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Feminist Courtly Love in Marie de France

Summer Weaver

In his book *Medieval Imagination*, Douglas Kelly writes, “Two facts are obvious to students of courtly literature: the constant union in art of love and art of poetry, and the durability of the subject of courtly love and the forms used to express it” (xi). Marie de France is known for her ability to unite “art of love” and “art of poetry,” which correctly classifies her as a courtly love author. Though little is known about her personal life, the conventions of courtly love depicted in her *Lais* give a modern audience insight into the values of medieval society. Most courtly love themes create idealized images of medieval relationships, yet they tend to portray women as manipulative or even antagonistic. The genre of courtly love is often considered anti-feminist because of these cold-hearted portrayals of women. When critic Jane Burns wrote an article identifying moments of resistance to the patriarchy in certain examples of courtly love literature, it opened the door for the genre as a whole to be read through a feminist lens. As a rare female author, Marie de France occasionally reverses this misogynistic stereotype and gives women a more positive role in romance. Her depictions of female characters in the *lais* “Laustic,” “Eliduc,” and “Lanval” demonstrate a surprising sympathy for female sexuality, despite the tendency of male authors to shame women for their lustfulness. A close reading of these texts not only proves de France’s careful boldness as an author, but further supports Jane Burns’ assertion that the courtly love genre can be read through a feminist lens.

Before analyzing specific tales written by de France, it is important to understand the genre of courtly love itself. John Moore provides a general definition when he writes that courtly love is “a special form of love in which the courtly lover idealized his beloved lady and spoke to her or about her in the exalted language reserved for a deity” (Moore 622). For the most part, critics view courtly love as anti-feminist due to this male tendency to place women on an impossible pedestal. Speaking about women as “deities” and idealizing them in literature creates impossible standards for female behavior. To explain the complicated argument surrounding the anti-feminism of courtly love, Kate Millet writes, “Both the courtly and the romantic versions of love are 'grants' which the male concedes out of his total power. Both have had the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confirming them in a narrow and often remarkably constricting sphere of behavior” (37). The concept that even the slight romantic roles women play in courtly love are “granted” to women is inherently anti-feminist. In many depictions, the woman’s actions are controlled by the male author’s, so much so that he creates an idealized image of her that is impossible for a real woman to obtain.

In addition to idealizing women to an impossible standard, authors of courtly love stories also exaggerate the lustfulness of women. Courtly love stories often detail female heartlessness as they play with their “male lover’s delicate heartstrings” (Burns 23). In her essay “Courtly Love: Who Needs It?” Jane Burns highlights ways in which this harsh “ladylove” has continued into modern America. She writes that the modern woman is “counseled to be cool and aloof, to withhold her affection, to driver her suitor mad, and thereby hold him captive. And yet, as in many medieval love lyrics and adventure stories, it is in fact the man’s desires and needs that govern this modern courtship.” These negative relationship tendencies are carried over from the initial customs learned from courtly love literature. However, Burns is not entirely convinced of courtly love’s anti-feminism, then or now. She explains that as we move through a variety of courtly love texts, “we find an array of historical and fictive women who move through the courtly world while deploying varied forms of resistance to its misogynistic, hierarchical, and normative paradigms of gendered interaction” (25). From the appearances of independent, unmarried women to the occasional depiction of same-sex relations, certain courtly love stories defy gender stereotypes and create

grander roles for women in fiction. Such subtle forms of resistance allow for careful readers, like Jane Burns, to view courtly love literature through a feminist lens. With de France being a rare woman writer, it is understandable that her literature follows many of the structured guidelines to courtly love fiction established by her male predecessors. However, as seen in the following stories, her depictions of women are not always that of “haughty and unresponsive” lovers that frequented the genre (23).

Marie de France’s lai “Laustic” is considered her most popular, as it appears in many anthologies of French literature (Green 695). In it, Marie shares the story of a man and woman who share a forbidden romance across the balconies of their neighboring houses. To summarize the message of “Laustic,” Robert Green writes, “The poem does not recount the unfortunate consequences of an unhappy love affair but is the sublimated depiction of a relationship which persists and which triumphs over exterior limitation” (695). This exterior limitation comes in the form of a violent overreaction from the woman’s husband. Like other courtly love stories, the relationship between the unmarried man and the married woman is a more emotional bond than physical one. In fact, de France makes it clear that the two have never physically sealed their affair when she writes, “They were both very content except for the fact that they could not meet and take their pleasure with each other” (94). This emotional romance is kept secret from the woman’s husband, who keeps her “closely guarded.” This secrecy fits with Andreas Capellanus’ rules of courtly love written in the twelfth century. Capellanus states that “when made public love rarely endures,” and that “the easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized” (“Courtly Love”). According to these guidelines, the husband actually enhanced the sexual desire in his wife’s secret relationship by keeping her under such strict watch. Had he given her the freedom to leave the house, she would not have found her forbidden lover so enticing. This irony of the husband’s actions helps de France portray him as the antagonist of the story, despite the fact that he is not the one being unfaithful.

De France depicts the woman’s husband as the destroyer of their romance through his murder of the nightingale. When the husband grows to suspect the woman’s behavior, she blames her nightly wanderings on a nightingale’s song. Upon hearing this, the husband “gave a spiteful, angry laugh and devised a plan to ensnare the nightingale” (France 95). Even through her narration, de France conveys her disapproval of the husband’s

“angry” actions. When he finally finds the bird, she writes that “he killed it out of spite, breaking its neck *wickedly* with his two hands. He threw the body at the lady, so that the front of her tunic was bespattered with blood” (95, emphasis added). Through her use of the word “wickedly,” de France completes the antagonistic image of the husband while emphasizing the innocence and guiltlessness of the lady. The husband’s actions are what set this lai apart from other classic courtly love stories. According to Karli Grazman, “in most of the other lais, it seems that Marie de France rewards those that stick to the appropriate, courtly actions and that the ones who are punished are the ones who tried to be sneaky or lied” (Grazman). However, unlike most other lais, the lady’s punishment seems undeserving, despite the fact that she did lie to her husband. Because of de France’s opinionated narrator, the lady is portrayed as an oppressed and innocent romantic, while the husband is preventing her from finding true love in the most gruesome of ways. And, when Capellanus’ rule that “marriage is no excuse for not loving” is taken into account, readers can interpret this to mean that the lady did not deserve punishment in the first place (“Courtly Love”). By portraying the husband as a literal murderer of love, de France makes a statement about the oppressive tendencies of marriage in the medieval period. Unlike other courtly love stories that make women out as cold and heartless manipulators, de France has subverted the theme in “Laustic” by making the husband the antagonist.

Marie de France’s stance on feminine sexuality and desire is not always as sympathetic as her narrator’s opinion in “Laustic.” In fact, de France often punishes women for their immorality or depicts them as antagonists in her lais. Michelle Freeman addresses crucial questions regarding the villainy of women in some of Marie’s own stories, saying,

That the narrator created by a female author identifies herself with a sympathetic female protagonist [in *Laustic*] is hardly surprising, but what is the reader to make of those poems in the *recueil* that project the female central character as less than sympathetic? Where do the author’s loyalties lie? How does Marie direct her narrator when the woman is indisputably at fault? (288)

These questions are relevant to “Lanval,” in which the female antagonist, Queen Guinevere, nearly destroys Lanval’s relationship with his mysterious fairy maiden. Guinevere is so persistent with her flirtations that she pushes

Lanval to confess of his secret lover, who swore him to keep their relationship hidden in order to maintain its passion (France 77). After Guinevere finds herself publicly rejected, de France describes in detail the queen's manipulative plot against Lanval. When the king returns home, Guinevere "cried for mercy and said that Lanval had shamed her. He had requested her love and because she had refused him, had insulted and deeply humiliated her." These blatant lies force the audience to turn against Guinevere and feel sympathy for Lanval, the one who rejected her. At first glance, this story initially appears to reinforce the traditional roles of women as the lusty manipulators in the relationship, but while Guinevere and the lady in "Laustic" both seek to commit adultery, only Guinevere is depicted by Marie as worthy of punishment. Judith Rothschild describes Guinevere and other similar stock characters as "female villains," which characterization contrasts with the argument that courtly love literature can be viewed through a feminist lens. Despite the villainous Queen Guinevere, de France continues to break traditional female roles through her depictions of Lanval's lover.

Marie de France redeems women in "Lanval" by allowing the fairy maiden to play a more traditionally masculine role by coming to Lanval's defense in court. After Lanval is forced to defend himself in court, the barons agree to release him if he can prove the existence of his lover. De France then describes the magnificent arrival of Lanval's lover as she "entered the palace, where no one so beautiful had ever before been seen" (81). The lady then urges the court to release Lanval, doing so with grace and confidence. According to Jane Burns, this scene

openly displays the stunning beauty and refined behavior of the classic, commodified courtly lady while riding heroically to defend her seemingly helpless lover in a legal suit. The effect of this woman's uncharacteristic participation in the legal system at King Arthur's court is to disrupt it substantially and to defy simultaneously our preconceived notions of gendered options in the courtly world. While this heroine plays both parts of lovely lady and heroic knight, her lover Lanval is cast as stunningly "beautiful" but not effeminate. (47)

By depicting the lady as the heroic knight, de France is reversing the gender roles of classic courtly love literature. However, as stated by Burns, doing so does not place Lanval in a position of weakness or femininity. In fact, both Lanval and the lady appear attractive to the audience by the end of this

courtly love drama, even with the lady taking a more heroic position in the narrative. This careful depiction of a strong female character by de France helps counteract any anti-feminist themes enforced with the villainous actions of Queen Guinevere.

Continuing with the theme of independent women, Marie de France's lai "Eliduc" features a woman capable of sympathizing with her own husband's lover. Guildeleuc's reaction to her spouse's affair can be directly contrasted with the husband's in "Laustic," who reacted with violence and oppression. Rather than celebrate the death of her husband's mistress, Guildeleuc weeps for the beautiful woman and for her husband's loss. Usha Vishnuvajjala argues that the women's interaction is what shifts the story and allows for this lai to be read with a feminist lens. She examines the language de France uses to describe their initial meeting and contrasts it to the meeting of Eliduc and Guilliadun. When noting their similarities, Vishnuvajjala writes that Guildeleuc "seems to have romantic or sexual feelings for (the unconscious) Guilliadun . . . It is easy to miss Guildeleuc's courtly lover's gaze in this passage because the lover is a woman. Remarkably, although the courtly love gaze is usually male, this poem depicts the gaze as exclusively female" (171). This argument for Guildeleuc's homosexuality is one of the ways in which de France potentially subverts the typical themes of courtly love. Even if the story is not read through this lens of same-sex attraction, the actions of Guildeleuc still defy the stereotypes of women as greedy lovers. Guildeleuc "simultaneously understands Eliduc's love and desire for Guilliadun and forgives him almost before she is aware of his emotional infidelity." The sympathy and forgiveness emphasized in this story paints Guildeleuc as a woman of incredible strength and virtue. After reviving her husband's mistress and reuniting the lovers, she becomes a nun and dedicates her life to God. While this could be interpreted as another idealized depiction of women, the implication of homosexuality allows for the feminist reading to remain relevant to the analysis of "Eliduc."

To truly demonstrate how Marie de France's courtly love stories are unique in their feminist qualities, it is necessary to contrast her lais with a courtly lovestory written by a male author. *The Canterbury Tales*, written by Geoffrey Chaucer, contain many examples of courtly love and female sexuality. As arguably the most well-known English author the courtly love genre, Chaucer can serve as a representative of his male contemporaries. Unlike de France, Chaucer does not attempt to justify female sexuality—rather,

in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," he coincides his story with the common theme of the aggressive lustfulness of women. This tale depicts a violent rape, after which the guilty knight is sent by Queen Guinevere to discover what women want most in the world. He returns to declare, "A woman wants the self-same sovereignty / Over her husband as over her lover, / And master him; he must not be above her" (214–216). The knight essentially claims that the woman wants sexual and total control over the man in the relationship. Despite this outrageous statement, Chaucer, through the Wife of Bath, continues: "In all the court not one that shook her head / Or contradicted what the knight had said" (219–220). Although this tale is supposedly told by a woman, the Wife of Bath, Chaucer's own bias as a male is shown through the implication that all women want control over their partners. This clearly contradicts the more feminist tales of de France, which do not imply the same level of sexual assertiveness in women. Chaucer's tale is a particularly sexist retelling when one considers other versions in which what women want is simply a choice ("The Knight's Tale"). Excluding the depiction of Queen Guinevere herself in "Lanval," the women of de France's stories do not have these same characteristics of exaggerated sexual desire. De France conveys female sexuality and behavior in a more realistic, less controlling light, as opposed to male authors like Chaucer.

Through a close reading of "Laustic," "Eliduc," and "Lanval," Marie de France's sympathetic and empowering depictions of women provide a promising platform for feminist readings of courtly love literature. While men tend to portray women as greedy, lustful, and heartless, de France shows her female characters as both strong and sensitive. While many male authors also idealize women by granting them godlike characteristics that are impossible to achieve, de France humanizes them by accurately depicting their sexual desires. Although not all of de France's *lais* are perfect models of medieval feminism, as seen by the female villains such as Queen Guinevere in "Lanval," her writing grants women a more realistic representation in literature. Her subtle forms of resistance, like depicting the woman's husband in "Laustic" as oppressive and cruel, or hinting at homosexuality in "Eliduc," give modern readers a better sense of what a non-idealized medieval relationship may have looked like. Through her boldness as a female writer in a sphere dominated by men, Marie de France paved the way for women to overcome stereotypes as selfish or idealized lovers.

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