the women in the lais which follow the tradition of courtly romances are adulterous, and they seek true love outside of their happy marriages. The husbands of the women in these tales are old, cruel, and unable to provide their wives with children. In fact, Marie criticizes these old men in *Guigemar*, in which she writes that “all old men are jealous and hate to be cuckolded” (Marie de France 46). While cuckoldry is certainly depicted negatively in some of the other lais, Marie seems to indicate that cuckoldry can only be expected when a husband has nothing to offer his wife and is cruel to her. The women are not happy in these marriages, and their infidelity is justified by their search for true love with another, more fulfilling partner. Despite their infidelity to their husbands, the women in these lais still uphold the idea of faithfulness which defined “good” medieval women. In these stories, it was not so much the women’s faithfulness to their husbands which defined their characters, but their obedience to the men in their lives. These women display their passiveness by enduring their unfortunate circumstances until a knight comes to save them, rather than taking their own actions to free

themselves from their husbands. In fact, the women do remain obedient to their husbands until the point that the knights comes along, actively seeking out these women. At this turning point in these stories, the women become devoted to true love rather than their husbands, and their willingness to pursue love despite the obvious dangers is what characterizes them as admirable and upholding of the courtly feminine ideal as defined by Marie de France.

This idea of female obedience is particularly exemplified in the lai, *Yonec*, in which a beautiful woman is confined to a single room in a tower by her jealous husband. The husband is described as very old, and he is not able to provide his wife with any children. The woman in *Yonec* embodies the ideal medieval woman in both looks and behavior. She is described as “fair and noble,” and her kind personality and passiveness denote her as a “good” woman (Marie de France 86). It is because of her beauty and good character that she attracts a lover who literally flies in through her window as a hawk and transforms into a knight who claims that he has admired her from afar and loves her unconditionally. Despite their love for each other, the lai ends tragically, and the knight is eventually killed by the woman’s jealous old husband. Even though the knight is dead, the woman remains faithful to him by obeying his request for her to stay with her husband and allow her son to avenge his real father when he is old enough. She endures her husband’s cruelty for several more years and dies from fainting just before her son kills her old husband. In dying, the woman proves her devotion to the knight, showing that she was truly devoted to him because, now that her promise to him has been fulfilled, she is no longer able to live. Her death proves that she really was worthy of the knight’s love and embodies Marie’s idea of the ideal courtly woman.

The woman in the lai *Guigemar* faces similar circumstances to the lady in *Yonec*, although her story has a happy ending. *Guigemar* tells the story of a man who comes across

beautiful woman with whom he immediately falls in love. This woman has also been confined to the castle by a jealous husband, and the woman in *Guigemar* also remains obedient to her husband, expressing hesitation before forming a relationship with the knight. Although she does make the decision to take in the knight, defying her husband, the woman does this because the knight is wounded. She is justified in her decision to take in the knight because if she did not, he would die. The woman falls in love with the knight, but after a short time together, her husband comes back and forces the knight to leave. The two lovers face great hardships over several years, but are eventually reunited and allowed to be with one another as a reward for their admirable devotion to one another.

The fact that the woman and the knight are in love is an important aspect of both of these stories, and justifies the women's unfaithfulness to their husbands. In courtly romances, love was separate from marriage, which was often depicted as oppressive and inherently loveless, leading married people to look outside of their marriages to find love. While Marie does not present such a cynical view of marriage in *The Lais of Marie de France*, ending some of the tragic and difficult romances with happy marriages, she definitely depicts love and marriage as existing separately, and presents the idea that adultery is not acceptable if it is done out of love. Marie depicts marriage as a societal convention which often gets in the way of true love, which makes sense when taking into consideration that medieval noblewomen rarely had the opportunity to choose to whom they were married, and they entered marriages for political and economic reasons rather than as an expression of love. For women, courtly love stories were often a way of "gaining control of their own choice in love and marriage" (Wollock 7). Marie supports this fantasy of gaining female agency in romance, but with a clear emphasis that this agency should only apply to situations in which two people are truly in love. In *Guigemar*, Marie shows that

“love, even adulterous love, if loyal and deep, need not necessarily lead to the death of the lovers” (Marie de France 29). This distinction is important in understanding some of Marie’s other *lais*. Marie does not criticize love on the basis of adultery, but based on the faithfulness of the two lovers.

Several of the *lais* in *The Lais of Marie de France* present a far more critical view of love. In these stories, the characters abandon loving relationships in pursuit of a much more selfish and purely physical love. *Lais* like *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* are often seen as a challenge to the genre of courtly romance because of the depictions of love and women in these *lais*. The women in these *lais* do not represent the ideal woman of courtly romances, taking on roles as antagonists in the story and characterized by their deceptive nature. While these *lais* do not fit in with the more traditional tales of courtly romance and have far more in common with the traditional *fabliau*, they are not necessarily out of place in the *Lais of Marie De France*. Two of Marie’s characters, the women in the *lais Bisclavret* and *Equitan*, are a clear antithesis of this courtly feminine ideal. Both of these *lais* are far more critical of the motivations of their characters and more moralistic in tone than some of the other *lais*, like *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, which fit the traditional pattern of courtly romances. Medieval literary scholar Sarah-Jane Murray discusses some of the *lais*, particularly the *lai Lauüistic*, as criticisms of the conventions of courtly love and the portrayal of adultery in these tales, but an important distinction is made when she writes that “Marie’s text can be understood as a subtle and very interesting critique of the covetous and destructive kind of selfish love, or *cupiditas*, portrayed therein” (Murray 2). *The Lais of Marie de France* do not offer a criticism of courtly love, but a criticism of selfish love and an inability to uphold courtly feminine ideals.

Medieval scholar Judith Rice Rothschild explains that while she believes the lai *Equitan* fits in with the rest of *The Lais of Marie de France*, “Marie does attack l’amour courtois” (Rothschild 115). According to Rothschild, the lai has far more in common with the traditional *fabliau*, and the lai is included more as a criticism of many of the conventions of courtly romance than another work in that genre. While both *Equitan* and *Bisclavret* do have far more in common with the traditional narrative of a *fabliau*, their place in *The Lais of Marie de France* contributes to the positive messages about women who uphold the ideas of courtly romance as depicted in other lais. *Equitan* tells the story of a happily married woman who betrays her husband by seeking out a relationship with the king. This story is interestingly, told right after *Guigemar*, which is credited as following the traditional format of the courtly love genre (Marie de France 29). *Equitan* greatly contrasts the story of *Guigemar* in its depiction of love. In this story it is important to note that both the king, Equitan, and the woman he falls in love with express doubts about pursuing this relationship. Equitan believes that only a man possessing of his wealth and status is deserving of such a beautiful woman, and his interest in this woman is depicted as having formed more out of pride than genuine affection. The woman also does not seem genuinely affectionate towards Equitan, becoming jealous and vowing to kill herself if he marries another, younger woman. To prevent this from happening, the woman plans to kill her own husband so that she will be free to marry Equitan. The lai ends with a moral: “evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another’s misfortune” (60).

While this lai can be interpreted as a challenge to the genre of courtly romance in that it depicts characters pursuing extramarital affairs in a negative light, this argument does not make sense in comparison with lais like *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, which depict adultery as tragic, but not evil. In fact, *Equitan* actually supports the messages about courtly female behavior presented in

the other *lais*. Marie makes it clear that in this situation, it was not the wife's adulterous behavior, but her decision to take action and kill her husband that led to her death. Instead of waiting for her lover to save her from her marriage, which is happy, she decides to kill her husband herself in order to get what she wants. Whether or not the woman is truly in love does not matter in this story, because she has gone beyond devotion to love by killing her husband, an innocent man. Burgess also agrees that it is the lover's "plan to dispose of the lady's husband" which defines the characterization of *Equitan* and the knight's wife, explaining that what these *lais* offer is a "condemnation of disloyalty" (Marie de France 30).

This moralistic disapproval of unfaithfulness also appears in the *lai Bisclavret*. In *Bisclavret*, a woman discovers that her husband is actually a werewolf. After interrogating him about his condition, she finds out that after her husband transforms into a wolf he cannot become human again unless he puts his clothes back. Upon learning this, the woman "tormented and harried him so much that he could not do otherwise but tell her" where he keeps his clothes when he transforms (Marie de France 69). Although she promises not to take his clothing, the woman deceives her husband, stealing his clothes and forcing him to remain a werewolf. After this she pursues an affair with a man she does not love, but who loves her. The woman's husband is described as a "good and handsome knight who conducted himself nobly," and it is clear that he loved his wife. While the woman "returned his love," and she is described as a beautiful and worthy wife, she breaks her promise to her husband (68). While Marie follows the traditional depiction of courtly women's beauty as a signifier of their good personalities in several *lais*, "she also seems to be aware that a pleasing exterior can mask a potential for cruel and misguided behavior" (Burgess 116). The women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* are deceptive in both their personalities and appearances.

Because they do not uphold the feminine ideal of these stories, the women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* could be interpreted as a challenge to the feminine ideal. Although the stories resemble those of courtly love stories in plot, the women in these lais have almost nothing in common with women like Chaucer's Emelye. The women in these lais are selfish, disobedient, and scheming, and they take on extremely active roles in their stories, making an effort to determine their own endings. However, in the context of *The Lais of Marie de France* as a whole, these lais uphold the concept of the ideal courtly woman rather than challenge it. These stories are not part of the genre of courtly romance, but they do reinforce the ideas of courtly love by stressing the punishment of the characters who do not conform to the ideals of courtly romance. While it is difficult to determine Marie's exact stance on the concept of courtly love, it is clear that she views characters who embody the qualities of love and devotion favorably, and characters who make an active effort to destroy love are depicted negatively. Unfaithfulness in marriage is only acceptable when the marriage results in the tragic mistreatment of a woman, but women who betray good husbands simply to fulfill their own selfish desires are portrayed as wicked. The women in the lais *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* deceive their kind and loving husbands not because they are in love with these other men, but because they do not respect the love that their husbands have for them. It is especially difficult to view these women as a challenge to the more traditional depictions of women in courtly literature when taking into consideration that both of them receive just punishment for their actions at the end of the lais.

Appearance plays an important part in the punishment of the woman in *Bisclavret*, and her beauty is removed at the end of the story to reveal her true nature. As punishment, the woman and the man she left her husband for are exiled together. In contrast to the woman in *Yonec*, who actually regains her beauty after falling in love and becoming herself again, the

woman in *Bisclavret* has her nose cut off to expose the ugliness of her true personality. The woman in *Yonec* is rewarded with beauty to reflect her personality once she experiences happiness in a loving relationship, and the woman in *Bisclavret* loses her beauty as a result of her betrayal of the man who loves her. The woman is described as having several children who are born without noses, and many of the women in her family for generations after her are born without noses as punishment for this woman's trickery. Marie is clearly making a statement about the morality of this woman's actions. Medieval historian Carl Grey Martin writes that the woman's punishment "asks its audience ... to ascertain the moral qualities and duties of her characters," and the conclusion the reader is meant to come to is that the woman was wrong for betraying her loving husband (25). The woman in *Equitan* is also punished for her actions, and she is pushed into a tub of boiling water by her husband.

The punishments of these women are a direct result of their actions in the *lais*. These women do not uphold the standard of the ideal courtly woman, and they are stripped of their deceptive beauty and forced to either live in misery or die. Their inability to embody this ideal of the passive, beautiful, and faithful woman, whom Marie depicts in *lais* like *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, is what leads to the tragic ends of these women. Unlike traditional courtly women, who admirably endure the tragedies of their romances and devote themselves to true love, these women chose to betray love by deceiving their kind husbands.

Although these *lais* are not truly courtly romances in that they differ from the genre in both plot and tone, they do uphold the ideas of the courtly romance by presenting an alternative depiction of wicked women who do not embody the feminine ideals of courtly romance. Despite their differences from some of the more traditional courtly *lais*, stories like *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* cannot truly be considered a challenge to the conventions of courtly romance, because

Marie depicts these aberrations from the genre as deceptive and wrong. The good women in *Guigemar* and *Yonec* show how courtly women were supposed to behave, and these other stories are included as a moralistic alternative to this depiction of women. The morals at the end of both *Equitan* and *Bisclavret* make it clear that Marie does not approve of the selfish actions of the women in these stories. While her exact opinion on the nature of courtly love is not clear, Marie is certainly not challenging the conventions of courtly love, and seems to be of the opinion that courtly romances can even be good if the feelings of the lovers are truly based on devotion and mutuality in the relationship. Marie's inclusion of these alternative depictions of women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* reinforces this idea, showing that women who actively betray love are deserving of punishment for their inability to represent the courtly feminine ideal.

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