

**The Making of the Man: Woman as Consummator in the  
*Lais* of Marie de France**

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Skilled in the art of falconry, adept at arms, fearless of death, generous and loyal, the Arthurian knight stands an incomplete man in the *Lais* of Marie de France.<sup>1</sup> The rite of passage into manhood is afforded him by a woman. Wife, lover or mother, she is sometimes wise, sometimes innocent, often a victim and always justified by the author, even when her behavior is in conflict with traditional Christian mores. Marie presents her readers with a fine variety of ladies, each faced with her own set of difficult circumstances. Much effort has been made to show the similarity of situations among the tales, to ascribe a deliberate architecture to their arrangement;<sup>2</sup> nevertheless, it is still their difference, the uniqueness of each that prevails. Indeed the individuality of each story, of each hero and heroine was doubtless a central concern of the author. In my analysis of Marie's female personae I will set them in contrast to the men they fulfill, and, while preserving the particularity of each character and her dilemma, elucidate Marie's view of the twelfth-century woman and her crucial role in courtly society.

Greatly influenced by the *Metamorphoses* and the *Remedia Amoris* of Ovid, Marie makes love her principal theme. Unlike the legendary figures in the romance of Tristan and Iseult, her lovers seem more real to the reader, more like ordinary people to whom extraordinary things happen. They are not great kings and queens presented in a grand saga, but rather typical knights, *mal mariées*, and members of the gentry whose individual dilemmas are briefly delineated in a short story form. In her general prologue Marie, in traditional medieval fashion,

insists on the veracity of the events (*aventure*) recounted in the Breton songs (*lais*), which she sets in narrative poetic form. Love in Marie's tales, although not always as tragic as that of Tristan, is equally exalted. Its linear progression in the male protagonist is generally recognized by researchers. Commenting on the function of love in the *Lais*, Hanning and Ferrante write: "Unlike earlier medieval epics, in which heroic values are universally acknowledged even though cowardise or treachery may cause their subversion, twelfth-century courtly tales and romances usually portray the protagonist's gradual discovery of real values through love" (5) and elsewhere, ". . . as soon as love begins to control prowess, directing its energies to bind together rather than to separate the love unit, the insuperable social obstacles to love's fulfillment simply disappear" (179).

In Marie's first tale,<sup>3</sup> *Guigemar*, the woman is both predictor and precipitator of the knight's future fulfillment. Symbolized by the *biche blanche* (white hind) in this poem, the woman as consummator is a paradigm of purity and pathos. Appearing with her fawn, thus paralleling the Madonna and Child, she is pierced by Guigemar's hunting arrow, a figuration of the sex act. Curiously, the arrow rebounds into the knight's thigh. The rejection of the arrow is a symbolic representation of the knight's one flaw, as announced by Marie at the beginning of the story: he is indifferent to love. Before expiring, the doe prophetically explains to Guigemar that he can never be cured of this wound: *De si ke cele te guarisse/Ki souffera pur tue amur/ Issi grant peine e tel dolur/K'unkes femme taunt ne suffri* (until a woman comes to heal you, a woman who will suffer great pain for your love, greater than any other woman has ever endured, 114-117).

Early in the poem a correlation with the Tristan legend is evident. Like Tristan, Guigemar drifts in a vessel. Although more lavish than Tristan's simple boat since its seams are invisible, it has a beautiful silken sail, and is equipped with candelabra and an elaborate bed inlaid with cypress and ivory, carved *a l'ovre Salemun* (according to the art of Solomon) and

covered with rich material, this vessel, like Tristan's, takes him seemingly by magic or divine design to the woman who will heal him. He is found and nursed back to health by this lady-love-to-be. She is his healer, but not yet his liberator. Both knight and lady are imprisoned: she in an external prison—the garden walled in down to the sea and the tower kept locked by her jealous old husband, Guigemar in an internal prison of impotence. Awakening to love, Guigemar passes from the confines of his prison to hers.

Unlike Tristan, however, Marie's knight remains totally non-resistant to his destiny. He accepts it without question and yields to it immediately. Whether fortuitous or intentional, Guigemar is the first knight the reader encounters in the only manuscript containing all twelve narrative poems. In this position he establishes the pattern for the others.<sup>4</sup> Deprived by nature of sexual desire, carried away by the phantom vessel, submissive to all his lady's requests, he is a model of passivity.<sup>5</sup> Even when the lovers are discovered by the husband, Guigemar grabs a club but is incapable of striking his assailant: he is led back to the magic ship and sent home where he helplessly bemoans his lost love.

The lady's suffering, as predicted by the white hind, is intolerable. Unlike her lover, the lady refuses to accept her circumstances as inalterable. Suicide is her only recourse. As she walks toward the sea to drown herself, she confronts her fate and, by doing so, sets another course of events in motion, events which lead to the recovery of her love. When the lovers are finally reunited—ironically by a second man who is holding her against her will, the lady spurs her lover to act: *Amis, menez en vostre drue* (My love, take your beloved away, 836). Now Guigemar can meet this opponent with force of action. He captures the castle, kills the would-be-lover, and leads away his mistress. Guigemar emerges a perfected knight whose chivalric activity has now become a means to a worthy end, not an end in itself. Hanning and Ferrante also see a transformed Guigemar: ". . . the knight who scorned love has become the knight who

fights under its banner; his impulse to dominate is now wholly subservient to his desire to possess a woman **without whom he remains incomplete**" (58, emphasis mine).

The third poem in the manuscript, *Le Fresne*, is the only one of the twelve whose title is the name of the female protagonist, in contrast to eight titles referring to the hero. Like most of Marie's principal characters she is victimized, in this case, from birth.<sup>6</sup> Abandoned by her mother, raised lovingly by an abbess, seduced by the noble lord Gurun who takes her away as his mistress, Le Fresne submits to her fate. Even when under pressure from his vassals Gurun is married with great ceremony to a girl of noble birth (who is, unbeknownst to all except the reader/listener, Le Fresne's twin sister), the girl is dutifully committed to her ex-lover/lord to the point of preparing the matrimonial bed.

It is at this point in the narrative that Le Fresne's act of self-abnegation parallels that of the lady in *Guigemar*. She replaces the old unattractive bedcover with the beautiful brocade cloth in which she had been wrapped for abandonment. It is this link to her past and true identity which she willingly relinquishes out of unselfish love for Gurun. There is an immediate reversal of fortune for all concerned, as the mother recognizes the brocade. The first marriage to La Codre (the sister) is annulled, and Gurun *Unques si grant joie nen ot!* (Had never known such great joy, 498).

Le Fresne's dilemma is in one respect similar to the one faced by *Guigemar's* mistress: she is (to be) separated from her lover by a third party. In *Guigemar* it is the husband, in *Le Fresne*, it is her sister, although Le Fresne is unaware of this kinship at the time of her sacrificial gesture. Yet Le Fresne's nature is quite different from her counterpart in the first tale: Le Fresne shows no self-pity. She has either learned to conceal her grief or has the makings of a saint. It would appear that her act of sacrifice sprang from pure and innocent love tinged perhaps with gratitude for having been rescued from a loveless life in the convent. *Guigemar's* lady acted out of despair;

Le Fresne was motivated by simple love and gratitude. Nevertheless, each acted from the heart, and each was rewarded. One could also note the eventual pay-off for La Codre's willingness to hand over her new husband to a long-lost sister, for Marie tells us that she returned home with her parents and subsequently was married *mult richement* (very richly).

Building her story line on material from the *Roman de Thèbes* and the *Roman d'Enéas* as well as on elements from the biblical episode of Potiphar's wife and the Celtic concept of a mysterious otherworld, Marie introduces the idealized woman in *Lanval* and sets her in contrast to the Arthur's Queen Guenevere (the Potiphar's wife's of this tale). Here the author's view of the ideal female role in society is clear: she is a rectifier of wrongs, a benefactor, and in a very literal sense a "dream-come-true." Appearing from the otherworld to the despondent, self-pitying knight Lanval, she provides pleasant company for her knight in his times of loneliness when as a foreigner in the service of King Arthur he is without close companions (until he becomes a *cause célèbre*). She abundantly supplies him with material wealth to more than make up for the neglect on the part of Arthur when doling out money and gifts to those in his service. Like the lady in *Yonec*, Lanval can cause his dream-lover to appear to him by simply desiring to be with her. Unlike the dream-lover in *Yonec*, however, Lanval's lady is invisible to others until the finale when she makes her grand appearance at Arthur's court.

Accused of homosexuality by Queen Guenevere whose love he has scorned, Lanval breaks his promise to his fairy mistress and in anger and indignation reveals her existence to the queen. While Arthur and his court are deliberating Lanval's guilt or innocence on the false charges made by the queen, the reader/listener experiences the dilemma: should the lady uphold her word never to appear again or should she come to rescue her hapless lover? Reminiscent of the *biche blanche*, she arrives clad in pure white. Her cortège evokes that of Queen Iseult, and

her beauty is detailed in the longest passage containing physical description in any of the *Lais*.

Her act of sacrifice is simple yet powerful:

La pucele entra el palais:  
Unkes si bele n'i vint mais!  
Devant li rei est descendue,  
Si que de tuz iert bien veue.  
Sun mantel ad laissi, cheeir,  
Que mieuz la peussent veeir

(The maiden went into the palace. Never before had so beautiful a creature entered therein. She alighted in front of the king in the sight of all. She let her cloak fall so that they could have a better look at her, 601-606).

By dropping her cloak of purity this representative from the invisible world becomes incarnate, she is a word-made-flesh who has come to forgive and save her recreant knight.<sup>7</sup>

In the story of *Yonec*, a mother acts as woman-consummator of her son. Like the maiden in *Lanval*, the father/lover is otherworldly. Although he shares some properties with his female counterpart, he is quite visible and vulnerable. Capable of transforming himself into a bird at will, he flies into his lady's room where she is locked and guarded by her husband's sister. When her lover is mortally wounded by the husband's trap, the pregnant lady, the most daring of Marie's females, leaps unharmed from her tower and follows the droplets of her lover's blood through a dark tunnel into his world. Unlike Lanval in Avalon, she is not permitted to stay in the otherworld but must return to the real world with a mission to avenge her lover's death.

It is in her role as revealer of truth to her son that the mother performs her function as consummator. Coming upon the tomb of her beloved by chance not long after the dubbing of her son, she finds the occasion propitious to hand over the sword: *Or vus comant e rent s'espee,/Jeo l'ai asez lung tens gardee* (I now commend his [your father's] sword to you. I have kept it hidden long enough, 533-534). Just as Le Fresne yielded up an object which connected her to her past identity, so the mother gives up the one object that was her *raison d'être*. Her immediate

expiration on the tomb unites the lovers in death. Yonec has now become a knight with an honorable purpose. The murder of his *parastre* not only avenges his father's death but also wins the fealty of his father's vassals. This mother's obedience to the command of her dying lover—to give his sword to their son and recount his death—provoked the young man to action and brought him into full knighthood.

More than any other of the *Lais*, *Eliduc* lends itself to sententious interpretation. It is tempting to see religious symbolism and biblical allusions throughout the poem: the storm episode, the candelabra, the weasel resuscitation episode, the distinction between carnal love and “*caritas*,” sin and punishment. We must be careful not to err on the side of post-Reformation fundamentalist moralizing. The Christian parallels are implicit but never explicit in this poem or any of the others. Marie makes it clear that God is merciful to true lovers, as if God himself were the designer of their fate. Their sins, including adultery, are considered forgivable, if not already forgiven for love's sake. It is stretching the proposition to consider Guilliadun—the maiden with whom our married hero falls in love—as the aggressive instrument of evil when she invites him to visit her and gives him gifts he willingly accepts (Nelson 38). There is no hint of condemnation of Guilliadun for her actions, since she is totally ignorant of Eliduc's marital state, a fact Eliduc has kept hidden not only from Guilliadun but from her father, his new lord, as well. During the storm episode the sailor who dared accuse Guilliadun of sin is the one duly punished.<sup>8</sup>

Eliduc, like all of Marie's sympathetic heroes and heroines, is victimized. He is falsely accused of betraying his original lord. It is not surprising that false accusations abound in Marie's stories, for, as she reveals in the prologue to *Guigemar*, she herself was a victim of slander. Eliduc finds it necessary to leave his homeland. Marie also seemed to have compassion on those who, like herself, were living away from their homeland or their natural environment: Lanval, Bisclavret, Le Fresne, Milun.<sup>9</sup> Yet Eliduc is a good vassal both to his old and new lord;

in a strange land, far from his wife, he meets a beautiful and worthy damsel and falls in love with her. The circumstances are not unusual in any given century, certainly not in Marie's time. The young lady is his equal in worthiness and beauty—a justification for love as explained by Marie herself in another of the stories, *Equitan: Amurs n'est pruz se n'est egals* (Love is not worthy, if it is not between equals, l. 141).

Eliduc, like most of Marie's principal characters, is not to be judged too harshly; he is merely human: forgetful, indecisive, acting on impulse. The wife in *Le Fresne* is at the threshold of infanticide to save herself from public shame; the senechal's wife in *Equitan* gives in to the wooing of a king and plots the death of her husband; Lanval cannot hold his tongue before Queen Guenevere; Eliduc in anger kills one of his sailors. Marie does not parade saints and sinners before her listener/readers. What we do see in most of her characters, male and female, is the human condition with its virtues and frailties—the capacity for slander and murder on the one hand, the capacity for sacrifice and *caritas* on the other.

If anyone is without blemish in the *Lais*, it is the women of *Eliduc*. Guildeluec, by the willing sacrifice of her position as Eliduc's wife, makes possible Eliduc's *parfite amur* (perfect love, 1150) with Guilliadun on the one hand and, eventually, the devotion of his entire heart to God. The similarity of the names of Eliduc's two women, Guilliadun and Guildeluec, is no coincidence. They are personifications of the duality of love: Guilliadun embodying the *fin amors* (physical courtly love) lauded by the troubadours, Guideluec representing *agape*, divine selfless love. Viewed in this light, the story of the man with two wives becomes an allegory of love which prefigures the work of Guillaume de Lorrain in the *Roman de la Rose*.

Judith Rice Rothschild has convincingly described the majority of female personae in the *Lais* as "controlling women." It is the woman who takes the initiative, while the male remains content or resigned to the status quo, especially in matters of love. The women of the *Lais* are



resourceful. They are often labeled *pruz*—a term usually applied to the likes of Roland and Olivier, a term which has been defined as possessing "the ability to adapt skill and power to a particular need" (Burgess 134). These women live in a world where human weaknesses or circumstances sometimes create dilemmas from which the victims would like to extract themselves. Their efforts sometimes precipitate the destruction of others and occasionally the destruction of themselves as well (*Equitan*, for example). Whether through assertive behavior (the dream lady in *Lanval*, the mother in *Yonec*) or self-abnegation (Le Fresne, the lady in *Guigemar*, Guideluec in *Eliduc*), the woman plays a key role and serves to turn the tide in the affairs of men, sometimes abruptly (*Lanval*), sometimes over protracted time (*Le Fresne*). She is a deflector of destiny in her own individual way. She is perhaps not so much the controlling woman, but an active force, a *primum mobile* who alters the course of destiny for her sons and lovers.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the poems of Marie de France are taken from *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Rychner (Paris: Champion, 1981). Numerical references are to the line numbers of the poem (story) in question. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See Margaret Boland's *Architectural Structure in the Lais of Marie de France* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> The order most frequently followed by editors and translators of the *Lais* is that of the Harley 978 manuscript housed in the British Library. It is the only manuscript that contains all twelve of the *lais* ascribed to Marie de France. It is to this arrangement of the *Lais* that I refer.

<sup>4</sup> The sleeping knight, a figure which appears several times in the *Lais*, exemplifies Marie's vision of the knight as unassertive prior to his quickening by love through the self-abnegation on the part of the beloved.

<sup>5</sup> Some critics see Guigemar as an aggressor from the outset of the poem. This conception of the hero is based on a questionable translation of lines 57-58 (*De tant i out mepris Nature/Ke unc de nule amur n'out cure*) as "He had so scorned nature that he had no desire for love." A more interesting translation makes Nature the subject of the first clause: "Nature had so mistreated him in that he had no desire for love." Thus translated, Marie evokes sympathy for Guigemar while revealing his passivity.

<sup>6</sup> For a closer look at the themes of victimization and entrapment, see Brightenback.

<sup>7</sup> Brewster E. Fitz ("The Storm Episode . . .") proposes a gloss of the *Lais* on three levels, the highest of which is "the Ultimate Sacrifice of the Logos Incarnate" (543). Deborah Nelson's view of *Eliduc* ("Eliduc's Salvation") as an allegory of the temptation and fall of man and his subsequent redemption could also be applied to Lanval. Thus forgiven, the knight can now go with his otherworldly lover to a blissful existence in Avalon—an interesting reversal of the Prince Charming role.

<sup>8</sup> Fitz sees this episode as an example of the lowest level of his proposed tri-level gloss of the story: "the base sacrifice of the sailor at the bottom of the social pyramid" (543). The guilty ones are Eliduc and his men who have abducted Guilliadun (albeit willingly on her part) from her father; she is the only innocent on board.

<sup>9</sup> Sankovitch appears to be investigating the theme of alienation in the *Lais* when she examines the "wild places" in each of the stories. She contends that each of these "non-social" zones is necessary to the advancement of the plot (25 ff).

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