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## Marie's Knowing Winks: Ironic Play, Courtly Love, and the Disruption of Generic Conventions in *Chaitivel*, *Lanva*, and *Yonec*

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MARIE'S KNOWING WINKS:  
IRONIC PLAY, COURTLY LOVE, AND THE DISRUPTION OF  
GENERIC CONVENTIONS IN *CHAITIVEL*, *LANVAL*, AND *YONEC*

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Anna Lia Johnson  
May 2020

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Andy Lemons, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

While readers such as M. L. Stapleton and K. Sarah-Jane Murray have devoted time to the courtly and Ovidian play in Marie de France's *Guigemar* and *Laiüstic*, less attention has been paid to that within *Chaitivel*, *Lanval* and *Yonec*. In this essay, I argue that Marie slyly mocks the subgenre within which she operates: she both participates in and pushes against the constraints of *fin'amors*, or courtly love. In her twelfth-century version of Ovidian one-upmanship, Marie pulls tales from Celtic and classical sources, redresses them with the accoutrements of courtly love, and inserts her own wry narrative voice through the means of direct authorial commentary. She gives a final Marian twist to her "assembling" of the *lais* by making her female characters not merely, as courtly tradition would hold, the distant objects of male desire, but decisive, knowing, and, ultimately, realistic woman. In the process, her courtly tales, probing as they do such fraught topics as Norman colonization and forced marriage, might have created discomfort for some members of her audience.

Both in her Prologue and in her *lais*, Marie reveals herself as simultaneously playful and as a figure of authority, never allowing us to take her tales entirely at face value. In this essay, I first highlight a few relevant moments from the Prologue and discuss Andreas Capellanus' *De Arte honeste amandi* before reading *Chaitivel* with reference to its absurd send-up of courtly components. Next, I examine *Lanval* as a comical revision of Celtic themes whose only happy ending lies in the exiting of the courtly "game," and finally read *Yonec* as including uncomfortable elements that disrupt its apparently courtly plot.

## DEDICATION

To my husband Randolph, for his constant encouragement, for taking on the lion's share of our children's care in the past two years, and for urging me to pursue this degree when I doubted myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Andy Lemons was an invaluable mentor in the entire process of my writing this thesis. He gave thorough, challenging, and always witty feedback to my drafts, and the flashes of insight that I came to while sitting in his office were the consequence of his excellent guiding questions and incisive observations. I am also thankful to Dr. Will Stockton for prompt and patient answers to my many questions as I navigated the MAE, and for his encouragement. Finally, I thank Dr. Lindsey Panxhi at Oklahoma Baptist University for introducing me to Marie de France and for encouraging me to pursue my conviction that Marie is, in fact, quite funny.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marie de France's medieval *lais* were long perceived as being those of a sage poet who wrote within a courtly framework, containing as they do such trappings: fair, swooning ladies, noble knights, jealous husbands, and refined love. Many notable Marie scholars of the twentieth century regarded Marie as humorless, as Elizabeth Wilson Poe observed in her 1983 response to such readings (310n30). I argue, however, that while playing with the conventions of lyric love poetry, Marie slyly mocks the subgenre within which she operates: she both participates in and pushes against the constraints of the cult of *fin'amors*, or courtly love. With *Chaitivel*, where she takes the "clichés of lyric poetry to their extremes and makes fun of the tradition" (Hanning and Ferrante 188), Marie portrays courtly love as an unfulfilling game that results in a weary stalemate between the man and the woman. She is careful in that *lai*, however, not to make any explicit statements about the characters whose actions she satirizes. From their frequent appearance in late-medieval manuscripts, *Lanval* and *Yonec* appear to have been two of Marie's most popular *lais*; and in these works, she ventures beyond the ironic detachment of *Chaitivel*.<sup>1</sup> In both *Lanval* and *Yonec*, while retaining many of the features of courtly love, and while including several distinctly Celtic otherworldly elements, Marie perpetrates a biting commentary on the courtly system, adding substance to elements with which she teases us in her Prologue.

<sup>1</sup> Glyn Burgess suggests that the original order of completion of the *lais* was as follows: *Equitan*, *Chaitivel*, *Bisclavret*, *Le Fresne*, *Les Deus Amanz*, *Laiüstic*, *Lanval*, *Yonec*, *Guigemar*, *Milun*, *Chevrefoil*, *Eliduc* (*Marie de France: Lais*, Bristol Classical, 1995, p. xxxviii).

In her twelfth-century version of Ovidian one-upmanship, Marie pulls tales from Celtic and classical sources, redresses them with the accoutrements of courtly love,<sup>2</sup> and inserts her own wry narrative voice through the means of direct authorial commentary. Marie is a significant source of information about the interior lives of medieval women: her contemporary Chrétien de Troyes, as Bernadette Williams discusses, presents women only in a supporting role (76). She gives a final Marian twist to her “assembling” of the *lais* by making her female characters not merely, as courtly tradition would hold, the distant objects of male desire, but decisive, knowing, and, ultimately, realistic woman. In the process, her courtly tales, probing as they do such fraught topics as Norman colonization and forced marriage, might have created discomfort for some members of her audience. Both in her Prologue and in her *lais*, Marie reveals herself as simultaneously playful and as a figure of authority, never allowing us to take her tales

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use the much-debated term “courtly love” in this essay, while remaining aware of the controversy over its usage. Joan Ferrante provides a vigorous defense of the term in her “*Cortes’ Amor* in Medieval Texts” (*Speculum*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1980, pp 686-695), where she discusses the fact that many mid-twentieth century medievalists considered “courtly love” a modern invention (by Gaston Paris, toward the end of the nineteenth century). She argues persuasively, however, that considerable medieval precedent exists in Provençal, French, Italian, and even Middle English medieval texts for the linking of courtliness and love (686). The most frequently used phrase for this “ritual pursuit of love which continues whether or not the object is achieved” is *fin’amor*, but that term does not, Ferrante says, include the “elegant disguising of the sexual impulse” that is part of courtly love (687). Like Ferrante, I appreciate the use of “courtly” not so much because of the “courteous” element of the game as because of its clear association with the courts: the word *cortejar*, *cortezar* in Provençal means both to hold court and to play court to a lady; the word *cortesia* was taken from *corte* (“court”) and means “usage of the court” (Ferrante 688, 694). Marie de France uses “courtly” frequently: all of her lovers, except those in *Chevrefoil*, which is an outlier in that it does not take place within a court, are *curteis* (692-693). Marie associates courtliness with love directly, as Ferrante observes, but not always positively: Equitan, for instance, who is “very *curteis*,” completely lacks control in his love-making (693). In her more recent review of the literature, Jennifer Wollock (*Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love*, Praeger, 2011) states that the critical consensus now is that troubadours did occasionally use the term *amor cortez* to describe the ideal of elegant courtship (31).

entirely at face value. In a number of her *lais*, Marie regards courtly conventions skeptically: in *Bisclavret*, the unfaithful and deceitful wife uses courtly love as a tool to attain her freedom from a husband for whom she feels contempt, while in *Laiüstic*, as Jennifer Wollock observes, the elements of *fin'amors* “precipitate abusive behavior” from a suspicious husband (43), after which the *lai* ends anticlimactically. Overall, Wollock reads Marie’s *lais* as a “tactfully understated but pointed” response to the courtly love theories of the likes of Andreas’s circle: the “Northern poetess talking back to the troubadours and their audiences” and offering her incisive but indirect social criticism (43, 124).

That social criticism is more blatant in certain *lais* than in others. While readers such as M. L. Stapleton and K. Sarah-Jane Murray have devoted time to the courtly and Ovidian play in *Guigemar* and *Laiüstic*, little attention has been paid to that within *Chaitivel*, *Lanval* and *Yonec*. In this essay, I first highlight a few relevant moments from the Prologue and discuss Andreas Capellanus’ *De Arte honeste amandi* before reading *Chaitivel* with reference to its absurd send-up of courtly components. Next, I examine *Lanval* as a comical revision of Celtic themes whose only happy ending lies in the exiting of the courtly “game,” and finally read *Yonec* as including uncomfortable elements that disrupt its apparently courtly plot.

## MARIE AND HER PROLOGUE

Marie de France is an enigmatic figure. “‘Marie ai num, si sui de France’ [Marie is my name, I am from/of France],” she states elliptically in the Epilogue to her Fables:

and despite decades of intensive research, we are still no closer now to knowing which twelfth-century Marie she was (qtd. in Hanning and Ferrante 6). We can say with some certainty, however, that she was an aristocratic woman—possibly Henry II’s illegitimate half-sister— of Anglo-Norman origins who chose to draw on Celtic material while interacting with the Welsh politics of her adopted home (McLoone 10). Marie’s own contemporaries alluded, perhaps unknowingly, to the playful power of her tales. Marie’s possibly jealous fellow poet Denis Piramus, writing between 1170 and 1180, dismisses the work of several of his fashionable peers within the opening of his *La vie de saint Edmond le roi* (*The Life of Saint Edmund the King*) and devotes thirteen lines to Marie, the author of *lais* that are “not at all true, and yet she is praised for them and her poetry loved by all” (lines 35-47, qtd. in Ferrante “1180?” 52). The counts, barons, and knights cherish Marie and her writing, reading it again and again, and the ladies take joy in her works because “they suit their desires,” Denis claims (qtd. in Ferrante “1180?” 52). She may have been popular: but rather than the simple, delicate figure that she was portrayed as being for the early part of the twentieth century, Marie was, Howard Bloch argues, among the “most self-conscious, sophisticated, complicated, obscure, tricky, and disturbing figures of her time” (*Anonymous* 19). This self-conscious yet mysterious authorial persona is particularly marked in her brief intro to each *lai*.

In the first few lines of her Prologue to the *lais*, Marie voices her belief that “anyone who has received from God the gift of knowledge and true eloquence has a duty not to remain silent,” a line that Marie may well have written with a wry smile (lines 1-

3).<sup>3</sup> Marie repeats this reference to her “duty” in her prologue to *Guigemar*, where she again alludes to Matthew 25:14-30’s *Parable of the Talents*: “Hear my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents” (lines 3-4).<sup>4</sup> In both prologues, Marie clearly indicates that she, a female writer, self-identifies as one who possesses this “gift of knowledge and true eloquence.” After this confident beginning, Marie invites her readers to engage in a type of play. She states blithely that “It was customary for the ancients, in the books which they wrote (Priscian testifies to this), to express themselves very obscurely so that those in later generations, who had to learn them, could provide a gloss for the text and put the finishing touches to their meaning” (lines 9-16). Whether Marie is speaking wryly here or whether she intends this practice to continue for her writing is ambiguous, and critics have for decades been kept busy in seeking to “gloss” these very lines. Some scholars, such as Tony Hunt, have viewed with heavy skepticism Leo Spitzer’s influential mid-twentieth-century examination of veiled Biblical significance in the *lais*, asserting that scholars glossing the sixth-century grammarian Priscian would be engaging in a radically different form of interpretation from that of Christian exegesis (Hunt 397).

Generally, Marie readers since the end of the nineteenth century have associated lines 9-16 here with Priscian’s opening to the *Institutiones grammaticae*, his influential

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay, I use Glyn Burgess and Keith Busby’s prose translation of the *lais* (Penguin 2003), unless I indicate otherwise. All Old French quotations from the *lais* are from Alfred Ewert, ed., *Marie de France: Lais* (Oxford, 1944; repr. with introduction and bibliography by Glyn S. Burgess, London, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Logan Whalen is one among many Marie scholars who have probed Marie’s allusion to Matthew 25:14-30: she reviews the literature in the “Prologues” chapter (4 n. 12) in her *A Companion to Marie de France* (Brill, 2011).

treatise on grammar: however, such an association is deeply problematic, particularly in light of the fact that Priscian's comments there do not deal with earlier authors of literary texts, but simply with older grammarians (Whalen "Prologues" 8-9). Some Marie scholars have concluded that her reference to Priscian is simply "not correct" (Mickel "Learned Tradition" 40); still others, that Marie was thinking of Priscian's *Praeexercitamina*, Latin translations of the second-century rhetorician Hermogenes of Tarsus's work, and of Priscian's emphasis on the importance of creating vivid descriptions (Zanoni qtd. in Whalen "Prologues" 11, Whalen 12-13). Marie's allusion conveys her knowledge of the scholars traditionally studied as part of medieval training in grammar and rhetoric. However, to my knowledge, no scholars have yet examined Marie's parenthetical reference to Priscian's dense grammatical work in light of a knowing wink: Marie's listeners would no more have taken her allusion seriously than a collector of fairy tales would refer soberly to the importance of reading "Hansel and Gretel" in light of Derrida's observations in *Of Grammatology*. Marie's nonchalant reference to Priscian, I argue, functions as one of the first of many playful moves in her collection.

As the Prologue continues, Marie relays the fact that, seeking to "guard against vice" by undergoing a "demanding task," she considered "translating a Latin text into French"—"but this would scarcely have been worthwhile," she asserts, "for others have undertaken a similar task" (lines 23, 25, 30-32). Having decided instead to devote her time to "lays which I have heard," she emphasizes her strenuous effort in preparing these adventures, stating the stages of putting them "into verse," making "poems from them,"

and working “on them late into the night” (lines 33, 41-42). This work combines with her nominal rejection of classical sources in favor of “lays which I had heard” and her desire to create stories from this source material that are more in line with her own poetic perspective to sketch a self-portrait of a decisive woman who reconstructs stories of other complex women for a partially female audience.

### MARIE’S OVIDIAN PLAY

Marie is also having fun with her listeners here, however: having revealed her extensive reading, teased us with a reference to Priscian, and stated her intention of doing other than “translating a Latin work into French,” she proceeds to provide numerous examples of her familiarity with Latin works. The first *lai* in her collection, *Guigemar*, is replete with Ovidian elements, including what M. L. Stapleton describes as the “fiendishly ambiguous” passage that comprises her sole direct reference to Ovid (291).<sup>5</sup> In this passage, Marie tells of a mural in the imprisoned lady’s chamber that depicts the goddess Venus casting “the book in which Ovid teaches the art of controlling love” into a fire, as well as “excommunicating all those who read this book or adopted its teachings” (lines 239-244). While most readers, including Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (37 n.

<sup>5</sup> Ovid’s influence on Marie de France has been discussed a good deal, mostly in reference to *The Metamorphoses*. See, for example, Kristine Brightenback, “The Metamorphoses and Narrative Conjointure in ‘Deus amanz,’ ‘Yonec,’ and ‘Le laiüstic,’” *Romanic Review* 72 (1981): 1–12; June Hall McCash, “Philomena’s Window: Issues of Intertextuality and Influence in Works of Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes,” in “*De sens rassis*”: *Essays in Honor of Rupert T. Pickens*, ed. Keith Busby, Bernard Guidot, and Logan E. Whalen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 415–30; Robert R. Edwards, “Marie de France and *Le livre Ovide*,” *Mediaevalia* 26 (2005): 57–81; Sylvia Huot, “Troubadour Lyric and Old French Narrative,” in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 262–78; and K. Sarah-Jane Murray, “Marie de France, Ethicist: Questioning Courtly Love in *Laiüstic*,” *Modern Philology* 109 (2011): 1-16.

5, Stapleton 291), interpret this line as referring to Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, which tells men how to get over women, it could just as well have been *Ars amatoria*, Ovid's cynical "manual of seduction" (Krueger 61). On the puzzling choice of having Venus burning the book, Stapleton observes wryly that the jealous old husband "seems to be drowning in a sea of misinformation, willfully or not" (293). Regardless, the mural, commissioned by the lady's jealous husband, functions as a supremely ironic piece: the imprisoned *mal mariée* does choose an illicit extramarital love. In light of Marie's negative treatment of *Guigemar's* jealous husband, she could not be read as endorsing the message of his mural.

While Marie's tales reject elements of the *Ars amatoria* and the *Remedia amoris*, this particular Ovidian allusion seems pointed, especially in light of its description of a mural. Marie here takes a sly, Ovidian shot at the perpetually playful Ovid, providing a pastiche of Ovid's riffs on Virgil. Book I of the *Aeneid* contains one of the epic's most famous ekphrases, where Virgil describes the murals decorating Dido's temple to Juno (Putnam 243). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book XIV, meanwhile, provides an extremely truncated version of Aeneas' love affair to Dido, devoting just four lines to their relationship before veering off into descriptions of complex love triangles. By putting Ovid's work—*Remedia Amoris* or *Ars amatoria*—in relief on a wall, Marie draws in two classical interlocutors, perhaps even pitting the two contemporaries against one another. *Guigemar*, which functions as a framing *lai* for Marie's collection, and which contains a more substantial prologue than any of the subsequent tales, thus foreshadows the preoccupation and play with Ovid's mock-serious materials that Marie will continue

throughout all twelve tales. Even when she makes no specific reference to his works, Marie reveals Ovid's influence through her similarly cool, skeptical authorial presence.

Ovid is everywhere in medieval literature. His work was central in scholastic education: to learn Latin was to learn Ovid, along with a handful of other classical writers. His writing also strongly informed court poets, neo-Latin poems, and the poetry of the troubadours and trouvères, and most medievalists recognize Ovid, and his texts' sharp wit and cynicism, as an influence upon courtly love (Stapleton 284-286, 288, Krueger 57). M. L. Stapleton, in his examination of Ovid's influence on Marie, states as his thesis that Marie, like most of her male contemporaries, "adopted and consciously refashioned" Ovid, in spite of the poet's apparent antifeminism (283). Discussing Ovid's contradictory persona, Stapleton suggests that the *praeceptor's* voice is most in earnest in *Remedia Amoris*, or *Remedies for Love*, where he implies that no man could be more deceitful than women, despite having stated the opposite in *Ars amatoria*. Medieval women writers, Stapleton says, "note Ovid's objectification of them, and his pseudo-antifeminism"—they may quote passages from the *Ars*, but with disapproval (290). I differ from Stapleton, however, in that he sees no irony in Marie's use of courtly love: in his view, "twelfth-century poets seldom distance themselves from love with Ovidian irony" (294). I puzzle over this view of Marie, particularly, as I will discuss, in light of *Chaitivel's* content.

## MARIE'S WARPED MIRROR IMAGE, ANDREAS CAPELLANUS

Ovid's *Ars amatoria* was a "sort of parody on the technical treatises of Ovid's day—a bit of fooling which should never have been taken seriously, but often was," notes John Parry (4). In 1941, Parry provided a foundational translation of Andreas Capellanus' twelfth-century treatise *De Arte honeste amandi*, or *De Amore*, which is generally translated *The Art of Courtly Love*. *De Arte honeste amandi* is the most famous medieval update of Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris* (Wollock 33). Recently, Jennifer Wollock dated the work to circa 1185 and said that it has now been associated with the northern French court of Philip Augustus rather than the ladies whom Andreas addresses, Marie de Champagne or Eleanor of Aquitaine (42). The problem of how to read Andreas, as Wollock notes, summarizing the past few decades' worth of scholarship on the treatise, has preoccupied medievalists for some time (42). Andreas' list of "the rules," embedded in the Arthurian "Book Two: How Love May be Retained" of *De Arte honeste amandi*, includes such extreme examples as "II. He who is not jealous cannot love," "XVII. A new love puts to flight an old one," and "XXX. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved" (185-186). In response to a purported question from the Countess of Champagne as to whether "love can have any place between husband and wife," Andreas states in the Seventh Dialogue that "We declare and we hold as firmly established that love cannot exert its powers between two people who are married to each other" (106). This statement, phrased with such outrageous language, could very well be a grimly humorous, hyperbolic response to the carefully arranged marriages of the time.

Fascinatingly, the next (and final) section of *De Arte honeste amandi* consists of his Book Three: The Rejection of Love, in which Andreas—the name Capellanus means simply “the chaplain”—warns the unknown subject, “Walter,” to eschew love, enjoining him, as a “wise man,” to “avoid all the deeds of love and to oppose all its mandates” (187). Critics are divided upon whether Andreas, having maintained a mock-serious tone throughout the first two Books of the *De Arte honeste amandi*, continues to be ironic in this scathing third section. In his review of the best-known twentieth-century readings of *De Arte honeste amandi*, Don Monson concludes that Andreas “to a certain extent succeeded in being funny” throughout the entire work, perhaps “without necessarily having intended to do so” (“Problem of Irony” 569). And we have evidence to suggest that medieval readers of *De Arte honeste amandi* were tickled by its contents. Betsy Bowden quotes one Drouart la Vache who, in 1290, encountered Andreas’ outlawed treatise and described it as pleasing him—“so much so, that I began to laugh at it” (qtd. in Bowden 69). He then produced a vernacular translation for his circle of friends, “for in it there is much delight” (qtd. in Bowden 69). It may be that Andreas, asked to record the courtly “rules” in writing, was amused and irritated by their absurdity and thus intentionally conveyed contradictory information.

Contradiction, paradox, and irony are not by any means unique, among medieval texts, to *De Arte honeste amandi*. As Sarah Kay observes in *Courtly Contradictions*, courtly texts delight in contradictions, their figures of speech often including paired contraries: in fact, Kay argues that “contradiction is central to the makeup of courtly literature, to the intellectual environment which gave rise to it, and to its critical reception

today” (2). Elizabeth Morgan too has discussed how paradox and irony are implicit in the courtly love game (168), quoting F. X. Newman’s observation that courtly love “entails the simultaneous acceptance of contradictory notions” (Morgan 171). Prominent twentieth-century medievalists E. Talbot Donaldson, D. W. Robertson, Frederick Goldin, and others would contend that irony is an inherent aspect of courtly love: summarizing their scholarship, Elizabeth Morgan asserts that “the literature of courtly love was always ironic, always mocking of man’s attempts to ennoble and sanctify idolatry” (Morgan 175). And as Frederick Goldin observes, the poets that appear to be “most committed to courtly love are among the most eager to make fun of it” (qtd. in Morgan 173). I argue that Marie’s nuanced, Ovidian treatment of courtly love precludes her from being a writer “committed” to it, but that she certainly makes fun of its absurdities.

#### IRONIC PLAY IN *CHAITIVEL*

Of all of Marie’s twelve *lais*, *Chaitivel* is the one that seems most closely to adhere to Andreas’ *De Arte honeste amandi*. In no other *lai*, as Emanuel Mickel notes, does Marie so clearly exhibit the “cruelty of the refined, mundane love of the courtly tradition” (“Use of Irony” 270). While Marie here provides many of courtly love’s conventions, however, she subverts them throughout the actual telling of her tale. *Chaitivel* begins in a familiar way: a lady who lives in Brittany is superlatively desirable to every knight “with any merit at all” that sees her even once (line 14). Marie tells us that this lady is respected for “her beauty, her education, and for good breeding” (10-12). Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante translate that final characteristic, *de tut bon afaitment*,

as meaning “the very best manners,” and the lady’s character is central to how we interpret the tale, as I will discuss. “It was not possible for her to love them all,” Marie tells us concerning the lady’s suitors: “but neither did she wish to repulse them”—and indeed, these two lines serve as an understated summation of the entire *lai* (17-18).

The proverb-like ten lines that follow, which deal with how to treat a persistent and perhaps unwelcome lover, have proven to be extraordinarily difficult to translate, a fact that Hanning and Ferrante observe in their version (181). Glyn Burgess and Keith Busby render the opening as follows: “It would be less dangerous for a man to court every lady in an entire land than for a lady to remove a single besotted lover from her skirts, for he will immediately attempt to strike back” (lines 19-22). The exaggerated nature of this scenario and the defensive posture necessary to the lady prepare us for Marie’s mock-serious prescription in the subsequent lines, which concludes the proverb’s hypothetical situation before drawing us back to the events of this specific *lai*. Although Marie’s *lais* generally remain in the indicative mood as she recounts the particulars of a tale, she here switches abruptly to dispensing advice to her readers. Even if a lady “has no wish to listen” to them, Marie chides, “she should not speak insultingly to her suitors: rather should she honour and cherish them, serve them appropriately and be grateful to them” (lines 23-28). As with her direct authorial interventions (by means of parenthetical observations) in *Lanval* and *Yonec*, Marie’s tonal shift here involves a heavy note of irony. Since *Chaitivel* is an unsatisfying tale of a lady who follows this exact prescription with regard to her lovers, and owing to Marie’s use of hyperbole, it seems unlikely that she is being sincere in this command to her readers.

While Marie often includes unnamed characters in her *lais* (in *Les Deus Amanz* and *Laiistic*, as in *Chaitivel*, Marie does not provide names even for her protagonists), *Chaitivel* is distinctive in the vagueness with which Marie tells her tale, and in her repetition of the phrase “I do not know.” This repetition seems like an echo of the words of that first and most outrageous of the troubadours, Guilhem IX of Aquitaine, and his *vers* 3, in particular, which begins with his statement “I will make a *vers* of exactly nothing,” and which repeats the phrase “I don’t know” at least once in each stanza. Joan Ferrante translates that poem’s fifth stanza, *Amigu’ ai ieu, no sai qui s’es*, where the speaker discusses his lover, as

I have a love, I don’t know who she is  
because I’ve never seen her, so help me;  
nor has she ever done anything to help or harm me  
and I couldn’t care less (Ferrante “*Cortes’ Amor*” 687)

As Ferrante observes, when we read these lines, we laugh, “it is funny” and is made even funnier because of the speaker’s self-consciousness (687). In certain other poems, Guilhem conveys a more somber tone: thus, when he launches into these insouciant lines of aporia, we see him engaging in self-parody, playing with the flexibility of courtly love poetry. Poets in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were working with courtly conventions that all of their audiences were familiar with, Ferrante states, to the extent that they “could parody them and count on the audience to get the joke” (686).

The interchangeability of *Chaitivel's* four male lovers is a matter of amusement: Marie tells us from the beginning that she does not know their names (line 34), and states that they are all young, "exceedingly handsome," "brave and valiant," "generous, courtly and liberal" (lines 35-40). Marie does not, throughout the course of the *lai*, provide any of the knights with a distinguishing characteristic or even with individual descriptions. These men, in short, seem to function as a unit: a description that fits one fits all. The lady, meanwhile, who possesses great "sense," or great intelligence—*fu de mut grant sens*—gives "careful thought to which of them was more worthy of her love" (lines 49-52). After much deliberation, however, she is unable to choose between them: "yet she did not wish to lose all three in order to win just one," and so she proceeds to maintain all four as long as possible (line 55). In light of the *lai's* tragic events, Marie's description of the lady's *grant sens* is profoundly ironic: the heroine's acute selfishness, rather than her great "sense," is evident in this refusal to choose that is interwoven with her coquettish encouragement of all four men.

The lady is remarkably deft in this encouragement: each man regards her as his beloved and wears her love token, with each seemingly unaware of her flirting with the others, thinking he has "the upper hand" (line 62). As the *lai* continues, Marie increases the sense of the characters' selfishness: while the knights fight in the "great *mêlée*," each seeking to prove himself, the lady watches "from a tower," and instead of being concerned about their safety, is preoccupied solely with not knowing "which merited her esteem the most" (lines 105, 110). Joan Ferrante, Emanuel Mickel, and K. Sarah-Jane Murray have commented upon how Marie alternates the selfish, covetous, and destructive

kind of love, or *cupiditas*, in her *lais* (here in *Chaitivel*, as well as in *Equitan* and in the other even-numbered *lais*), with the tales, such as *Guigemar* and the other odd-numbered *lais*, that focus on a selfless, redeeming form of love, or *caritas* (Ferrante “1180?” 53, Mickel “Reconsideration” 58-59, Murray 2). For the lady in *Chaitivel*, the tournament is merely an exciting game that gratifies her vanity. She takes what Emanuel Mickel describes as “an intellectual question of propriety” (58)—which knight is worthiest?—to an extreme. The lady’s self-absorption here is made to seem so foolish that some members of Marie’s audience might have been uncomfortable with her implicit condemnation of “frivolous and self-centered love affairs” (Murray 5).

To add to the muddled and parodic sense of the *lai*’s events, Marie emphasizes that when three of the knights are killed, their deaths are not the result of some mighty battle of good versus evil, or of conflicts between sympathetic and unsympathetic forces: they are killed by mistake. The tournament, meant for display, was not supposed to be deadly. Carried away by their desire to impress and possess the lady, the knights take enormous risks. The men that strike the three knights dead are immediately “grief-stricken,” “as they had not intended to kill them” (lines 129-130). Meanwhile, the fourth knight is pierced *par mi la quisse* (“wounded in the thigh,” line 123)—a description which, it becomes clear, is a euphemism for castration: the knight states in his closing speech that he “cannot experience the joy of a kiss or an embrace or of any pleasure other than conversation” (lines 220-222).

With the knight’s castration, we are faced, Howard Bloch says, with a “cruel irony”: the lady fails eternally to pronounce her favorite among the four, having been

faced with a surplus “of meaning or of names and of semen”—the knights, meanwhile, with their anxiety to pronounce her as their favorite, end with a complete absence of seed and of sexual desire (*Anonymous* 93). This failure to pronounce combines with the flickering ironies in Marie’s language to heighten the *lai*’s sense of instability. In addition to the situational irony inherent to the castration, Marie conveys a sense of absurdity through the lady’s response to the news that her lovers are, to all purposes, dead to her. “I shall never again be happy!” she laments, dwelling upon the loss to herself, and, musing upon the quandary of not knowing “which of them to mourn the most,” she devotes her energies to having them buried “lavishly” (lines 148, 157, 168-170). Marie provides a parenthetical interjection immediately after describing the lady’s funeral arrangements, her only authorial exclamation in the body of the *lai*: “May God have mercy on them!” she exclaims, as though to underline the extent to which the lady has not done so (line 172).

The surviving knight’s new eunuch state symbolizes, as Roberta Krueger observes, “the sterility of courtly love as a game” (79) and leads to the *lai*’s dead end: the lady and her knight embark on a tedious argument about its title. *Chaitivel* turns out to be a *lai* about a lady who writes a *lai* about *her* “great sorrow,” rather than about the exploits of four ardent men. The knight challenges her in turn to recognize that not only is one of her lovers very much still alive, but that the *lai* ought to be called *The Unhappy One* rather than *The Four Sorrows*, to focus on his experience rather than hers (lines 183, 226-227). “Upon my word,” the lady soothes him, “I am agreeable to that”: but her

acquiescence seems like cold comfort for a knight who claims that he is “bewildered and forlorn,” and that “death would be preferable for me” (lines 229, 216, 224).

In conveying this elegant squabbling between the two remaining protagonists, Marie alludes to the fact that literary works of courtly love seem, conventionally, to focus upon the beloved lady, but in fact generally serve as an eloquent expression of the man’s perspective. Here in *Chaitivel*, Joan Ferrante observes, the “pointless competition for priority in grief shows up the emptiness of the courtly love game, a male creation of which this woman takes full advantage” (*Glory of her Sex* 201). The *lai*’s humor, Matilda Bruckner argues, points toward questions about the ethic built into courtly love, which necessitates fidelity to a single lover and prefers the delay of desiring over the joy desired. The lady in *Chaitivel* does not wish to be deprived of three out of her four lovers; she has “bought into the notion that desiring is better than *jouissance*, that flirtation is better than possession and, with her own uncourtly twist added, that four lovers are better than one” (Bruckner “Comedy and Enigma” 12). In their poetic proclamations of courtly love, the troubadours, even while elevating the desired lady to the status of lord, “use the feudal code,” as Bruckner discusses, thus representing the love relationship “as a way of controlling the lady’s response” (“Fictions” 869). Meanwhile, Hanning and Ferrante, in the notes to their translation of *Chaitivel*, observe that in line 43, *pur li e pur s’amur avenir* (“to win her and her love”), the word *avenir* reveals that the four knights desire a “tangible reward, possession of the lady” (Hanning and Ferrante 182 n.3). Howard Bloch too weighs in on this *lai*’s preoccupation with possession: the only proper name in

*Chaitivel*, that of the “city of Nantes,” where the *lai* takes place, is related to the verbal form *nantir*, which in modern French means “to take possession of” (*Anonymous* 91).

The lady’s refusal to make a decision among the four knights is a reversal of their attempts at possession and of the possessiveness inherent to the *De Arte honeste amandi*. With the exaggerated form of “courtesy” that she extends toward the knights, then, in not “wounding” a single one with rejection, in not removing “a single besotted lover from her skirts,” the lady follows to a fastidious extreme the proverb with which Marie begins the *lai* (line 21). In the process, her refusal functions as an ironic form of resistance—to the tenets of courtly love and also perhaps to the sexism built into them.

In his discussion of Marie’s *lais*, Paul Zumthor reflects on how non-sung narratives tend “confusedly” to establish a narrative situation where the author is implicated in such a way that he or she could be, “very briefly at any rate, taken for one of the story’s agents” (284). Such does not, however, occur in *Chaitivel*. In fact, Marie underlines her own neutrality on the subject of the *lai*’s title: noting that some call it *The Four Sorrows* but that it is “commonly” called *The Unhappy One*, she states demurely, “Each name is appropriate and supported by the subject matter” (lines 234-237). She concludes her tale enigmatically, using the word “plus” four times:

Ici finist, il n’i a *plus*:

*Plus* n’en oï ne *plus* n’en sai

Ne *plus* ne vus en cunterai.

Here it ends, for there is *no more*. I have heard *no more*, know *no more*, and shall relate *no more* to you. (lines 238-240, my emphasis)

With her exaggerated repetition of there being “no more,” Marie implicitly underscores our desire to know more. There is no satisfying conclusion to this account of men and women playing the courtly game. Marie refuses to make a judgment in the naming of her text; she refuses to speculate as to what might have become of the young lady and of the young knight; she refuses to grant resolution. We are left, then, to draw our own conclusions about the purpose—or purposelessness—of the tale from its sly moments of irony and from its resistance to the very genre in which it is written.

Paul Zumthor has discussed how the subgroups of the fabliau, the Breton *lai*, and the adventure romance splinter into “fragments so that the oppositions selected a priori to define them cease to be relevant”—leading to an elastic subgenre with the author “(pre)tending to teach something,” to display to her or his audience an “unknown facet of the story, of life or sentiment” (284). The blurring of the lines between farcical fabliau (and indeed, Marie wrote 102 earthy fables, some of them quite bawdy) and romantic *lais* increases the sense of a slippery irony, and even humor, in Marie’s play with language. Don Monson writes that attempts to view irony as a subcategory of humor, or humor as a subcategory of irony reveal that “neither can be fully subsumed under the other” (130)—they are equally unstable.

Scholars of medieval literature have long had a tendency, Lisa Perfetti discusses, to separate comic from serious genres, so that comic aspects in a “serious” work are

perceived “either as an aesthetic flaw incompatible with the work’s overall purpose, or as a mere sugar coating covering the work’s kernel of meaning” (38). She argues that Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival suggests that the humorous moments in a work, by engaging in a dialogue with official seriousness, even if they actually reinforce conservative ideology, may simultaneously provide a “safe vent for the anxiety this ideology could engineer” (38). Bakhtin’s view of literature as a “spectrum of dialogue between various ideologies” enables us to see the medieval text’s “ambivalence and to listen carefully to how its contrasting voices may be working together” (39).

In light of this anxiety that is dispelled by laughter, our reaction to Marie’s infusion of humor into the supposedly elevated tales of *fin’amor* may not be so dissimilar to that elicited by the centuries-old subgenre of the literary grotesque. Michael Steig, who synthesizes the darker, horrified view of the grotesque exemplified by Wolfgang Kayser’s research with the liberating, comic aspect of the grotesque that Mikhail Bakhtin focuses on, discusses how “the grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic,” and results in “a state of unresolved tension” (Steig 259, 260). The grotesque, Ivana Bičak says, “simultaneously unsettles readers and makes them laugh”: this laughter, however, does not bring a full comic relief, but is rather a “queasy” laughter (115) that helps to offset some of the anxiety that comes with the subgenre’s creation of discomfort. While some readers balk at recognizing the presence of humor, irony, and parody in medieval literature, the inherently distorted nature of fabliau, of Marie’s playful *lais*, and even of the tradition of courtly love itself points to those disruptive elements.

While Marie infuses her play in *Chaitivel* with detached, wryly aporetic humor, she seems more personally engaged with the characters in *Lanval* and *Yonec*, perhaps in part because she gives more space to the latter works: *Lanval* has 646 lines, and *Yonec* 554, to *Chaitivel*'s 240. Marie also adds certain other complexities to these works' content: *Lanval* and *Yonec* both contain a Celtic "fairy bride" who comes from an otherworldly realm in response to despair on the part of a marginalized character. In *Lanval*, the otherworldly character is an unnamed female fairy, whereas in the Welsh *Yonec*, the exotic male knight Muldumarec represents the fairy world. Both otherworldly, Celtic-influenced characters<sup>6</sup> function as fairy brides. Michael Faletra argues that the Celtic fairy bride motif is generally exemplary of mortals' inability to dominate and control the ambiguous supernatural force (80). Both *Lanval* and *Yonec*, as I will discuss, emphatically convey a failure on the part of the ruling authorities (Arthur in *Lanval*; the jealous old husband in *Yonec*) to control the marginalized and supernatural characters in these *lais*.

<sup>6</sup> Marie herself directly refers to the Breton sources for her *lais*, and numerous critics have discussed the fact that the origins of these stories may be merely Celtic, not exclusively from Brittany. Michael Faletra, Marianne Fisher, Katherine McLoone, and Patrick Sims-Williams are among those who provide convincing arguments for Celtic allusions within the *lais*' descriptions of otherworldly characters and places, in addition to poring over the possible Welsh location of specific *lais*. The Welsh themselves often associated the Bretons with the Britons, describing the Bretons as "potentially Cymry" or Welsh as early as the tenth century (Pryce qtd. in McLoone 11). A number of Celtic-influenced Anglo-Norman works feature otherworldly beings that impose a taboo upon their mortal lovers, a taboo very similar in nature to the *geis* that is so prevalent in Irish literature (Byrne 44). Both *Lanval* and *Yonec* contain such a taboo that, when broken, leads to the *lai*'s crisis (Burgess and Busby 28). The end of *Lanval* also bears remarkable similarities to the ancient Irish tale of Oisín of the Fianna, who rides off to Tír na nÓg with fairy-lady Niamh. However, while critics such as John Carey have argued persuasively for the possibility of Irish monks bringing tales to Wales (121-131), the specific origins of these individual *lais* are nearly impossible to ascertain.

## THE COURTLY WORLD IN *LANVAL*

In *Lanval*, the protagonist's rejection of the unjust Arthurian court in favor of his fairy mistress's otherworld draws parallels with other Celtic depictions of lands such as the Irish Tír na nÓg, a peaceful realm frequently portrayed as the locus of "right and just kingship" (Findon 29). Lanval is not traveling to Tír na nÓg, but Marie does provide a specific name for this *lai*'s otherworld: Avalun, or Avalon. Several critics have discussed the anagrammatic relevance of "Lanval" to "Avalon," a connection most evident in MS.C, where the hero's name is spelled "Launval" (Poe 309n28). Marie certainly emphasizes her hero's name in the *lai*. Within the work's 644 octosyllabic lines, Marie uses Lanval's name a total of thirty-nine times, creating a "repetitious sonority," as Logan Whalen notes in her translation, that is especially evident with Marie's use of anaphora in describing Lanval's gift-granting and general benevolence:

Lanval donout les riches duns,  
Lanval acquitout les prisuns,  
Lanval vesteit les juleürs,  
Lanval faiseit les granz honus,  
Lanval despendeit largement,  
Lanval donout or e argent:  
N'i ot estrange ne privé  
A qui Lanval n'eüst doné. (lines 209-216)

Lanval gave costly gifts, Lanval freed prisoners, Lanval clothed the jongleurs, Lanval performed many honourable acts [Lanval disbursed generously, Lanval gave gold and silver]. There was no one, stranger or friend, to whom he would not have given gifts. (Whalen *Poetics of Memory* 75)

Marie's use of anaphora here fixes her hero's name in her hearers' minds and emphasizes Lanval's actions as being reminiscent of those of a lord or king. The repetition also possibly aids in intensifying Lanval's association with Avalon, an association that comes to fruition at the close of the *lai*, when Lanval exits with his fairy bride "to Avalon, so the Bretons tell us" (lines 641-642). Marie both begins and ends the *lai* with Breton references: at the *lai*'s beginning, she mentions that her "very noble young" protagonist's name "in Breton is Lanval," portraying Lanval as though he were a local Breton legend (line 4). His name might be a variation of the Celtic god Lanovalus, who was worshipped, Constance Bullock-Davies states, in the vicinity of Carlisle, "the Roman *Avalana*" or Avalon (qtd. in Mickel "Learned Tradition" 33). This Arthurian knight's departure to the island to which he bears an anagrammatic connection is a return home, in a sense: as he travels to the land from which his name possibly derives, Lanval is, in Katherine McLoone's words, realizing his unique Celtic identity "through the woman of Avalun" and "vacating the court to which he is now an interloper" (12). Regardless of whether Lanval will be able to find himself within a land bearing a

“confused version” of his own name (Poe 309n28), the Lanval-Avalun anagram seems like a game on Marie’s part.

Marie highlights Lanval’s outsider status from the *lai*’s beginning, mentioning Arthur’s neglect only of Lanval as well as how “many were envious” of him (line 23). She also refers to him as *humme d’autre pais*, a “man from abroad” in the court scene and as being “alone and forlorn, having no relation or friend there” earlier when the king asks for pledges for him (lines 398-399). Lanval is quite literally a foreigner, a fact that provides a parallel to his fairy mistress, who is similarly, albeit in more extreme fashion, alien to Arthur’s court (Byrne 62). Marie provides a deliberate break from her narrative early in the text, after having mentioned that Lanval is “far from his inheritance,” by speaking directly to her audience. “Lords, do not be surprised,” she urges, without the wry humor of later asides within *Lanval*: “a stranger bereft of advice can be very downcast in another land when he does not know where to seek help” (lines 35-38). Marie here intentionally breaks the fourth wall, drawing perhaps from her own experience as a foreigner “de France” but now living in Britain. She urges her aristocratic audience to beware the discourtesy and the dangers of ostracizing vulnerable foreigners on the margins. In so doing, she also foreshadows Lanval’s receiving help from someone outside of the hegemonic Arthurian court structure.

While Marie’s treatment of women can be rather mixed—witness as an example the harsh ending for the vindictive wife in *Bisclavret*—her *lais* often feature heroines who are strong-willed and who voice their desires very clearly. In her *lais*, Marie sympathetically explores the situations of the “most marginalized members of the

Norman aristocracy, specifically women and bachelor knights” (Finke and Shichtman 479), a category describing both of the human characters in these two longer tales: Lanval and the unnamed *mal mariée* of *Yonec*. Women may be, in Finke and Shichtman’s words, “marginalized” members of the Anglo-Norman society, but the fairy lady at the heart of *Lanval* is no retiring character. In fact, she initiates their relationship, placing herself conspicuously in his path when he is sorrowing over Arthur’s rejection; and all of her actions and words indicate that she is directing the course of their relationship. Her maidens approach Lanval with the information that their lady “has sent us for you”: “Come with us,” they command him (line 74). When Lanval first sees the unnamed fairy lady, she is the first to speak, calling to him, and telling him frankly that “for you I came from my country. I have come far in search of you” (lines 11-112). While befitting the language of well-mannered romantic love, her words are also forthright and decisive; and Lanval immediately acquiesces to this woman who knows her own mind so well, saying, “I shall do as you bid and abandon all others for you” (lines 127-128). When we first encounter this richly clad *pucele*, she lounges, Jane Burns, says “like a temptress, scantily clad on a sumptuous bed,” but she behaves, as the *lai* continues, more as a knight, a king, and a lord than a lady (167).

In this scene, Marie provides two parallel asides directly after lines where she has described the enthusiastic sexual relationship between Lanval and his mistress. Marie seems genuinely amused in these asides—as in her observation upon Lanval’s being granted his fairy mistress’s “love and her body” that “Now Lanval was on the right path!” (line 134). In the parallel interjection a few lines later, after Lanval has lain down beside

his mistress on the bed, Marie states, “now Lanval was well lodged” (line 154). In this latter line, Marie gives the word *herberge*, or “lodged,” an ironic double meaning: *herberge* refers simultaneously to lodging in the general sense, and to being lodged within a woman (Mickel “Use of Irony” 71). Here, Marie’s mischievous observation does not merely provide comic relief: it also underscores Lanval’s previously disenfranchised state and the ironic fact that it has taken a feminine fairy benefactor for Lanval to be “lodged” in the manner that he deserves.

The fairy lady continues to direct their relationship throughout the remainder of the *lai*, setting the terms of the “boon” that she grants him, and finally exhorting him to return to court: “Beloved,” she urges, “arise! You can stay no longer” (line 159). Marie provides numerous strong verbs to emphasize the forcefulness and independent thinking of this fairy lady who has smoothly assumed the role of Lanval’s gift-granting lord. The lady’s departure from convention in proposing love to Lanval and in taking the initiative numerous times represents “an inversion of courtliness” (B. Wind qtd. in Poe 305n16). This scene functions also as a play on the *alba*, a well-known poetic lament over the daybreak separation of a knight and his lady who have spent the night amorously together: Marie alludes to the *alba* genre by means of the words *Levez sus* (“arise,” or “get up”) in line 159. She “makes sport of the melancholy dawn song,” as Elizabeth Poe observes: while the *alba* generally conveys a sensation of urgency, as the lovers behold the approach of the dawn, for Lanval and his fairy mistress, the dawn presents no threats because Marie rejects the typical early-morning setting in favor of mid-afternoon, in addition to dispensing with a jealous husband figure or any ominous bird calls (Poe 306).

As a result, Poe states, the *pucele*'s brisk exhortation of *levez sus / Vos n'i poez demurer plus; / Alez vos en!* (lines 159-61), lacks conviction (306-307). Neither Lanval nor we as readers can discern why he should rush: and, in fact, not only does Lanval not rush away, but he is dressed resplendently in "rich garments" (line 174), put through ceremonious and unhurried hand-washing, and enjoys a "joyful" supper with his beloved, at which he is "very courteously served" (lines 183-184). At this meal, Marie tells us, there was one "*entremés*" in "abundance that pleased the knight particularly, for he often kissed his beloved and embraced her closely" (lines 185-188). Burgess and Busby translate *entremés* simply as "dish," while Hanning and Ferrante modernize the word to "entremet": the latter conveys more of Marie's sly double entendre, indicating an interlude that is more than merely culinary.

As with her play on the *alba*, Marie repeatedly causes us to anticipate what "ought" to take place in a romance, and then refuses to have the tale conform to our expectations: she provides, Elizabeth Poe states, the standard "building blocks of Old French romance"—the hospitality theme, adulterous love, justice by tribunal—but then refuses to conclude them as expected, or pokes fun at them (307, 309). When Lanval breaks his promise to his fairy lover to remain silent about her existence, Marie both signals her awareness of the *geis* or taboo common to Celtic literature and exaggerates courtly conventions. Ironically, Lanval breaks faith with his lady by overpraising her: by his use of the encomium, he adheres too closely to the "adulatory context of courtly literature," Howard Bloch asserts (*Medieval Misogyny* 142). Once Lanval has spoken the taboo, Marie emphasizes the excessive nature of his suffering: the "distraught and

anguished” hero laments, begs for death, sighs, faints, cries out to his unseen lover for mercy (lines 337-344), and becomes in essence the “archetypal afflicted courtly lover,” illustrating the consequences of “a rhetoric of excessive praise” (Bloch 142).

However, what distinguishes Lanval from the suffering hero of the courtly lyric is a matter of perspective (Bloch *Medieval Misogyny* 142): the songs of the troubadours are from the first person, the lyric “I.” Marie presents *Lanval* from the perspective of a detached third party and she underscores that detachment with another of her parenthetical interjections. Just after describing how “it was a wonder” that the distressed Lanval “did not kill himself,” she queries, “Alas, what will he do?” (lines 346, 351). Since Marie immediately afterward launches into what indeed Lanval does, and what is done to Lanval, her interruption functions not just as a rhetorical question calculated to cause her listeners to lean forward eagerly, but as a deliberate reminder of her authorial distance from the courtly conventions.

During the court tribunal, when faced with King Arthur, Lanval’s lady and her female attendants control the scene, making the male characters suddenly passive. King Arthur’s thrice-mentioned impatience for the trial to be concluded seems impotent and ineffectual, as he cannot compel his barons to do as he wishes (lines 469, 499-502, 544). Meanwhile, all of the Lady’s maidens speak in imperatives, each commanding Arthur to “make your chambers available” for their mistress (lines 491, 535). While Jerry Root maintains that the fairy-woman’s appearance at court, with Marie’s heavy emphasis upon every man’s awestruck reaction to her physical beauty, merely highlights her as an object of the male gaze (17), Marie’s words nevertheless make it clear that the lady is not

constrained by any man. The lady speaks, briefly, because “she had no wish to remain,” and after the judges pass the verdict that she has specified, she leaves, “for the king could not retain her”—once again emphasizing Arthur’s powerlessness in the face of this otherworldly character (lines 614, 631).

Describes the entrance of the fairy lady’s maidens, Marie calls them “extremely comely” and says that they are “dressed only in purple taffeta”—“next to their bare skin,” she emphasizes (lines 474-476). After such an explicit physical description, Marie states, slyly, *Cil les esgardent volenters*, “the knights were pleased to see them” (line 477). This single, “well-placed line,” as Emanuel Mickel observes, foreshadows the “future course of the text and Lanval’s deliverance” (“Use of Irony” 282), in addition to highlighting Marie’s playfulness as a writer. Elizabeth Poe, who has examined Marie’s ironic toying with the various meanings of the words *plait*, *departir*, and *esgarder* in *Lanval*, discusses the play with *esgarder/les esgardent* in this line and the fact that Marie here reaches the culmination of her repetition of *esgarder* throughout the *lai* (308). Poe notes that *esgarder* means “to regard attentively, to gaze upon,” but that in the context of the court, it signifies “to pass judgement” (308). The word, in various forms, recurs throughout the *lai*: describing Arthur’s queen’s lustful appreciation of Lanval, Marie states *Lanval conut e esgarda* (line 241). During the trial, the knightly judges, who ought to be concerned with *esgarder*, or “rational decision making,” cannot restrain themselves from *esgarder*, gawking—to the extent that when Marie tells us that Lanval has been spared the *esgart* of the judges (line 629), we are uncertain as, as Poe observes, as to whether “their wisdom or their lust has saved him” (Poe 308).

As the *lai* ends, Marie shows up the courtly love game, parodied here by Arthur's bored, aristocratic queen's toying spitefully with the outsider knight, and by the lustful knights' being rendered foolish by the disdainful fairy lady and her maidens. Having played with courtly conventions throughout *Lanval*, Marie has her fairy lady sweep out of the court and ride away—and, as a parting shot, she emphasizes that Lanval jumps onto his lady's palfrey “behind her,” and “was borne” away (lines 640, 644). Rather than presenting a knight in an agonizing love triangle with an icy, unavailable married *domna* and her jealous husband, Marie in *Lanval* features a foreign knight, a lustful queen in whom the protagonist has no interest, that queen's hapless husband, and an eminently available, unmarried fairy lady who directs the *lai*'s action. This decisive, scene-stealing woman, in particular, when combined with Marie's authorial interjections, points to the poet's play with the male-controlled tenets of courtly love.

#### DARK PLAY IN *YONEC*

In *Lanval* and *Yonec*, the marginalized characters do not suffer silently. In fact, Burgess and Busby have noted that the *lais* as a whole create the impression that “the women characters are more forceful than the men” (33). The women in *Lanval* and *Yonec*, despite the patriarchal social context, both provide a dissenting voice to the injustice they perceive. Lanval's fairy lady not only presents herself as his wife or mistress (“gift granted”) but becomes her lover's “gift granter” and lord after his blatant mistreatment by the remarkably colonial Arthurian court (McLoone 8)—while Yonec's mother cries out passionately against her husband's repressive treatment and voices her

desire for a “courtly,” “worthy” lover (87). Marie does not provide a name for either of these women, but the absence of names makes their decisiveness all the more striking.

Marie’s *Yonec* presents the inverse of Lanval’s romantic couple: a fairy king visits a human woman. A number of early insular tales feature mortal women visited by disguised otherworldly men. Tom Peete Cross, Alfred Nutt, Matthieu Boyd, and Joanne Findon, among others, have discussed certain strong similarities between *Yonec* and the Irish *Snám dá Én* (*Swim Two Birds*) and *Togáil Bruidne Dá Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*). However, Findon makes the crucial distinction that such tales do not, unlike *Yonec*, relate the events from the female’s perspective (29n10). *Yonec* involves an otherworldly male whose appearance fulfils the clearly expressed desires of a relatable and frustrated woman. Marie presents this woman both sympathetically, as I will discuss, and with a great deal of realism. Bernadette Williams has compared Chrétien de Troyes’ romances with Marie’s *lais*, discussing how in Chrétien’s tales, the love affairs are conducted from the male viewpoint and no pregnancies occur to “distract the knight” (81). Chrétien’s contemporary Marie, however, presents love affairs far more realistically, with attentiveness to the woman’s perspective—and her *lais*’ love affairs often result in pregnancies.

From the outset of *Yonec*, Marie seems to pursue well-worn courtly conventions: a beautiful young woman is married to a jealous older man, seeks a noble lover, and receives in response the handsome young fairy knight Muldumarec, who visits her whenever she wishes. The lovers’ secret meetings reveal an inherent irony of the husband’s attempt to hide his wife away from any potential lovers: the tower that he uses

to trap his wife enables the young lovers to hide themselves from him. Love between this controlling elderly *avouez* and the young wife whom he imprisons is indeed impossible. Marie might seem here to be conforming to Andreas Capellanus' declarations regarding how romantic love must be by definition adulterous. However, as I will discuss, Marie complicates the narrative in a number of ways. The fairy knight is a foreigner, and Yonec, the mixed-race child born of Muldumarec and the woman's union, threatens the established order of colonial activity in Wales. In *De Arte honeste amandi*, Andreas warns over and over, as Howard Bloch says, that "Thou shalt not be a revealer of love affairs" (*Anonymous* 64). The conflict in both *Lanval* and *Yonec*, however, is predicated on a lover's failure to follow that prescription; and indeed, as Bloch mentions, the hidden love in the *Lais* is always, sooner or later, revealed (65). And finally, rather than conspiring to trick the husband, the *mal mariée* and Muldumarec are tricked, and earn the listeners' sympathy in the process.

Instead of her detached wryness in *Chaitivel* or her effervescent playfulness in *Lanval*, Marie is more grimly ironic in *Yonec*. She includes several disturbingly graphic descriptions, she refers to specific locations in Wales, and her contextual details are more precise than those of many other *lais*, despite the presence here of a male fairy. Several readers have discussed the "fundamentally unsound" nature of the lady's marriage to the potentially corrupt and certainly villainous *avouez* (Panxhi 130, Burgess and Busby 127n1). Not only does the husband repress his wife's religious life, denying her access to the church, to "God's service," and presumably to the sacraments (lines 75-76)—an action all the more hypocritical because of his presumably ecclesiastical ties—but he

seems to have entered into the marriage without her consent, a detail that Marie's audience in the twelfth century would have been attuned to, as the Church sought to decrease the incidence of prearranged noble marriages, especially those entered into without mutual consent (Gillingham qtd. in Panxhi 130).

Marie was writing at a time when the church deliberated over whether a daughter could be given in marriage against her will, ultimately deciding that she could not. However, as Bernadette Williams discusses, the marital situation of the medieval noblewoman did not change: she was still married for her family's benefit (77-78). Marriage, Williams reviews, was a privately negotiated business between the male members of two families: if the woman had no family, her marriage was at the disposal of the king or her feudal lord (79). The 1185 Roll that Henry II had drawn up lists the women and children, male and female, who were his to give in marriage (Williams 79), a fact that is traced in *Lanval* by King Arthur's apportioning wives and lands to all who serve him (lines 17-18). In lamenting that "Cursed be my parents and all those who gave me to this jealous man and married me to his person!" the *Yonec* lady's precise verbs and bitter indictment of her parents give credence to this reading of her marriage as having been without her consent, with her as an unwilling recipient (lines 81-84).

In the *Lais*, "true" union occurs when the lovers choose one another and consequently have their love blessed with children. The marriage between the elderly *avouez* and the *mal mariée* is childless, a truly ironic and appropriate fact, given that the woman was married against her will and for the explicit purpose of providing her husband with heirs (lines 19-20). Citing research by Huw Pryce on medieval Welsh

marriage laws, Joanne Findon identifies the *mal mariée*'s despair at the end of seven years of marriage as being deeply significant. It was only after seven years that a marriage became permanent: separation prior to that point was more easily achieved, particularly if the woman had failed to bear children (Pryce qtd. in Findon 44). The husband's extension of this "trial" marriage that has failed to produce offspring invites us to question his motives, and points perhaps to a pathological possessiveness on his part.

The *mal mariée*'s ethnic background is unclear. Marie discloses that the lady is "from a noble family," which could denote her origins as Anglo-Norman, but is far more elliptical in introducing her, merely mentioning that she is "wise, courtly, and extremely beautiful," a description that contrasts with Marie's precise details in reference to the position of the rich old husband (lines 22, 25). Critics differ in their views on whether this husband is Anglo-Norman or Welsh, with most determining that he is Anglo-Norman; if he is Welsh, he is certainly complicit with his colonial overlords (Faletra 92, Findon 45, Burgess and Busby 127n1). Karen K. Jambeck has discussed the relative independence enjoyed by early Welsh and Irish women, in that such women could not be married against their will (125).

In his detailed examination of medieval marriage, legitimacy and primogeniture, Huw Pryce notes that Welsh law "differed fundamentally from the law of the Church and of England in that it knew no sharp antinomy between legitimate and illegitimate children: what mattered was a child's affiliation to his father" (97). Yonec, the son of Muldumarec and the *mal mariée*, is then Anglo-Norman society's "worst nightmare," as Sharon Kinoshita observes: an illegitimate child passed off as her husband's son and heir

who wreaks ferocious revenge on his stepfather and, by assuming control of his late father's Celtic kingdom, "restores the old, occulted order" ("Colonial Possessions" 156-7). In the twelfth-century era during which Marie wrote, then, native marriage laws certainly "clashed with those of the colonizing Normans" (Findon 44)—sometimes violently. In such a tumultuous, multiethnic environment, Marie's audience members would have been keenly aware of (and, perhaps, uncomfortable with) the ramifications of this tale.

While musing on the heritage of romantic history within "this country," toward the tale's beginning, the *mal mariée* alludes to Wales itself and refers to how "knights discovered maidens to their liking, noble and fair, and ladies found handsome and courtly lovers, worthy and valiant men" (87). Significantly, Marie employs parallel syntax here:

Chevalers trovoënt puceles

A lur talent gentes e beles,

E dames truvoënt amanz

Beaus e curteis, [pruz] e vaillanz (lines 95-98)

Her parallel equation of both sexes in their equal pursuit of desirable lovers combines with her active language to convey women's agency and decisiveness.

Having longingly contemplated these romantic adventures of the past, the lady proceeds to initiate a relationship with a supernatural lover by calling upon "almighty God" to "grant my wish!" (lines 103-104). While Muldumarec has, as he expresses

afterward in his opening passage, loved *Yonec*'s maiden "for a long time and desired you greatly in my heart," he is not free to come to his love, nor "to leave my country," until she voices her desire for him—for a Celtic, not a Norman, lover (lines 127-128, 131-132). Despite Muldumarec's power, versatility, and wealth, he waits upon the lady: not out of mere *cortesia*, Marie seems to suggest, but because this lady has finally realized that she has some control over her choices.

Muldumarec's first words to the lady are, unsurprisingly, to reassure her not to be afraid: but he elaborates upon this first sentence by continuing, "The hawk is a noble bird" (line 122). Birds feature noticeably in the *lais*, have been historically associated with memory, and certainly help, with such lively imagery, to make this particular *lai* more memorable (Whalen *Poetics of Memory* 87). Matthieu Boyd has discussed the presence of Otherworld bird-people as being common within both Welsh and Irish tales ("The Ring" 215). Additionally, Muldumarec here emphasizes the "noble" nature of hawks, thus "locating the animal in the value-system of the aristocratic culture in which the lady lives" (Kinoshita and McCracken 147). Despite these factors, however, which are useful in understanding Marie's choice of magical creature, her phrasing here could be construed as ironic. Muldumarec's primary reassurance to his lady lies not in emphasizing how easily he can shed his animal form, or even in an explanation of his metamorphosis—in fact, he states that the hawk's secrets may "remain a mystery to you" (line 123)—but in a fairly abrupt statement upon the *nobility* of his appearance as a bird of prey. With such a calm, matter-of-fact abruptness, Marie might here be drawing her

audience into a winking complicity with the necessity of suspending our disbelief in the fact of incongruous magical details.

While the *mal mariée* seems eager to acquiesce to her fairy lover's decisions as the *lai* continues, she is not entirely passive: she states her willingness to make Muldumarec her lover, but only "provided he believed in God" (line 139), thus setting the initial terms of their relationship. She also undergoes an arduous journey in pursuit of her lover, leaping through a window to pursue the dying Muldumarec and courageously following his trail of blood to his eerily deserted otherworldly kingdom beneath the hill, a kingdom with undertones of a wild Wales eluding Anglo-Norman control (Faletra 94). In undertaking this journey—entirely of her own volition, and seemingly against Muldumarec's implicit advice—she reveals her impulsive, passionate character, a character that actually contributes to her lover's death, since, failing to observe the moderation that he had earlier urged, her radiant appearance betrays her love (line 227). This tragic impulsivity, however, seems inextricably bound up with her strong and decisive character.

At times, Marie's authorial voice combines a laughing irony with a fervent empathy with the characters whose doom so clearly overshadows them. Such an instance occurs directly after Marie describes the joy that Muldumarec and his lady take in one another prior to their betrayal: "Now may she, with God's grace," Marie interjects, "long enjoy her love!" (line 224). As Emanuel Mickel observes, in view of the intense watchfulness with which the lady's jealous husband monitors her, Muldumarec's

injunction to his lover to be discreet seems like an impossible caution (“Use of Irony” 283): and Marie’s aside highlights that impossibility through her knowing irony.

Several lines later, after describing the husband’s plot with his aged sister, Marie provides another aside, this time without the effervescent enthusiasm of the previous one: “Alas!” Marie exclaims, “how ill-served were they on whom he wanted to spy in order to betray and trap them” (lines 254-256). Her voice seems bitter here, with an implicit condemnation of this villainous husband who seeks to “betray” and “trap.” Marie thus again reveals her empathy with the lovers, despite the fact that such empathy could be construed as providing subversive advice to her female audience members who might in turn sympathize with the protagonists.

As the *lai* continues, Marie’s empathy with the doomed Muldumarec and his lady becomes even more evident, as she discusses the husband’s calculated cruelty in devising painful “traps to kill the knight” and interjects, “Oh God! If only he had known the treachery that the villain was preparing” (lines 295-296). Using explicit language, Marie describes the razor-sharp spikes, Muldumarec’s wound, which “covers all the sheets in blood” (lines 316), and his suffering. When describing how the *mal mariée* leaps through a window in her tower and follows her dying lover, Marie adds a moment of wry authorial detachment: “it was a wonder she did not kill herself,” she adds parenthetically, “for she had to jump a good twenty feet,” “naked but for her shift” (lines 338-339, 341). Despite these moments of flickering irony, however, Marie continues to draw her listeners’ sympathy to the tragic fairy knight, causing him to be more memorable than his son Yonec, whom Falettra dubs a “hybrid” knight: “half indigene, half colonist” (96).

While Yonec ostensibly ends the *lai* in a satisfying way, avenging his father's death and his mother's maltreatment and being elevated to a lord of his father's realm, his triumphs seem peripheral to the *lai*'s real focus: the love between the relatable *mal mariée* and the earnest Muldumarec.

With such positive, clear-eyed portrayals of disenfranchised and probably Celtic characters, Marie betrays her sympathy with her *lais*'s Breton and Welsh subject matter, whose settings she often details in very specific terms, as she does in *Yonec*. That Marie should do so is unsurprising considering her own nuanced authorial position as a woman "de France" who used Celtic material while interacting with the politics of her adopted land (McLoone 10). Drawing on work by Tilde Sankovitch, Faletta equates Marie's interest in and empathy with her source material as standing "in parallel with her subject-position as a female writer" (86). *Yonec* is not alone in its depiction of a *mal mariée*: many of the women in the *lais* are unhappily married, as women trapped in aristocratic marriages within Marie's era often were, lacking the ability to choose their own spouses. Amy Remensnyder has discussed Marie's sensitivity to the "very real constraints" (215) that twelfth-century women encountered within the area of marriage, which is particularly evident in *Yonec*. Marie's *lais*, then, with their worlds of imagination, provided these women with a power that they otherwise could not have. Remensnyder argues, however, that these *lais* do not serve as mere wish fulfilment for her audience, since by composing her *lais*, Marie enabled her female voice to be heard despite the patriarchal constraints of her era (215-216).

Marie's voice is certainly not strident in heralding the power of women within her *lais*, nor even in providing a sympathetic treatment of the indigenous peoples of the British Isles. Critics have held wildly varying opinions about Marie's *lais*, as upholding traditional codes, as providing dissident commentary upon her circumstances, or as juxtaposing both submissive and subversive reactions to repressive social structures. In contrast to those who delight in claiming that Marie is advancing a particular political agenda with her twelve *lais*—whether that agenda be conservative or radical—Marianne Fisher states that “the collection itself refuses to pass judgement”; and, particularly in reference to its juxtaposition of conflicting perspectives, that “Marie does not provide answers. It is up to the audience to decide for itself how to reconcile its inner tensions” (209). Fisher's controversial exception to this summary, however, lies in her brief examination of three “ideologically indeterminate” *lais*—*Chaitivel*, *Laiüstic*, and *Chevrefoil*—that differ from the rest; that deconstruct the structures that produce them (210, 209). These three ambitious *lais*, Fisher maintains, “end up anguished,” with our receiving “only shards and fragments of narrative” (210). Fisher, however, does not discuss or acknowledge the presence of playful exaggeration or irony in the tales. I argue that the *lais*' playfulness complicates this reading. Rather than sounding “anguished,” the disruption in *Chaitivel*, *Lanval*, and *Yonec* causes us to smile at the inverting of our expectations for tales of courtly love.

In reviewing the Celtic origins for Marie's *lais* (*Yonec*, in particular), Matthieu Boyd argues that attempts like those of Sharon Kinoshita's to “impute twelfth-century political meaning” to the *lais* must come up against the fact that most of the source

materials and motifs that form the *lais* are not twelfth-century in origin (“The Ring” 221). If, however, we recognize those elements that seem to be unique to Marie’s version of the tales—her Prologue, her insertion of sympathetic and frequently humorous parenthetical observations, and the fact that she describes a woman’s point of view in *Yonec* (unlike the Irish tales to which it bears a strong resemblance)—we see Marie far transcending her self-described role as compiler and transcriber.

If the *lais*, in Fisher’s words, “challenge and deconstruct the very security they ostensibly seek to establish” (198), they force the reader in the process to become a glossator: the onus, Marie, implies, is on us to reconcile her *lais*’ conflicting voices. In her essay “Comedy and Enigma,” Matilda Bruckner states that the “puzzle of laughter” requires us to continue asking questions of authors (22). We are forced to do precisely what the poet alludes to in her much-interpreted references in the General Prologue to “glossing” *la lettre* and its *surplus de sens* (lines 15-16). We are unable to pigeonhole Marie’s work, and that may be one of her greatest triumphs. She includes courtly conventions; she pushes against courtly conventions. She exposes our desire to reduce characters and literary texts to a more manageable category. In disrupting our reading experience, she causes us to engage with literary discourses, no matter how uncomfortable, and to ask difficult questions about the preconceptions that we bring with us.

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