

Empowering
medieval women:
aspects of courtly
love in the lais of
marie de france...



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During the Medieval time period, a woman would generally be forced to depend upon a man for her livelihood. However, in the fictional world of courtly love, a 12th century philosophical phenomenon believed by some to have originated as a form of goddess worship, a man is unable to survive without his beloved. As a result of this, her love causes him to aspire to complete noble deeds, and he becomes obedient and subservient to her in hopes of winning her affection. In *The Lais of Marie de France*, specifically “Chevrefoil,” “Laustic,” “Lanval,” and “Yonec,” the author by no means follows all of the rules of courtly love, yet she does model the relations between the man and his beloved after the aforementioned aspects of it. She bestows beauty, intelligence, and wisdom upon her heroines, giving them power over those men who love them. While Marie de France often constrains women to the oppressive realities of the Middle Ages, she allows her characters to unknowingly rebel against the societal norms of the time period through using the courtly love relationship as a way of empowering women. In his essay, “Women in Love,” Glyn S. Burgess states that “the cruel way in which [the husbands] treat [their wives] calls forth from Marie an outburst which she reserves for those who deny young women the chance to place their affections where they wish” (102). In the Middle Ages the majority of marriages were arranged. Given that the society at that point in time was largely patriarchal, men were often the ones given the privilege of choosing a spouse. Many times women were forced to marry men that they barely knew – men that they did not love. Through allowing the women in her *lais* to escape from their husbands and be with men whom they possess power over, Marie de France elevates women up onto pedestals. She glorifies their characteristics and allows them to be worshiped by men –

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those whom they traditionally must honor and obey. Within such a relationship, the time that a man spends separated from his beloved leads to nothing but heartache. Yet, according to Marie de France, it is not so for the woman. In “Chevrefoil,” Tristram becomes “distressed and downcast” when his uncle sends him away from his kingdom, and it is because of this separation from his beloved that he is said to have risked “death and destruction” (de France 109). However, the queen does not openly experience the same degree of emotion, making her appear to be the stronger individual; she is the one with the upper hand in the relationship, and thus the one with more power. A woman not only fails to express her sorrow during times of separation, but she also fails to verbally express her love and need for her beloved. This too gives her more power, leaving the man vulnerable and feeling as though he must fulfill her every desire in order to win her love. Throughout “Chevrefoil” the queen never proclaims her love for Tristram. Instead, the only time her love for him is declared is when Tristram himself declares it: “Sweet love, so it is with us: without me you cannot survive, nor I without you” (de France 110). One must then wonder if the queen actually loves him, or if she is just using the power she holds over him to get what she wants. After all, it is clear from the same declaration of love that Tristram is unable to survive without her. Thus, he would certainly stop at nothing to keep the queen at his side, for his livelihood depends on it. While the details differ a bit in “Laustic,” the idea remains the same. The woman does not actually proclaim her love for the knight, yet the narrator tells us that “she love[s] him above all things” (de France 94). However, the reasons given for her love trivialize it immensely. It is said that she loves the knight “for the good she [has] heard about him

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and because he live[s] close by” (de France 94). Chances are slim that one could truly love another for these reasons, and thus it suggests that the woman uses the knight’s love for her own desires – for example, the gifts that he throws to her window. The fact that one of the things she has heard about him is that he “ spend[s] freely and giv[es] generously whatever he [has],” only further proves this point (de France 94). Burgess suggests that the relationship is merely a means of providing the lady with “ a period of happiness spiked with risk” (109). The seemingly loving gesture of “ smuggl[ing] the dead nightingale out of her house and into the hands of her beloved” can be seen as simply a way of “ win[ning] a small victory over her [oppressive] husband” (Burgess 110). No matter what the true motive is, through misleading the knight and taking advantage of his love for her the woman gains power over him, allowing her to use him as she pleases. The same holds true in “ Yonec,” yet the woman uses the man for things other than small gifts. After being locked in a tower for years, “ the lady [is] in great distress” (de France 86). Burgess describes the man she was given to as “ intensely jealous . . . The fact that he had himself ‘ called’ lord suggests that he was intent on usurping power and influence.” At this point, the lady is yearning for a man, and thus when one appears in her chambers and professes his undying love for her, she is quick to take advantage of the situation. The power that the woman holds over the man is so strong that when she wishes his presence, he is “ with [her] within the hour” (de France 88). This power causes the man to go to great lengths in order to please his beloved. For example, he does not simply profess his faith in the Lord, but he goes to the trouble of assuming his wife’s appearance so that he will have the chance to receive the body of Christ and “ recite all of [his] credo for <https://assignbuster.com/empowering-medieval-women-aspects-of-courtly-love-in-the-lais-of-marie-de-france/>

[her]" (de France 88). In addition to this, the man goes as far as risking his life so that he may love the woman. He knows all along that " for love of [his lady]" he will lose his life, yet he loves her just the same (de France 90). The woman has enough power over him that he risks his life on earth for her love. Yet, this comes as no surprise, seeing as, according to Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector, she possesses the sole power to escape a tyrannical marriage by wishing a lover " into existence through the power of her imagination" (9). It is she that creates her beloved. In his essay " Love and Power," R. W. Hanning states that God is not the only creator in the lai, but the lady herself is one as well; she " has undertaken to make her own love story on the pattern of others she has heard, and thereby brings across her close encounter of the bird-kind" (de France 98). The woman possesses such a large amount of power that she is able to wish her beloved into existence and control everything he does. Not only does Marie de France display the philosophy of the courtly love relationship through the words and actions of her characters, but through symbolism as well. In " Chevrefoil," she uses honeysuckle and a hazel branch as metaphors for Tristram and the Queen: The two of them resembled the honeysuckle which clings to the hazel branch: when it has wound itself round and attached itself to the hazel, the two can survive together: but if anyone should separate them, the hazel quickly dies, as does the honeysuckle. (de France 110)While either one is doomed without the other, it is clear that the hazel branch represents the Queen, for it is the more solid and stable of the two. The honeysuckle, on the other hand, represents Tristram, for he feeds off the Queen's love as the honeysuckle feeds off the hazel branch. The symbolism in " Laustic,"

however, is used to bring across a completely different message. While the <https://assignbuster.com/empowering-medieval-women-aspects-of-courtly-love-in-the-lais-of-marie-de-france/>

women of these *lais* are empowered by the men who seek their love, they lose all of this power when they look beyond these relationships. This is expected, for one must remember that during the Middle Ages, women generally possessed little power. It is only in the fictional world of courtly love that they are lifted onto pedestals and worshiped by their beloveds. In this *lai*, the nightingale represents the love between the woman and the knight. Despite her control over the knight, the woman is unable to stop her husband from both symbolically and realistically destroying their love for one another. When he learns of it, her husband takes the nightingale and “[breaks] its neck wickedly with two hands,” despite her asking him to return it to her safely (de France 95). It is clear through this incident that, when faced with a man other than her beloved, the woman possesses no power whatsoever. Her husband refuses to allow her to have something that he believes means the world to her. After all, if he did not believe that she truly loved the knight, he would not have bothered to kill the nightingale. It is clear in “Yonec” as well that a woman does not possess any power outside of the boundaries of a courtly love relationship. When faced with her husband, the woman is found to be completely helpless. As in “Laustic,” the husband exercises his power over his wife through destroying the one thing that brings her great joy. The bird her lover takes the shape of represents the small amount of freedom that prevents her from wishing to die (de France 86). However, the oppressive actions of her husband do not stop here. Before the woman even meets her beloved, her husband holds her captive in a tower on account of her beauty, allowing only his old sister in the room to “keep [his wife] from going astray” (de France 86). The constraints that Medieval society places on women are seen once again near <https://assignbuster.com/empowering-medieval-women-aspects-of-courtly-love-in-the-lais-of-marie-de-france/>

the end of the lai, when the woman is forced to depend upon her son to avenge her beloved's untimely death. The fact that the woman has to wait until her son "grow[s] up and become[s] a worthy and valiant knight," shows that Medieval society places men above women; this leaves women completely powerless outside of the fictional world of courtly love (de France 91). In "Lanval," however, things prove to be different. In the three lais already discussed, each woman can be assumed to have been part of an arranged marriage. The men they are married to do not allow their wives to place their affections where they please, thus causing Marie to allow the women to rebel and possess power over their beloveds. However, as we see in Lanval, a woman need not be part of an arranged marriage to have the pleasure of being placed in a powerful position with a man. The woman in this lai is an unmarried fairy. However, her beauty gives her complete control over the man she wants. According to Burgess "the fairy has the power to impose of Lanval the taboo of secrecy and possesses the omniscience to know the circumstances in which he is forced to break the taboo" (104-105). She is an intelligent woman who has a clear idea of what she wants and knows how to go about getting it. Her beauty mesmerizes Lanval, and immediately after she professes her love for him, "love's spark prick[s] him so that his heart [is] set alight" (de France 74). Lanval is instantly attracted to the fairy, and it is not hard to see why. Not only is she beautiful and intelligent, but there are many other appealing aspects to her as well. In Burgess's opinion: She is inordinately rich and capable of offering Lanval limitless pocket-money and immediate sexual gratification . . . In short, she represents a fearsome combination of beauty, wealth, power and knowledge." (104-105)It is because of these characteristics that the fairy has

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complete control over her beloved. When Lanval first meets her, he is in such awe of her beauty and love for him that he confesses to her that there is nothing he would not do to please her. He states: Fair lady, if it were to please you to grant me the joy of wanting to love me, you could ask nothing that I would not do as best I could, be it foolish or wise. I shall do as you bid and abandon all others for you.” (de France 74) However, the fairy does not hold power over anyone else in the society in which Lanval lives. After the queen unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Lanval, he is forced to reveal his love for the fairy. Because of this broken vow of secrecy, he “loses his ability to ‘see’ his lady in person and now suffers greatly, in that he has lost something he once had” (Mickel 110). When Lanval states that the beauty of his beloved exceeds that of the queen, he is forced to appear in court. To avoid punishment or death, he and his beloved must leave Lanval’s world for Avalon, the “very beautiful island” which the fairy is from (de France 81). The story may have a happy ending, and Lanval and his beloved may be able to love each other without enduring constant suffering, but “it is only ‘out of this world’” that this is possible (Mickel 110). The fairy does not possess any power over the court or the rest of society, and thus cannot find happiness within Lanval’s world. The power that Marie de France bestows upon the women in her *lais* comes from many different places. Glyn S. Burgess states that Marie de France’s ladies possess “outstanding characteristics,” similar to the courtly lady, who “possesses a thorough understanding of the needs of the court . . . can cope with a delicate or tricky situation, [and] demonstrates responsibility and subtlety in handling others” (114-115). Eleven of the female lovers in her *lais* are specifically described as beautiful, while eight of them are termed as sage. The women in “Lanval” and “<https://assignbuster.com/empowering-medieval-women-aspects-of-courtly-love-in-the-lais-of-marie-de-france/>

Laustic” are described as curteise, a word which, according to Burgess, “ has a strong cerebral element” (115). The fairy in Lanval is not only said to have a body that is “ well formed and handsome,” but she is also described with the word cointise (de France 74). Burgess states that this word covers a wide range of meanings, including wisdom, sagacity, knowledge, skill, elegance, and refinement (115). And while the women of Marie’s lais always go after what they want, they do not do so in a rude or unbecoming manner. This can be seen by the fact that she uses the word franche to describe a few of her heroines. Franche “ expresses nobility of outlook,” and can be interpreted as “ a blend of politeness and sensitivity” (Burgess 115). Marie de France has once described her view of an ideal woman, and when one compares the adjectives she used to do so with those adjectives she uses to describe her heroines, they are often found to be identical (Burgess 115). In addition to possessing outstanding characteristics, Marie de France’s heroines are often of noble birth. Since in her mind “ there is never any thought of presenting a relationship between a member of the nobility and a partner of markedly disparate social background,” the lovers of her heroines are also often of noble birth (Burgess 129). Not only are they able to exercise power over men, but they are able to exercise power over some of the best men that society has to offer. These men are often handsome, strong, and capable of doing nearly anything and everything for their women. It is because of the beauty, wisdom, and intelligence of the women in Marie de France’s lais that they are able to completely control such men. Works Cited Burgess, Glyn S.

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