

The lais of marie de france in reference to the patriarchy



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I consider myself a recovering patriarchal woman. By patriarchal woman I mean, of course, a woman, who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. (Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 81, emphasis original)

For my argument, I have chosen to discuss the role of patriarchy in *The Lais of Marie de France*. Being a medieval text, it is predominantly patriarchal, with gender roles established not only through examples of what a man or a woman should do, but what their divergence from those roles can lead to. Marie de France, however, does not always embrace conventions, which is important to consider because she is a female writer within the patriarchal context.

Firstly, the ways in which the author reinforces gender roles should be discussed. To start more generally, Marie gives seven of her twelve lais names of their male protagonists, as the central character was traditionally expected to be male. Furthermore, lais like "Guigemar" and "Milun" not only demonstrate the qualities that were considered typical for male protagonists but their contribution to their status: Guigemar's identity is defined by his martial abilities, since not only could 'no one...find his equal as a knight' (pg. 44) but his travel to foreign land is aimed at 'search of renown' (pg 43) through 'war and strife', thus establishing the importance of gaining glory through conflict; Milun, too, is 'an exceedingly fine knight' (pg. 97) who is 'noble and bold, courtly and fierce' and 'loved for his prowess.'

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Similarly, there are lais, where typical feminine qualities are celebrated. In fact, as Wood points out, ' by spotlighting them in the narrative, it glorifies the station and roles of women in the household.' (pg. 1)[1] Women were associated with domesticity and thus, a lot of female characters feel in control when in their household. The treacherous wife in " Equitan" chooses to execute her husband with a method that has nothing to do with weapons or fighting but a hot bath tub that would usually offer domestic comfort to a man. In " La Fresne", Fresne takes care of the bedclothes for the newly married and regains her status by exposing the expensive brocade she had received from her mother at birth. Another aspect of domesticity, motherhood, the nurturing side of a woman, is celebrated, too: for example, in " Milun", there is a particular emphasis on the fact that a proper care of the child is taken as ' they fed the child, put it...to sleep and bathed it" as well as taking " a wet nurse with them' (pg. 98).

When reinforcement of gender roles is being argued, however, there is also a place for some negative stereotypes about women. An important pattern that is maintained in at least nine of the lais is adultery that is always committed by a woman, not a man. While in some cases, like in " Equitan", " Bisclavret" and " Lanval" it is condemned and in others like " Guigemar", " Yonec" and " Milun" it is celebrated, it is always a married woman's initiative to have a lover, not a married man's, with an exception, perhaps, of La Fresne. Furthermore, in lais like " Equitan", " Bisclavret", and " Lanval" the archetype of a conniving, treacherous woman is presented. These women are clever but they do not use their intellect benevolently; rather, they deceive others into believing the " truth" convenient to them. In "

Bisclavret", for example, a wife can go as far as begging for an answer in 'the name of God' (pg. 69), stating that she loves her husband 'more than the whole world' and yet still betraying him when he gives away his most precious secret. It may be a reference to the Old Testament subject of Samson and Delilah where a woman of great beauty deceives a man, only to use his weakness against him in order to dehumanise, emasculate him. Many feminist critics would argue that 'it is not unreasonable for the lady [in Bisclavret] to...fear...and decide never again to lie with a man who regularly morphs into such a fearsome creature' (Kinoshita & McCracken, pg. 69)[2]. The male characters in the text, however, not only accept Bisclavret's harsh action of biting 'the nose right off [his wife's] face' but also subject her to torture. It is only in Marie's own commentary that it is suggested that Bisclavret acted like a "madman" and therefore, did not use human reasoning.

The same facts can be used as an argument against set patriarchal thinking because women use the concepts pitched against them in their favour.

Marie, as a writer of her time, 'display[s] her belief in a woman's role and the beauty, skill, strength, and intelligence it requires.' (Wood pg. 1)[3] In numerous lais, it is women who get to resolve problems with their wit that men cannot resolve with physical force. In "Lanval", the eponymous character despite possessing virtues like 'valour' and 'prowess' needs his 'beloved...to defend and protect him' by speaking in front of the court, which she does and succeeds at liberating him. In "Guigemar", it is the lady that comes up with the 'pledge' in a form of a knot in her beloved shirt and a chastity belt, which helps her reunite with Guigemar. Another important

instance when women are shown to be autonomous is when they commit adultery: Marie does not portray their husbands as sympathetic and that seems to justify those women. In fact, most of these husbands are depicted as 'jealous', 'rich old men', who have subjected their wives to lengthy periods of imprisonment and found themselves cheated for mistreating them: it is thus a 'rebellion [that is] simultaneously a rebirth and an affirmation of [a woman]' (Guthrie, pg. 45)[4]. Since most women of the time were subjected to an arranged marriage, Marie does not condemn them for cuckolding their husbands; instead, she condemns women who have chosen a lover with their heart and cheated on him nevertheless. Thus, in lais where women have found true love and remained loyal to it such as "Guigemar", "Yonec", "Milun", not only are they not ostracised but either reunited with their lovers or avenged.

In conclusion, while it cannot be denied that the text is imbued with patriarchal thinking that was prevalent for Medieval literature, it is also hard to deny that Marie's perception of gender roles was not uniform or typical for her time. While some traditionally male and female qualities are present in the lais, there are moments when both men and women act out of character.

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