

The lais of marie de france and the lion in the winter: when regulated love becom...

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Desensitized Matrimony: The Disastrous Results of Regulated Love

Tales of gallant knights, conquering realms and wooing fair maidens, have been passed down over generations from their inception in Medieval Europe. However, many of these stories fabricate a fair and virtuous nature of society to ensure a happy ending. Both *The Lais of Marie de France*, a group of short stories from 1183, and *The Lion in Winter*, a film from 1968, reflect a more accurate representation of society, especially in their depictions of love and marriage. The lais criticize societal rules which limit the potential of marriage, permitting people to marry only if they are both of noble blood or have a love deemed “right” by social standards. These rules, in most cases, diluted the meaning of a “union of two souls” into a loveless “union of two territories,” or even prevented the union entirely. *The Lion in Winter*, too, criticizes the property-based marriages and standards decreeing “right” relationships in society. Furthermore, both the lais and the film display characters who have been tormented or made callous by these rules. And yet, *The Lais of Marie de France* and *The Lion in Winter* appear dissimilar, as the former directly relays a sentiment about 12th century society, while the latter simply uses the medieval setting to make a statement to a 20th century audience. Despite this, the message of these two pieces is the same. While *The Lion in Winter* and *The Lais of Marie de France* are ostensibly different, they both reveal the dehumanizing and demoralizing effects of a society in which love and marriage are regulated and commoditized.

Marie de France presents the society's matrimonial rules, which permit marriage only between people of nobility or between those who have upheld the standards of courtly love and chivalry, as destructive to married individuals and those pursuing marriage. In the lais, she shows that, when a marriage equates to a transaction, as a nobleman marries a noblewoman simply to expand his territorial holdings, there will likely be little love or sympathy between husband and wife, derogating the wife and making the husband paranoid about losing his wife (and newfound land), as Marie de France attests when kings unfeelingly lock their beautiful queens away in many of her lais. Additionally, she displays the impediments, which society places on individual happiness and genuine love, when a marriage is prohibited solely because the relationship does not meet social criterion. In "Laüstic," a "closely guarded... lady" seeks love and affection with her neighbor, outside of her marriage with a knight who had "taken" her seemingly just for her "[courtliness] and [elegance]..." (de France 94). She communicates nightly with the neighbor by her window, concealing the love by telling her husband that she visits the window to hear the nightingale's song. After growing irritated by this excuse, her husband swears to kill the nightingale with the help of "every single servant in [the] household," a task which he promptly completes (de France 95). With the nightingale dead, the lady does not have an excuse to visit the window anymore and thus, she must remain unhappily confined in her marriage, deemed socially acceptable because of her noble lineage and her husband's knighthood. Marie de France's specific mention of "every single servant" (de France 95), when referring to the search party for the nightingale, signifies that society, not

just her husband, took part in rejecting any chance the lady had at actual love, as she was not only already the property of one man, but also the relationship caused the neighbor (a knight) to betray his fellow knight (in opposition of social law). In addition, the queen, locked away by her paranoid king, in “Chevrefoil” falls in love with Tristram, the king’s nephew, but they cannot expand their love beyond private life, as this would prove Tristram’s disloyalty to the king: an act against the society’s chivalric values. Marie de France expresses the pain caused by society’s prohibition of their love by comparing the two to a “honeysuckle which clings to the hazel branch” by which “the two can survive together: but if anyone should then attempt to separate them, the hazel quickly dies, as does the honeysuckle,” (110). Marie de France echoes this sentiment— that societal rules, governing marriage and love, cause some to be unhappy and others insensitive and possessive— throughout her lais.

The Lion in Winter examines the rules of matrimony, too, displaying the negative effects of commoditized marriage and obstructed love. In the film, the marriage between the king, Henry, and queen, Eleanor, is volatile. The king, after years of ruling and seeing the world as a place to own, has become affectless, treating his sons as simple heirs rather than children, explaining to his mistress (whom he claims to love) that “[he] will use [her] as [he likes]” (The Lion in Winter), and even banishing his queen. Meanwhile, the queen, after living locked in a far away kingdom for years, is in despair, as the man she once loved has devalued their marriage to a means for procuring land and creating heirs. With territory and heirs looming above

their heads, the king and queen never find happiness. They communicate, throughout most of the film, through an apparent game of advocating for a certain son as heir to the throne. Eleanor even laments, after Henry uncaringly deceives her to push his choice for heir into the lead, that she has “lost,” (The Lion in Winter). This simple phrase explains bounds about their relationship, indicating that marriage truly is a game to Henry and Eleanor and that their relationship revolves around deception and defeating the other person, rather than love. The territorial possessiveness, which caused this, was created directly by the nature of Henry and Eleanor’s marriage, as it was initially a transactional union. Henry married Eleanor to gain strategic land, a customary reason for noble matrimony. Yet, this reason, the societal custom inevitably led to unhappiness for both, as obsession over territory impedes love between the two. The film shows that rules determining proper love and marriage force individuals to become miserable or compassionless, as their relationships are built not on human affection, but on purchase and abidance to social norms.

Both The Lais of Marie de France and The Lion in Winter expose flaws in marital constructs and the idea of “socially acceptable” love, as both works demonstrate the obstruction that the constructs and societal expectations put on happiness. The lais and film criticize this same idea and also argue the same point— individual happiness will increase if people are permitted to marry out of love, rather than by amount of land or if they have correctly followed the rules. As society continues to place barriers around marriage

and deem some types of love “ wrong,” these works prove that there is still progress to be had in order to achieve a truly equal and just society.