

## “NO BARRIER EXCEPT FOR ONE”: A QUEER READING OF MARIE DE FRANCE’S *LAÛSTIC*

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### **ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

Many believe the medieval period was a simpler, even easier time, when a strict and straightforward hierarchy existed and those who deviated from the norm were punished, while those who followed the rules lived happy, uninterrupted lives and all was well. Those same individuals probably also believe that their sexuality was simple as well: men liked women and women liked men. But, while explicit labels may not have existed, queer individuals always have. By examining stories, poems, letters, and other personal writings throughout history using contemporary ideas and approaches, we are able to gather exciting new insight about those who have been purposely left out of the conversation for so long. In this paper, I take a postmodern, queer approach to Marie de France’s *Laüstic* in order to contribute to the vast research already done on her work. While most scholarship on *Laüstic* focuses on the obvious aspects of courtly love, symbolism of the nightingale, or comparisons to other pieces of literature, I shall argue that the first knight’s wife is not an actual character; rather, she is a projection of that first knight’s queer self, allowing him to maintain a brief homosexual relationship with the second knight.

### **NARRATIVE EXISTENCE AND THE POSTMODERN APPROACH**

In an attempt accurately to portray the characters I will be discussing, it is important for me first to clarify the idea of narrative existence, as it is foundational to both my overall argument, as well as a general understanding of queer medieval studies. Although Marie de France’s *lais* are technically lyrical poems, all twelve are short tales, or narratives, which are equipped with plot, characters, setting, conflict, and resolution. As was established long ago, narrative “does not merely list what happens, but... it brings out or creates meaningful connections between events or experiences, thereby rendering them (at least partly) intelligible” and therefore, examinable (Meretoja 89). Because of these connections, narrative has a significant relationship with human existence, which can be discussed in three dimensions: ontologically, or the nature of being; epistemologically, the theory of knowledge, specifically regarding the methods, validity, and distinction between belief and opinion; and ethically, which involves the approval or disapproval of moral principles. By exploring narrative and human existence using all three dimensions at once, Meretoja claims that “the relationship between experience and narrative can be clarified in relation to the fundamental phenomenological-hermeneutic notion of interpretation,” (97). Because Marie de France explicitly states she is simply retelling stories that she had once been told -- “I too have heard them: I do not / wish them abandoned, lost, forgot. / Thus I made rhymes and poetry / late into night-time, wakefully!” -- we can safely assume that these narratives are not her personal experiences; rather, through interpretation, the *lais* can provide insight into the types of experiences individuals of the medieval period went through (Gilbert 4). Therefore, looking past heteronormative structures and instead, viewing the tale through a queer lens, *Laüstic* takes on an entirely new meaning; however, equally as important as establishing its narrative existence, is the idea of confronting the ways in which medieval queer literature operates in the present and how its meaning has transformed from the time it was originally published.

In order to analyze Marie de France's lai through a queer lens, one must take a postmodernist approach to the text, as well as to the genre of medieval studies as a whole, in order to keep up with contemporary scholarship. Postmodernism, at its core, believes that the "natural, universal, given, transcendent, and timeless is historically constituted -- and therefore alterable," as are many other elements of literature (Paterson 90). The idea of representation can be seen as "generating not a paralyzing epistemological sophistication but opportunities for change" and completely decentering the normal systems of authority, or generally dismantling different types of hierarchies "leads not merely to eclecticism but to new, more egalitarian structures of relationship" between both the text and the reader, as well as the characters within the text (90). Unfortunately, the patriarchal underpinnings of medieval texts are still very much present, but rather than focusing on the "teleological linearity" of those male-dominated ideas, scholars Robert Magnani and Diane Watt forge a path toward a "new codicology, a queer philology, whose epistemology is founded on dissonance, instability, and misprision," (252). Therefore, by its very definition -- "the study of sexual identity and its related cultural history"; to challenge the need for labels such as gay and lesbian; to question "why society should allocate resources and grant privileges according to sexual orientation" -- queer studies is deeply interested in the examination of institutions of power embedded into the mainstream (Buchanan). A postmodernist queer approach allows the reader to analyze an older text, such as Marie de France's *Laüstic*, while keeping in mind both medieval and contemporary cultural structures.

### **REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP**

As far as previous scholarship regarding *Laüstic* is concerned, I have not been able to find anything that falls within the area of queer studies; rather, a focus on courtly love, the symbolism of the nightingale, and comparisons to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are repeatedly present. Specifically focusing on line 23 of the text, -- "He loved his neighbor's wife" -- Sarah-Jane Murray's article "Marie de France, Ethicist: Questioning Courtly Love in *Laüstic*" argues that such an explicit reference to one of the Ten Commandments creates "an important ethical dimension to the story," opening whole new paths of interpretation (2). Murray states that Marie's entire text is "a subtle and very interesting critique of the covetous and destructive kind of selfish love," opposed to the more selfless love that is seen in many of the eleven other lais (2). This selfishness presents itself from the very beginning, but is much more obvious as the nightingale motif is revealed. About halfway through, the selfish love "becomes even stronger" as Marie "draws attention to her characters' moral shortcomings by introducing a series of references to Ovid's stories of Pyramus and Thisbe and Philomela in the *Metamorphoses*," (2). Murray concludes by saying that the death of the nightingale is Marie both questioning courtly love and encouraging her audience to better understand "what it means to lead a fulfilled, moral, and Christian life in relation to their neighbor," or in simpler terms: one can love their neighbor, but platonically, and not in a way that breaks one of the Commandments (16). All-in-all, anything done "with an eye toward self-gratification is ultimately doomed to failure," as the lovers' relationship fails when the nightingale dies (15). However, within a queer reading, this love between the two men is not at all selfish, but instead, an attempt to live a life true to themselves and their desires, which are dangerous deviations from the established norm.

Marie de France's references to and inspiration for other texts is a popular topic of comparative research, including but not limited to, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Susan Glaspell's twentieth-century play *Trifles*. Scholar Robert T. Cargo notes that the way in which the woman in *Laüstic* conveys a message to her lover via embroidery "recalls strikingly an episode from the story in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses*, where Ovid treats the Greek legend which, in its adapted form, has at its center the story of Philomela and her metamorphosis into the nightingale" (162). However similar these incidents may be, Cargo makes a bold assumption that "in all probability, the lady embroidered a scene upon the silk depicting the lovers, each at his own window, listening to the song of the nightingale," which he makes as the very basis of his entire argument -- that the message sent, either written or oral, is presented to the knight as a way for her to communicate her undying and everlasting love to the second knight (165). By a similar comparative token, scholar Brian Sutton argues that comparing the works *Laüstic* and *Trifles* "helps us to recognize how an image's symbolic associations may resonate over continents and centuries, as well as

how literature explores complex realities that have persisted over those same continents and centuries," specifically in discussing the nightingale, or songbird (171). Each of these articles focuses on comparing the assumed love between man and woman, but none, as far as my research has taken me, have attempted to compare the love present in Marie de France's work to a more queer-centered work of literature. Although my piece is not comparative in nature, I believe it would be beneficial for medieval queer studies to consider doing so in the future, as there is much more room for contemporary interpretation.

Continuing with the comparative approach theme, but drifting into the area of symbolism, is the abundance of scholarship focusing specifically on the nightingale. Thomas Alan Shippey, author of "Listening to the Nightingale" states that "it is important to be able to trace out the chain of emotional reasoning that leads" the men of the medieval period to collectively understand that the nightingale has a special meaning, and he travels back to Homer and Ovid to do so (47). In his interpretation, the fact that the characters within the stories of the medieval period "do not love each other is almost irrelevant, and is forced out of sight by the demands of the age," marking the nightingale as a "piercing reminder of the *danger* of love, the suddenness made more sweet by a realization of fated disaster" (49). Even when the bird does represent love between two people – more commonly referred to as courtly love in medieval times – it is either discussing the "ideal love they wish for" or an "illicit and frustrated love" (51-2). The bottom-line argument is that the nightingale seems to be linked to the "pleasures of love," but also the "cruelties of desire," therefore, the author makes a very clear choice when inserting a nightingale into their story or poem, becoming a signal for readers to pay attention (47). While the basis of Shippey's argument is strong, the reading itself is very heteronormative. Paired with the idea of self-repression, as well as gender performativity, the nightingale takes on these old meanings, but more importantly, new queer meanings too.

In more general terms, scholars of Marie de France have differing views on her thoughts on courtly love; however, Christopher Pipkin argues that to even ask for Marie's actual position on any one issue "is to ask the wrong question, insisting that the *Lais* be a kind of novel of ideas," (308). Instead of using her work in a way that may resemble propaganda, Marie "allow[s] readers to explore love and morality through narratives that approximate real-life situations and proverbs that (always partially) apply to them," so that those readers are able to contextualize and interpret the proverbs in a way that suits their own personal situation (308). When speaking specifically about *Laüstic*, Pipkin focuses on lines 27 and 28: "partly, for all the good she heard; / partly, he lived close by, this lord," (120). Reports of his good qualities ultimately inspires her love, playing into the "love from afar" trope, which is "an ardent love... conceived for a person the lover has not yet met, [but] based only on reports of beauty, heroism, or general perfection," (Pipkin 318). However, the woman also loves the knight because of his close proximity. Instead of discrediting the love the woman feels because of this detail, as many scholars have done, Pipkin claims that Marie "combine[s] idealized love-codes with practical considerations," so that her audience may respond and relate to the *lais* that much more (319). Although Pipkin discusses Marie's ability to "innovatively combine varying morals and narratives within her own culture," he does not discuss any queer elements of that culture, even though we know that queer people, and therefore queer culture, very much existed (320). Unfortunately, we will never know how the queer folk of the time reacted to Marie de France's *Laüstic*, especially if Pipkin's argument is correct, but by looking through a postmodern queer lens, we can at least attempt to understand.

The final piece of relevant scholarship that I would like to discuss has to do with the enclosure of women, whether literally or figuratively. Central to understanding her article, Jean-Marie Kauth begins by providing background on the history of the woman trapped in a tower that is intended to protect her. The physical architecture of the space is extremely important, for it is "mapped onto the woman's body in order that the man may more clearly penetrate and subordinate her sexually" and when he finally progresses into the tower, it "becomes a graphic metaphor for his sexual intercourse with her" so that the "woman herself merges with and disappears into the architecture" (34). The very little agency a woman had before this encounter has completely vanished and she is now wholeheartedly objectified, a metaphor for female sexuality, Kauth suggests. More than just a metaphor, however, women's "enclosure moves beyond mere metonymy; it is replete with the sort of symbolic resonances that others have

observed in images and language throughout Marie's works" (35). Kauth goes on to argue three main points: the connection Marie de France has to oral and material culture simply changes their use of the metaphor; that she genders the tower as feminine in a "more vivid and ambiguous way"; and lastly, that Marie rewrites female spaces in ways that are "fundamentally subversive of a medieval patriarchal hegemony that vilifies and distrusts the enclosed space" (35). While this feminist reading is more of a step in the direction toward a queering than any of the others I have come across, it still misses the mark. Within a more queer reading, the male's "impulse to silence women and the threat their speech represents" -- since women's "silencing corresponds to their enclosure, and the threat they present is the reason for their containment" -- is, instead, representative of the queer self he wishes to contain and repress (57). This point will be expanded upon in the upcoming analysis below.

### **TERMINOLOGY**

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In order to examine *Laiistic* through a queer lens, one must first have a basic understanding of both the terms, as well as the overall atmosphere in medieval Europe toward those who had and carried out their homosexual desires. Because 'homosexual,' 'gay,' and most recently 'queer' are all very modern terms -- the world gay as applied to homosexuality "derives from the slang of the American homosexual underworld" -- Warren Johansson and William A. Percy claim that "in these contemporary acceptations no one in the Middle Ages was or could have been" labeled in that way (156). Johansson and Percy describe the way medieval theologians and jurists discuss the "sinning against nature" as sodomy (156). Sodomy had three main subdivisions for medieval society: *ratione generis*, "by reason of species"; *ratione sexus*, "by reason for sex" or in other words, with a person who has the same genitalia; *ratione modi*, "by reason of manner," which meant sex with a member of the opposite sex, but in the wrong orifice, namely one that would exclude procreation (156). This all derives from *Genesis 19* and the overall "destruction of the city of Sodom on account of the wickedness of its inhabitants," making the city's destruction the source of the taboo regarding homosexuality (156). All of this information is to say that for individuals of the medieval period, the idea of anything besides the respectable heterosexual relationships was wrong in three distinct ways. The first is the psychological understanding, or "the moral reprobation," which rests upon "the implicit belief in an uninhibited sexual appetite" of men who are unsuccessful in their pursuit of women (157). The second, the legal definition that surrounded the law, restricted sodomy to "anal intercourse with man or woman or vaginal penetration of an animal" (157). The final, and arguably most important during this time, was the fact that the sodomite is sacrilege, since heterosexual activity within the union of marriage was the only acceptable form of sexual expression. The sodomite, then, was seen to be a person "driven by lust so bestial, demonic and blasphemous as to make him tamper upon every law of God and man in quest of pleasure," (158). Keeping in mind these contemporarily harsh ideals, it is not surprising that a queer reading has not been done on Marie de France's *Laiistic*, since it is hard to believe Marie would take such a chance; however, by creating a female character to represent the first knight's queer self, she masks the homosexuality in such a way that does generate suspicion until a more modern reader looks more closely.

### **"A GREAT HIGH WALL"**

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While very few scholars have touched upon the wall, which is only mentioned once throughout the entire lai, I would like to turn my attention to that object first, as it serves as the first indication of a potential queer relationship, a literal and figurative barrier between the two men. In the Norton Critical Edition, translated and edited by Dorothy Gilbert, lines 37-8 read: "no barrier, except for one, / a great high wall of dark-hued stone," but what is interesting is the footnote Gilbert inserts, which states, "that wall is not mentioned again and plays no other part -- really no part at all -- in the story. It seems to be no sort of barrier to the lovers' sight of each other," (121). Murray, one of the few scholars who actually does mention the wall, makes the claim that Marie prevents the "protagonists from consummating their illegitimate affair" and while she is talking about the heterosexual relationship, the same stands for the homosexual relationship; however, the wall represents more than the lovers' inability to fulfill their desires. It also represents the harsh realities standing in the way of living a queer lifestyle. In medieval Europe, specifically in Italy and to a lesser extent northern communes, they developed strategies of

repression using the police. Their tactics were anywhere between two extremes: on the one hand, “toleration in the sense of not prosecuting activity that the police kept under surveillance,” but on the other, “sporadically rounding up offenders in droves to punish them with death, mutilation, exile, fines, or other less drastic sentences” (Johansson 177). Recognizing the real fears of the consequences of the lovers’ desires, Marie de France erects a wall in between the two men that serves no other purpose than to keep them physically apart from one another. To keep them physically apart throughout the entirety of the lai is an important aspect, since any type of intimate physicality could be used as grounds for the accusation of being a sodomite. The wall both keeps the two men away from one another, but also protects them from satisfying their unlawful queer desires of the medieval period.

The same argument -- the wall keeping the man and woman away from each other, as well as keeping them from breaking the law -- does not hold true for the relationship if it were between a married woman and a man, however. Because the medieval woman was held in such tight confines within domestic spaces, -- in other words, the home -- the window in which the woman would be able to look through becomes “an extension of her body” and “functions counter to convention working as a source of empowerment even while it cages her body,” (Kauth 47). With that being said, it is important that there is mention of a window, where “they could only see” and not touch one another because the idea of love was thought to be able to enter through one’s eyes (Gilbert 121). Therefore, in medieval times, “contact between eyes is tantamount to physical penetration” meaning that the wall, not blocking their sight, would not be halting adultery at all, but in fact, allowing the two to break the laws of marriage by not serving as an object of any real function (Kauth 57). Marie de France erected the wall with access to sight only, knowing the consequences of such an action for a heterosexual affair, specifically in terms of the woman’s responsibilities to be loyal to her husband. While within a queer reading, the wall acts as both a separator and a protector from physically breaking the law, it only acts as a separator for a heteronormative reading.

#### **“ABOVE THE FLOWERS, WITH A GREAT JOY”**

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After establishing the importance of the wall, I would like to talk about the space in between the two homes of the lovers, the gardens, and how that acts as a queer safe space for the men’s love to flourish in a natural way. At this point in the lai, the two men have been romantically involved for some time, but the changing of the season brings with it some changes within their relationship as well,

For a long time they loved each other,  
 until one summer, when the weather  
 had made the fields and forests green  
 and gardens, orchards, bloom again;  
 above the flowers, with a great joy  
 small birds sang sweetest melody.  
 He whose desire for love is strong  
 -- no wonder that he heeds their song! (121).

The garden becomes a place where the lovers truly begin to blossom; the hierarchy of stereotypical gender dynamics, which were very often associated with the medieval walled garden, are “distabilized to reveal a narrative that bears beneath the level of its own narration a redemptive femininity based on the garden dynamics of fertility, growth, and flourishing,” rejecting the toxicity of heterosexual masculinity (McAvoy). The garden, argues Liz Herbert McAvoy, is not only “a place of hope, aspiration, and uncertainty but also the place within which the hard work of its gardener will bring about an alltoo-temporary *illusion* of order, reconciliation, and fixedness that, in truth, is always already fleeting, fading, and dying” (McAvoy). Therefore, if the “order,” which represents the heteronormative structure of society, is just an illusion that is fleeting, then the queer non-structure must replace it, making the garden a space where those who are not heterosexual feel safe. This safeness does not last very long though, for it is the very openness and acceptance of this space that allows the nightingale to sing in the way that it does. While the nightingale’s song is beautiful, and both lovers enjoy it, the songbird is nonetheless

murdered, since it is symbolic of the flourishing queer love within the walls of the garden. The nightingale is murdered not as an act of jealousy, but rather, the first knight kills it (and the love it represents) as an act of violent self-repression.

### "ENTRAP THE NIGHTINGALE"

While the self-repression may peak with the nightingale being murdered, it begins with both the desire and physical act of trapping the bird. Once the first knight realizes that he is most comfortable at night while others are asleep, near the garden at his window, looking at his lover, and listening to the nightingale -- "so great my longing, my delight" -- he becomes afraid of the desires which go completely against the norm, as well as against the ideas of medieval gender performativity (Gilbert 123). Judith Butler, famous gender theorist and philosopher, argues that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed" and never has been, but rather gender is constituted in time as an identity that is instituted through the "stylized repetition of acts" (519). Although not nearly as developed as Butler's complex theories on gender performativity, individuals of the medieval period were very much aware of the ways in which behavior and attitudes can be performed, and therefore, manipulated to represent a certain sexuality. Take one of Marie de France's other very famous lais, *Lanval*, for example. After Lanval rejects Queen Guinevere's advances, she tells him,

... I know, I sense  
you do not care for dalliance;  
but it is often rumored, sire,  
for women you have no desire!  
But youths and squires, well-trained young men  
You seek out; you disport with them.  
Oh, coward! Boor! Unnatural,  
your service to my lord, Lanval!  
He has lost God -- I fear it -- since  
he's known your vicious influence!

accusing him of being both a homosexual and a pedophile (73). Because Lanval rejects the woman that every man is supposed to desire, the Queen, it is assumed that Lanval does not want any woman at all. If he does not want women, he must desire men, since they were living within such a strict binary. For the first knight in *Laüstic*, his simultaneous happiness and frustration in the homosexual relationship is an indication that he realizes the issues with performing his gender in a way that does not coincide with his sexuality. The binaries of the medieval period create a world where, if one was homosexual, society believed that one's behavior would change with their 'unnatural' desires, making it fairly easy to recognize those who deviated from the norm. For this reason, I believe the first knight represses his true feelings by capturing the nightingale, the very being that is verbally expressing love and doing so in a queer space where the knight clearly feels comfortable in, in order to ensure that nobody discovers their relationship, which subsequently ends with the nightingale's death.

### CONCLUSION

Most scholarship on Marie de France's *Laüstic*, as presented, focuses on aspects of courtly love, the symbolism surrounding the nightingale, or side-by-side comparisons to other pieces of literature. Instead of adding to that already rich selection, I decided to take a queer approach to the poem, arguing that the woman, the first knight's wife never actually existed; rather, she was simply a projection of the knight's queer self, so that he and the second knight could maintain a homosexual relationship. By bringing contemporary ideas and approaches, such as queer studies, to this medieval work, one can open new, never-before-thought-of insights and observations to old works, allowing for an opportunity to highlight aspects of society that have been hidden for so long. Although explicit labels and terms such as 'queer,' 'gay,' or 'homosexual' did not even exist in medieval Europe, queer individuals *have* always existed and my hope is that my queer reading has successfully demonstrated that point.

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