

Analysis of the lais of marie de france



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Medieval times, women were usually forced to be dependent on a man for her safety, prosperity, and guidance. Yet, in Marie de France's fictional tales of courtly love, men are in fact victims to women's charm. Men are unable to live without their lovers, and their desire for love leads these men to be more noble and obedient. Marie de France does not follow conventional rules of courtly love, but she models relationships between men and women after certain characteristics of it. In fact, women in relationships often fall into one of three groups; those unpunished for adultery, those condemned for disloyalty, and "godlike" women flawless in body and spirit. Out of these fictional relationships come distinct symbolism of marriage, social hierarchies, and gender roles. The particular tales of Guigemar, Eliduc, and Lanval all are examples of relationships which exhibit men and women in questionable social roles.

The Lay of Guigemar, a poetic description of lovers separated by distance and circumstance. Guigemar, a noble knight doomed unable to have love, finds a deer in the woods and attempts to kill it. Upon the arrow rebounding and wounding Guigemar, he is told by the deer that he is cursed, and he will never heal his wound until he finds a woman who is worth suffering for. Guigemar finds solace aboard a ship, which sets sail while he is asleep, and propels him towards his future lovers' kingdom. The Queen of the land he stumbles upon, as well as a maid, find him and offer comfort and a place to nurse his wound. Eventually, Guigemar is not bothered by his wound but is troubled by his love for the Queen. Both the Queen and Guigemar believe that their love for each other is unrequited, so Guigemar hopes to die. Yet, he is invited to join the Queen, where they begin a yearlong affair. To seal

their affection for each other, the Queen ties Guigemar's shirt into a knot only she can untie, and Guigemar wraps a belt around her. When the King finds out about their relationship, he lets Guigemar free, leaving the Queen behind who ponders if suicide is her only option for two years. She finds the boat Guigemar initially arrived on, sets sail to Brittany, but falls prey to Meriaduc's advances. Meriaduc cannot untie her belt, but Guigemar does, after learning that she is in attendance of his jousting tournament. Guigemar starves the enemy town, kills Meriaduc, and is reunited with the Queen.

Immediate reactions to this poem is of the disregard of the Queen's marriage. In the beginning of the Lay of Guigemar, Marie de France explains Guigemar's lack of interest in any women, but only uses the word for "unwed". She says in the beginning, "There was neither dame nor maiden beneath the sky, however dainty and kind, whom he gave thought our heed, though had he required her love of any damsel, very willingly would she have granted his desire" (P. 3). Marie de France uses a word commonly defined as unwed woman twice to explain Guigemar's predicament, yet he faces no punishment later for sleeping with a married royal. Marie de France also has little issue in Guigemar's territorial nature, as he places a chastity belt around his lover, to ensure she "would never grant her love, save to him only." (P. 29). Marie de France shows little respect for promises made in marriage, because there would be little romantics in Guigemar immediately being executed for his actions. In addition, both of the perpetrators in this affair are left unpunished for their actions. Guigemar knew he had to leave due to the Queen's dream, and the Queen was always locked in her tower before her lover's arrival. This story sets a theme for the proceeding tales; all

moral, ethical, and social boundaries are broken when love naturally presides over mortals.

The story of Eliduc is more normative for the time period Marie de France wrote in, exhibiting a male have unfaltering control over two women simultaneously. In this story, a knight named Eliduc was married to his wife Guildeluc, and lived happily serving the King of Brittany, until he is slandered by jealous enemies. The King bans him, and he leaves with ten knights. They promise to be faithful to each other. Eliduc arrives to a new land, where the lord has refused to give away his daughter. Eliduc wins the approval of the lord by defeating the enemies which come to this land, much to the delight of the daughter as well. Initially, Eliduc behaves respectfully due to being married, but finds it increasingly difficult to stay truthful to his wife. He is tested by Guilliadun, the daughter of the lord, to see if her love is accepted. After much torment, Guilliadun expresses her love for Eliduc, to which he denies by saying that he is only in her presence for a year. He leaves after rejecting Guilliadun's advances multiple times, only to return to sadness once he is reunited with his true wife. Eliduc again returns to Guilliadun, and attempts to bring her back to his home. However, on the voyage back, a great storm emerges, and Eliduc is accused of causing the storm by his affair. Guilliadun faints at the thought of Eliduc being married, and is seemingly dead. Guildeluc finds Guilliadun's "dead" body in a chapel, and brings Guilliadun back to life. She allowed Eliduc to marry his new love, on the condition she can be granted a nunnery on the land where Guilliadun was resurrected.

This story portrays high amounts of social hierarchy when examined through close analysis and distant reading. First, when viewing the plot as a whole, there is an overbearing amount of male dominance. The man has a wife, he refuses a potential lovers' advances, but eventually brings her to his homeland without telling either Guilladun about Guildeluec, or vice versa. Marie de France presents this story with contrasting and distorted images of loyalty. Eliduc left the King of Brittany upon request, and served both dutifully when called, but could not remain true to his wife. He does not sleep with Guilladun, but he permits himself to be emotionally captivated by her. In this process, he leads on Guilladun, leaving her with two choices; Eliduc bringing her with him, or leaving her to commit suicide. Guilladun is so adamant in her demands as she says, "' Since you cannot stay,' said the maiden. ' Take me with you, wherever you go. If not, my life is so joyless without you, that I would wish to end it with my knife'" (P. 42). Guildeluec shows similar desperation when she says "' Seest thou,' she said, ' this woman, who for beauty shineth as a gem! This lady, in her life, was the lover of my lord. It was for her that all his days were spoiled by grief. By my faith I marvel little at his sorry, since I, who am a woman too, will - for pity's sake or love- never know joy again, having seen so fair a lady in the dust'" (P. 58). Marie de France offered little mercy to be shown for Eliduc's proper wife, one to which he promised not to betray. Yet, she is shown as frail and pitying Eliduc's luck, standing above his lover's deathbed. Women are viewed as completely submissive to men in this piece, and neither female characters make any choice which is not influenced by Eliduc. Marie de France gives women little power or control in this story, leaving both of the lovers at the mercy of Eliduc.

An excellent example of reversed gender roles is portrayed in Marie de France's Lay of Sir Lanval. Lanval is described as loyal, handsome knight, yet he is lonely and sad. He decides to explore the forest to rid him of his misfortune, where he stumbles upon a stream. Two beautiful women approach him, who explain that their mistress has been awaiting him. This maiden tells him that she has been in search of deep love, and he would be rewarded for loving the "Fairy Queen" in exchange for his silence. Lanval agrees, and he is promised extravagant wishes. The consequence for disclosing their love to an outside is losing the Fairy Queen forever. Later, at a luncheon of sorts in King Arthur's garden, Queen Guinevere attempts to persuade Lanval. She confesses her desire for him, and quickly offers herself to him for affection. When he rejects the Queen, she accuses of him of homosexuality, to which he explains that he is in love with another woman whom he cannot betray. Guinevere accuses Lanval of offending her to King Arthur, and he holds a trial to determine Lanval's innocence. Though Lanval does not tell of his love for the Fairy Queen, he vehemently denies claims made by Guinevere, to which King Arthur does not believe. The jury is split in their decision, which angers the Queen, but Lanval's love arrives to clear his name. She forgives him for breaking his promise, but acknowledges his attempts to hide her identity during the trial.

This story is very interesting in its depiction of gender roles. In the stories previously mentioned, the women were more bound to their word than the men. For example, in the story of Guigemar, the Queen has a chastity belt tied around her waist, while Guigemar simply has a knot in his shirt. Yet in this story, Lanval face sure execution without the help from an outside

witness. Lanval is either at the mercy of King Arthur, which is normative, or the mercy of his lover, which is socially unusual. Descriptions of Lanval's interactions with the Fairy Queen are very clearly submissive, as explained when Marie de France says "Lanval plighted faith, that right strictly he would observe this commandment." Marie de France does not explain the Fairy Queen's wishes as a request, but a commandment. She later describes this vow as a "covenant", which also is a moderately strict word in place of "pact" or "bond". Lanval is always at the mercy of others, though he is a knight with "beauty and valor". He is first bound by his lover, then is threatened by Queen Guinevere, and is almost executed by King Arthur. In previous tales, such as *Eliduc*, both Kings offered great praise to their knight, and both women found themselves submissive to who *Eliduc* chose to be with. Even with sure death in his future, Lanval kept to his bond of not revealing his lover's identity. When the maidens arrive to the trial to introduce the Fair Queen, Lanval "answered very simply that never before had he seen these damsels with his eyes, nor known and loved them in his heart" (P. 40). Lanval was not bound to keep the Fairy Queen's maidens a secret, but Lanval was in such deference to his lover that he would not even acknowledge their existence. Lanval, a male in love, shows extreme submission to his lovers' wishes, which is in contrast with other tales written by Marie de France.

The Lays of Marie de France are not at all consistent, nor do they carry a single, general theme about love. Each individual story provides different points of view which vary in the amount of control women and men have. In stories like *The Lay of Eliduc*, men exhibit unfaltering power over their lovers,

which almost drive the women to suicide. Yet, stories such as The Lay of Lanval show women with complete control over men's actions. Marriage, social hierarchies, and gender roles are all completely thrown in the air, as Marie de France attempts to highlight unusual social situations with her tales. Marie de France is successful in exhibiting the different power dynamics between males and females, because she manipulates marriage, social hierarchies, and gender roles to her liking.