

The lais of marie de france | book review



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I've decided to do my second book review on the first book we read for this class. Which was "The Lais of Marie de France". written by Marie de France in the 12th century but later translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. Glyn S, Burgess studied French at St, Johns college, Oxford. He then took his MA at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, at the University of South Carolina and from 1971 at the University of Liverpool. He is now retired and professor Emeritus. His interests lie in the early medieval French literature, especially in the relationship between literature and society. He has also translated The Song of Roland for the Penguin Classics and has published a lot on twelfth century literature.[1]Keith Busby is a professor of French at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He was previously a professor of Old French and the Comparative Literature at the Universities of Leiden and Utrecht in the Netherlands. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, and at the universities of York and Poitiers. His current major interest is study of medieval literature in its manuscript context.[2]The author Marie de France has very little background, her last name isn't even known. Marie was one of the earliest known French women poets and mostly known for her lais in this book. She was obviously an educated lady of good background who knew Latin well enough to translate the *Purgatory* from Latin to French, perhaps an indication that she had been trained in a convent. Marie was from France but later moved to England and that is all that is known about her.[3]I've decided to summarize my favorites ones to read.

It begins with the very first Lays named *Guigemar* and it was very interesting to read. It's about a knight named Guigemar and is believed to be the best knight where he lives. Since he is a very good knight he is loved by a lot of

women but he is unable to love any of them back for some reason which is important to know. He didn't believe in love perhaps. The king sends him away to another land to serve for another king. But one day he decides to come home and wants to go hunting with his other knights. While hunting he runs into a beautiful white deer that almost looked magical so he shoots an arrow at the deer and hits him, but the arrow also ricochets off the white deer and hits Guigemar in the leg and wounds him. As the deer is dying he tells the knight, you will never be able to fix your injury unless you find a woman to suffer for but in other words a woman to love. This is when Guigemar realizes he has never met a woman he actually loved. As he wanders around the woods he stumbles upon a ship and decides to search it. After he is on it he realizes it is empty so he decides to rest on a bed found inside, which is a mistake. The story shifts to a different setting where there is another king who is married. But the wife is locked away because the king doesn't want her to cheat on him since she is very beautiful. The only person with the queen is a maiden and the only way to get to the queen is by sea. One day they see a boat has arrived at their land and the maiden searches it where she finds an injured Guigemar. So the queen decides to nurse him back to health where they both fall in love. But stubbornly won't admit it to each other but finally Guigemar does admit his love and they have an affair for one year and a half. Until they are caught but before they were caught the queen tied a knot in Guigemar's shirt and said anyone who can untie this knot can have you and the knight ties a chastity belt around the queen saying the same thing. The king then lets Guigemar leave without dying and he returns back home. The story shifts to the locked-up queen who spends the next two years very suicidal. As she goes to kill herself she finds a ship

which takes her to a different land. When the king of the land named Meriaduc searches the ship he immediately falls in love with the queen. She tells him she can only love a man that can take off her chastity belt. This certain test reminds the king of a similar situation he has heard of and that is of Guigemar and his shirt and he tells the queen. When she hears this, she faints and when she is unconscious the king tries to take the belt off but fails. Which in my opinion is very disgusting of this king. The king invites Guigemar to his castle to see if his accusations were correct. The king tells the queen to attempt to untie the knights knot and she does very easily. She then tells Guigemar of the ship and how she got there and so Guigemar asks the king to allow him to take his love back promising to fight for him in the war. Meriaduc tells the knights no to giving up the queen so Guigemar goes to Meriaduc's enemy and fights for him and they end up starving Meriaduc's whole town and Guigemar kills him and he is reunited with the love of his life.

The next Lais in the book is called *Equitan*. This one was a good read too but also very upsetting because it's about a king and a cheating wife. The king's name is Equitan. This king has a seneschal who is very loyal to him. But the king hears about this seneschal's wife who is supposedly very beautiful. He decides to go to his seneschals' home where he finds his wife and immediately falls in love contemplating whether or not to admit his love to the wife. Equitan finally convinces himself that the affair would be worth it to have her love. The next day as he goes out to hunt he has to go back because he feels very sick. This is when the king confesses his love for her but the wife says she cannot be with him because he is a king with so much

power and that once they sleep together he will leave her. The king tells her he will not and that she is the one who will be in power if they get together and then she agrees. After a long time of being in secret the kingdom starts asking why the king doesn't have a wife and that he should find one when the wife hears this she confronts the king saying he is going to leave her now but the king tells her he won't leave her and that he would marry her if the seneschal died. The wife suggests killing her husband and comes up with a plan. She tells Equitan to ask the seneschal to go hunting with him and to ask him to take a bath with him. The wife will make sure her husband's water is boiling water so he would die when he is inside it. The king agrees and the king asks his seneschal to hunt with him. While the wife is making the baths, they decide to have sex and they are caught. The king is so surprised that he jumps into the bath with boiling water to hide and dies. The seneschal is so upset that he throws his wife into the water where she dies too. I really thought the ending on this lais was justified because I would have done the same thing if I was the seneschal.

The fifth lay was actually my favorite one. It's called *Les Deux Amanz*. The setting was by a huge mountain which is very important to take note of considering how the story goes. A king builds a kingdom right next to this huge mountain. This same king also has a daughter who he is very attached to because he wife had died and he wanted to protect and be close to her. He then starts to hear his court talk about how weird it was that he was so overprotective of his daughter. So he makes an announcement that shocks everyone which is, anyone who can climb to the top of the mountain while carrying his daughter will be able to marry her. Men from all over come to try

but none could do it. One young man who visits the king falls in love with the princess and she falls in love with him too so they start a secret affair. But the girl notices he is very weak and wouldn't be able to pass her father's test. The girl suggest he drinks a strength potion to complete the task and she will starve herself to make it easier for him. The young man agrees and gets the potion and then asks the king to marry his daughter. The king can see that the boy is weak but he agrees and tells everyone to come and watch. The day comes and the boy starts to climb up the mountain while carrying the girl and at the same time the girl carries the potion so she can pour it into his mouth when he needs it. He makes it about halfway and the girl tells him he should take the potion now but he refuses. He makes it two-thirds of the way, and she continues to beg him to take the potion, but again he refuses. He makes it to the top but immediately dies from the struggle to the top. The girl lies down next to him and is so sad that she dies too. The king finds them and decided to bury them there on the mountain top.

The next lias is called " Laüstic." It begins with two knights who were neighbors. Both have good reputations, one having a beautiful courtly wife, and the other being known for adventure. The one knight is in love with his neighbor's wife and thanks to both his persistence, the wife gives in to his and falls in love with him as well. They are never able to meet because her husband's diligence. but because they were neighbors it allowed them to speak from their windows over the courtyard, and to give gifts to one another. One summer, the lovers began waking at night, wearing their mantles, so they can adore one another. The lady's husband grows angry because she keeps leaving the bed and she tells him that she gets up to

listen to the nightingale's song. The husband plans to kill the nightingale. His servants rig the entire courtyard with traps until the bird is captured and given alive to the knight. He brings the bird to his wife and he tells her she will be able to sleep now because he has caught the bird. He kills it and throws it at her, staining her dress with blood. The lady knows she can no longer rise to look at the knight, and is worried he will not understand why she no longer goes to her window. She gives a servant the bird and asks him to bring it to the neighbor. The servant agrees, and the knight understands and is sad to see the dead bird. He has the bird put in a small coffin, and he carries it around with him from that day forward.

The eleventh lays was named *Chevrefoil*. Of course, it is about a love story. Tristram is in love with the wife of his uncle Mark, who is a king. For this reason, the king banishes Tristram, who is willing to risk death and destruction to see his beloved again. He leaves his own land and travels to Cornwall, where the queen lives, traveling secretly and living with poor people to avoid detection. He learns through his hosts that the king has called his barons to court for revelry. Tristram is excited at the news, since he can devise a plan by which to see the queen. He decides to hide in the woods near the path she will travel. While waiting, he cuts a hazel branch covered in honeysuckle in half and writes his name on it, so that the queen could see it, and she will recognize it as his and know he thinks of her and cannot live without her. When the queen rides by with the group heading to court, she sees the wood and knows what it is. She asks her escorts to stop for a rest, and she moves a bit away from them with her faithful servant Brenguein. There she finds Tristram waiting, and they enjoy one another's

company. She tells him how he might be reunited with the king, who felt bad about the banishment. When they have to part they are saddened and grieve the loss of each other.

Marie de France dedicated her lays to a noble king as it says in the prologue. Her target audience was everyone and I know this because in her prologue she states that if you were given the God given gift of being able to story tell good then you should not be silent with it.[4]She wanted everyone to read her work and become more educated. When she first wrote the Lais it was very popular with men and women especially ones in aristocratic circles. Her work caught the imagination of her age and was able to satisfy and entertain the people of that time period. While the new translation by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby was written to keep her lays alive. Their goal was to translate the Lais as accurately as possible. The audience was the general public and students mostly, but they wanted to make sure that anyone who had no literature of the Old French could understand and be entertained by this book. " Our translation of Marie's Lais appears in the wake of a revival of interest in the middle ages."[5]Most translators' goals are to tell the story as close as they can to the original while simplifying it so others are able to enjoy and understand it.

As stated before Marie's Lais were very popular during her time period. When she first wrote the Lais it was very popular with men and women. Her stories gave imagination to her age and was able to entertain the people of that time period even though it is unknown if Marie actually wrote all the Lais in the book she is credited to. " Marie was determined in not abandoning her work because of malicious gossip and aggressive behavior. We do not know

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precisely at what moment in her career Marie wrote the prologue to Guigemar but it is clear that when she did she was sufficiently well known..."[6]The lias were well known then and hopefully they are well known now because they were very interesting to read.

I was very amused reading all the lias. It interesting to keep reading because I'm a sucker for a good love story and I know so is the rest of my generation. One thing I didn't like about the book was how repetitive it was. A love story having to do with cheating. I would have liked if the stories were more diverse with love. I also didn't like how the women were given adulterous and objectifying characteristics. Then the men were giving brave and noble characteristics, it seems unreal to me. Besides that, I really liked how each story was told and I was entertained the whole time while reading it.

Bibliography

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[1]Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie De France* . Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. London: Penguin Classics, 2012. 5

[2]Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie De France* . 5

[3]" Marie de France." Arts and Humanities Through the Eras . . *Encyclopedia. com*.

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[4]Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie De France* . Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby

[5]Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie De France* . Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby

[6]Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie De France* .