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MARIE DE FRANCE'S COURTLY LOVE:
THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN THROUGH ROMANCE

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In the courts of medieval France, women infiltrated the systems of constraint that tied them down. Throughout the halls of the court, the scandalous poems sung by French troubadours delighted the ears of many. One such troubadour, Marie de France, composed a book revealing the tales of ladies and lords behind the screens of the court. Before she begins telling her tales of the knights and ladies of the court, she proclaims in her prologue her reasoning for documenting the stories: “If a great truth is proclaimed in the ears of men, it brings forth fruit a hundred-fold; but when the sweetness of the telling is praised of many, flowers mingle with the fruit upon the branch.”¹ While the incorporation of romance into the medieval French court was based on the male knightly code of honor, courtly love subtly shifted power towards women and liberating them from traditional expectations of courtship and marriage.

Between 1050 CE to 1300 CE, marital status defined women’s lives.² However, because of a decline in the number of aristocratic women, the unbalanced ratio between men and women increased the demand and competition for women. In his work, Herman R. Lantz links the lowered number of women in the population to the rising control of women: “Aristocratic women could no longer be taken for granted and treated as property.”³ Consequently, historians theorize the chivalric code evolved around this development by incorporating courtly love as a

¹ Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1911), 1.

² Fiona Harris Stoertz, “Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300,” in the *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 4 (2001): 22.

³ Herman R. Lantz, “Romantic Love in the Pre-Modern Period: A Sociological Commentary,” in the *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 3 (1982): 353.

requirement of knightly behavior.⁴ In order to be considered chivalrous, a knight had to be not only brave, but also to hold the love of a lady.

A multitude of troubadours, French lyrical poets, illustrated this special form of courtly love in their songs and writings. In her collection of tales, *Lais*, Marie de France details the adulterous acts of the French court and her work exemplifies the effect of courtly love. Each chapter, or “lay” displays the lives of nobility as each story follows a knight through his romantic attempts. Through her work, Marie de France exemplifies the influence of knight’s code of honor on the actions of men and women.

The necessity of courtly love according to the chivalric code drove men to extraordinary lengths to please and serve women. Throughout her *Lais*, Marie de France repeatedly illustrates the power romance holds over men. In the “Lay of Equitan”, love leaves the lord Equitan helpless: “Love bound him captive to his car. The god loosed a shaft which entered deeply in his breast. The arrow pierced to his heart, and from thenceforth he cared nothing for measure, or kingship, or delight. Equitan was so surprised of the lady, that he remained silent and pensive. He heard nothing, and nothing he could do.”⁵ The lord Equitan is so engrossed by a woman that he disregards all other aspects of his life. The lady becomes the focal point of his life and his desire to woo her dictates all of his actions. In Marie de France’s *Lais*, his inability to resist his love eventually leads to his own death. While his captivation is connected to the description of her beauty, the tale provides an example of medieval women having leverage to hold power. As Equitan falls in love, he loses power to control his own life; instead, the woman now has the

⁴ Kim Smith and Polly Stewart, *Love and War: Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Lays of Marie De France and the Romances of Chrétien De Troyes*, (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2002), 10.

⁵ Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, 106.

ability to influence decision. Moreover, Equitan offers to degrade himself in order to serve the lady in love, “Dear lady, let me make myself plain. Do not regard me as your King; look on me as your servant and your friend...You shall be the Dame, and I the page; you shall be the scornful beauty, and I the prayer at your knee.”⁶ In his desperation for the lady to reciprocate his love, Equitan claims that he is willing to lower himself to serve her. By having a man propose servitude to a lady, Marie de France follows one of the four common themes of poetry about courtly love. Equitan’s self-demotion is an example of “knights humbling themselves before idealized ladies, or courteous lovers” as they attempt to win the love of a woman of the court.⁷ The social pressure that chivalry placed on finding love galvanized men to prioritize winning over a woman, even at the loss of their own power or status. As men tried to achieve the chivalric expectations, men unknowingly empowered women as men submitted to their lovers the power to guide their actions.

However, it was not enough for men to find love; one of the vital components of courtly love is the requirement that the love must be reciprocal.⁸ In the “Lay of Guigemar”, the knight Guigemar is considered almost the epitome of chivalry; however the one piece he lacks the aspect of romantic love: “The whole world knew that Guigemar was brave and above reproach-except in matters of love, to which he was indifferent.”⁹ Therefore, his lay was written in order to highlight his need to fulfill the requirement of a courtly love to be considered

⁶ Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, 108.

⁷ John C. Moore, ““Courtly love”: A Problem of Terminology,” in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 4 (1979): 623, doi: 10.2307/2709362.

⁸ Kim Smith and Polly Stewart, *Love and War: Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Lays of Marie De France and the Romances of Chrétien De Troyes*, 12.

⁹ Marie de France, *The Lays of Marie De France*, trans. David Slavitt (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 6.

chivalrous. He falls in love with a woman on the island he's washed up on; however, she's already married. After much internal turmoil, Guigemar proceeds with his affection and "the addition of courtly love to Gugemar's character gives him more status as a knight."¹⁰

Correspondingly, despite the lovers' separation, Guigemar remains loyal to the woman he met on the island. Both Guigemar and his lover repeatedly refuse the advances of others and remain loyal to each other throughout their time apart. As a symbol of their love, Guigemar wears a knot made by the maiden and refuses to be disloyal: "He said he'd promised not to romance or wed any maiden or dame who could not without violence undo the knot...Many women came to make an attempt...none was successful. It simply couldn't be done."¹¹ In return, the maiden wears and refuses to remove a belt from Guigemar. Smith claims, "The two-sided love affair is important because it links chivalry with romantic involvement. Reciprocal love implies possession of the chivalric values of charity and humility."¹² The loyalty Guigemar displays derives from his determination to be considered chivalric. With the incorporation of reciprocal love into the expectation of chivalry, knights began to work harder to find romantic partners which gave women more power within relationships since love now required the woman's consent.

Furthermore, while the lives of women were originally outlined by marriage, women used the new requirement for romance to open up the ability to choose. Before chivalry included courtly love, women were often treated as tradable property; girls were commonly married off

¹⁰ Kim Smith and Polly Stewart, *Love and War: Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Lays of Marie De France and the Romances of Chrétien De Troyes*, 12.

¹¹ David Slavitt, *The Lays of Marie De France*, 20.

¹² Kim Smith and Polly Stewart, *Love and War: Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Lays of Marie De France and the Romances of Chrétien De Troyes*, 12.

for the political benefit or security of their families.¹³ However, the addition of courtly love allowed women more choice in their own romantic lives. The women in Marie de France's tales often take control of their own love lives. In the "Lay of Milon", the maiden takes initiative in her own love interest: "Much talk had this maiden heard of Milon's knightly deeds, so that she began to set her thoughts upon him, because of the good men spoke of him. She sent him a message by a sure hand, saying that if her love was to his mind, sweetly would it be her heart."¹⁴ Rather than her family making decisions as expected, the maiden unconventionally chooses her partner. Similarly, in another lay, the act of decision by a woman is repeated in the "Lay of Eliduc" where the princess sends the knight, Eliduc, her girdle and golden ring to ask for his love. She determinedly directs her marriage prospects, "She wanted to become his wife. Otherwise, for the rest of her life, she would accept no other man."¹⁵ In both tales, the women know what they want and act accordingly. Women's choice in partnership is ingrained into Marie de France's work as Marie de France exemplifies stories where couples "freely choose each other" rather than remaining controlled by their families.¹⁶ Chivalric love emphasized the individual choices of the aristocratic nobles. In his work, Lantz connects "individual rights and feelings in the mate selection process" to the "potentially disruptive effect of love relationships on mate choice and stratification systems" that medieval families strived to prevent since "to permit random mating, based on individual feelings, would mean to lose control over this

¹³ Fiona Harris Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300," 24.

¹⁴ Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, 112.

¹⁵ David Slavitt, *The Lays of Marie De France*, 72.

¹⁶ Dolliann Margaret Hurtig, "'I Do, I Do': Medieval Models of Marriage and Choice of Partners in Marie De France's 'Le Fraisne'," in *Romanic Review*, 92, no. 4 (2001): 364.

process, and pose threats to the social structure.”¹⁷ Therefore, with the arising availability of choice for women relating to the evolving acceptance of courtly love, women partially broke free of their families, and in turn, society’s control over them.

Marie de France’s *Lais* also depicts women reconstructing and using marriage for their own benefit. The father in the “Lay of the Two Lovers” prevents his daughter from marriage. However, she’s fallen in love with a nobleman: “She found him engaging and thinking of her poor chances of married love because of her father’s arbitrary rules, she chose to do the very thing most fathers fear and gave her love to the young man...”¹⁸ Refusing to accept her fate, the daughter goes against her father’s will and chooses to devise a scheme with her lover to get married. Her rebellion against her father because of her infatuation represents women making their own choices. Furthermore, after marriage, wives were known for holding power over their husbands and persuading their husband’s opinions: “In France and in England, women often ruled territories and even kingdoms upon the absence or death of husbands. Women usually possessed their own households and circles of patronage, and it was widely recognized that women had considerable influence over their husbands.”¹⁹ Mature wives were offered “...freedom from supervision, control over the household, and participation in government.”²⁰ Therefore, in the lay, when the daughter fights for her love, she is also inadvertently fighting for the power she could obtain through marriage. While the lay ended in her death, her refusal to

¹⁷. Herman R. Lantz, “Romantic Love in the Pre-Modern Period: A Sociological Commentary,” 351.

¹⁸. David Slavitt, *The Lays of Marie De France*, 72.

¹⁹. Fiona Harris Stoertz, “Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300,” 23.

²⁰. Fiona Harris Stoertz, “Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300,” 35.

follow her father's rules that would keep her bound under his control forever shows her attempt to expand her power and future.

Courtly love also gave women the opportunity to be freed from harmful marital constraints. While the "Lay of Guigemar" displays men lowering themselves to win over women, his lay also showcases a wife who uses romance as an escape from her marriage. Marie de France's first tale discusses the "Lay of Guigemar". The wife of the king lives practically imprisoned in her own home when a man of the court, Guigemar, washes up on her island shore. The pair falls in love and consequently Guigemar gets banished. The wife declares her love and chases after him: "She issued forth, without challenge from sergeant or warder, and hasting to the harbour, found there her lover's ship, made fast to that very rock."²¹ The queen's refusal to accept her situation and willingness to betray her original husband contrasts with the expectation of a woman confined by marriage to remain loyal and silent about her situation. Since courtly love became a requirement of chivalry, more men of the court began to flirt with aristocratic women in hopes of being viewed as chivalric: "If a knight did not possess the qualities of both [attributes a knight should take with him into battle and courtly love], he could not properly be considered chivalrous."²² Guigemar exemplifies a knight who tries to complete the chivalric code and therefore provides the wife an escape from her marriage. According to John C. Moore, courtly love gave an excuse to break previous marriage vows since "among the 31 rules were: marriage is no real excuse for not loving."²³ Sharon Kinoshita continues, "The wording of some

²¹ Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, 18.

²² Kim Smith and Polly Stewart, *Love and War: Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Lays of Marie De France and the Romances of Chrétien De Troyes*, 12.

²³ John C. Moore, "'Courtly love': A Problem of Terminology," 626.

charters suggests that married women would function quite independently, choosing to leave marriage for their own reasons.”²⁴ By adopting the ideal of courtly love, the wife is able to morally abandon her previous husband and live a happy ending. With the introduction of romance, the women in Marie de France’s *Lais* found ways to retake control over their lives.

Moreover, the unintentional adultery that arose from the implementation of courtly love challenged contemporary church dogmas. The medieval catholic church emphasized indissolubility and asceticism. Marriage was considered a binding contract under God and promiscuity was severely discouraged; contradiction of either of these ideals meant scrutiny by the church. However, Marie de France’s romanticized poems about the adultery deriving from courtly love clashed with the church’s agenda of monogamy and antagonizing premarital sex. In the “Lay of Bisclavret”, the wife uses sex as a bargaining tool: ““I offer you not only my love but my body, too, if you will do me a service’...and thus was Bisclavret betrayed by his faithless wife.”²⁵ During this scene, the wife commits two offenses in the eyes of the church. She shares her bed with another man and she marries another man, a knight, while her husband remains alive. The knight, in hopes of fulfilling the expectation of courtly love, assists her in committing the crime against her husband as well as the church. Likewise, in the “Lay of Eliduc”, the knight Eliduc holds a mistress whom he has sex with despite already having a wife. Upon discovering her husband’s misdemeanors, his wife retires as a nun, “She prayed him, therefore, that he would grant her leave to depart, since she would serve God as a cloistered nun. Of his wealth she craved such a portion as would permit her to found a convent. He would then be able to wed the maiden

²⁴ Sharon Kinoshita, "Two for the Price of One: Courtly Love and Serial Polygamy in the Lais of Marie De France," in *Arthuriana* 8, no. 2 (1998): 48, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/27869338>.

²⁵ David Slavitt, *The Lays of Marie De France*, 50.

on whom his heart was set, for it was neither honest nor seemly that a man should maintain a wife with either hand.”²⁶ While the couple attempted to mend the husband’s transgression by having the wife join a convent, Eliduc still broke the ideals of the church by committing adultery and breaking the indissolubility of marriage. The use of sex outside of marriage combined with polygamy differs drastically from defined rules of marriage that the catholic church preached. By introducing romance into the medieval court, adultery cases rose as shown in the increase of stories detailing adulterous acts. This adultery led to a dissent in the church’s power and its restrictive rules of marriage since the church was publically unable to control the noble class.

Additionally, Marie de France’s writing offers a cynical view of the church. In the “Lay of Le Fresne”, the queen secretly deserts one of her infant twin daughters at the church. The girl, Le Fresne, grows up without knowledge of her lineage and captures the affection of Gurun the knight. In order to be together, Le Fresne moves onto his estate. Despite their happiness, Gurun’s peers convince him to marry a noblewoman. By chance, the new bride is the sister of Gurun’s wife and following tradition, an archbishop arrives to bless the marriage. However, within the day, the queen confesses Le Fresne’s identity and the archbishop quickly undoes the wedding: “...he sent for the knight and archbishop to set things right, which both of them were pleased to do. The archbishop suggested a way to dissolve the marriage the following day when Gurun could marry the one he had first loved until he had been coerced to make this match that was said to be better.”²⁷ In her examination of courtly love, Kinoshita explains the archbishop’s actions, “the *lais* happily-ever-after depends on the radical subversion of the church’s efforts to regulate

²⁶. Eugene Mason, *French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie De France*, 55.

²⁷. David Slavitt, *The Lays of Marie De France*, 46.

the marriage practices of a resistant aristocracy.”²⁸ The complete willingness of the archbishop to dissolve Gurun’s wedding hints at corruption within the church. Rather than holding to the ideals of the church, the archbishop is swayed into acting against the church’s own preachings.

Through the archbishop's actions to please the knight, it is evident that the church hesitated to contradict nobility. Therefore, by portraying a church figure committing an act of hypocrisy, Marie de France illustrates the court’s power over the church and the aristocracy’s freedom to pursue courtly love without interference.

While many commonly view the medieval ages as a time of repression for women, courtly love unintentionally initiated a subtle empowerment of women through a variety of new choices and by breaking past restraints. Marie de France’s era of courtly love provides an example for redefining a restrictive community that modern feminist movements can draw upon. Women now, as they have in the past, hold the capability to take oppressive situations and find ways to retake control. In the modern era, traditionally sexist places such as Hollywood have been redefined. Similar to Marie de France’s women retake on marriage, women today are retaking their control of their appearance. More in-depth research in the field of women like Marie de France will help transform the image of medieval Europe from a one-sided story of oppression for women. Still missing in the narrative of the medieval court are the tales of silenced characters of women and their influences on social development. Before a complete understanding of history can be reached, all the stories must be heard.

²⁸. Sharon Kinoshita, "Two for the Price of One: Courtly Love and Serial Polygamy in the Lais of Marie De France," 40.

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