# The Lais of Marie de France

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARIE DE FRANCE

Marie's real name isn't known for sure. In one of her works, she refers to herself as "Marie [...] from France," and that's how scholars and readers have identified her ever since. Besides calling herself "Marie" in her manuscripts, the author reveals nothing else about herself. Though apparently born in France, she lived in England and probably lived and wrote in a royal court, but which one is uncertain—possibly King Henry II's and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine's (reigning in the late 12th and early 13th centuries). (In fact, some have speculated that she was King Henry's sister—but given that the name "Marie" was so common, it's almost impossible to know for sure. Others have speculated that she was an abbess somewhere in England.) Scholars have also identified her as the first woman to author verse in French. She was educated: she wrote in Anglo-Norman and was apparently familiar with Latin, Middle English, and Breton (a Celtic language spoken in France's northwest peninsula), because Breton *lais*, or lays (short, rhyming tales), were the basis for the Anglo-Norman verse narratives that became known as *The Lais of Marie de France*. Besides authoring the *Lais* and some saints' lives, Marie also translated *Aesop's Fables* from Middle English to Anglo-Norman.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Marie de France was likely influenced by a collection of medieval literary and legendary material known as the Matter of Britain. A key text in the Matter of Britain was Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which drew on many ancient British writings. King Arthur, the possibly ahistorical King of Britain in the fifth or sixth century, is the story collection's central figure. Some stories focus on King Arthur's court, Camelot, and his fellowship of knights known as the Round Table, while others focus on his knights' quests, most famously the quest for the Holy Grail. The Arthurian legendary tradition overlapped with the genre of chivalric romance and its popular courtly love themes. As the term suggests, courtly love tales were popular in noble and royal courts across medieval Europe, from Scandinavia to Spain. Courtly love tales often featured Christian religious imagery; fairy tale elements like supernatural marvels; and standard romantic tropes like a knight's devotion to a lady from afar, dramatic manifestations of lovesickness, heroism, and affairs carried out in secret (all details that are present in the *Lais*). The story of Tristan and Iseult, which Marie adapts an episode from in her lay "Chevrefoil," is also part of the courtly love tradition, with Tristan counted as a Knight of Arthur's Round Table in some strands of the tradition.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The *Lais* consist of a series of 12 narrative poems written in eight-syllable verse. Marie based the poems on Breton *lais* or lays—short, rhyming tales that were common in medieval English and French literature, often containing romantic and fairy tale elements. Such tales circulated between continental Europe (especially Brittany in what's now northwestern France) and Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, and other parts of the British Isles. As the first to write down these stories in narrative verse, Marie is regarded as the pioneer of a new genre. In this new form, Marie's *Lais* influenced the emerging genre of chivalric romance. Chrétien de Troyes, who lived around the same time Marie did, was likely also influenced by Breton lays in writing well-known Arthurian romances such as *Lancelot*, *Perceval*, and *Yvain*. *The Nibelungenlied*, written by an anonymous courtly author in Middle High German around the same time as the *Lais*, includes elements of chivalric romance between the knight Siegfried and the princess Kriemhild. In the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*; one of them, *The Franklin's Tale*, was itself a Breton lay originally. Also in the 14th century, the Middle English poet Thomas Chestre based his romance *Sir Launfal* on Marie's *lai*, *Lanval*, and an anonymous writer's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* touched on themes of chivalry and the supernatural in the life of King Arthur's companion Gawain. In the 15th century, Sir Thomas Malory compiled stories of King Arthur's court into the Middle English prose collection *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the most familiar Arthurian work up through the modern period. As for Marie de France's other works, she also wrote the poem *L'Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*, or *The Legend of the Purgatory of Saint Patrick*—an Old French translation of a Latin work by the monk Henry of Saltrey. Some scholars also attribute the 12th- or 13th-century hagiography *The Life of Saint Audrey* to Marie. Other educated women authors of this period include Héloïse, writer and abbess famed for her correspondence with theologian Peter Abelard, and the German writer and abbess Hildegard von Bingen, known for such mystical writings as *Scivias*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Lais of Marie de France
- **When Written:** 1170s or later
- **Where Written:** England
- **Literary Period:** High Medieval
- **Genre:** Chivalric Romance, Narrative Verse

- **Setting:** Brittany, France and Britain
- **Antagonist:** Various
- **Point of View:** Third Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Medieval Manuscript.** There's just one surviving manuscript of *The Lais of Marie de France* that contains all 12 *lais* plus the Prologue. In this 13th-century manuscript housed in the British Library, the arrangement of the 12 *lais* (preserved in modern editions today) alternates between tales of love for others and selfish love.

**Known in Norway.** The *Lais* were one of the earliest works to be translated into Old Norse. The Old Norse version is called *Strengleikar* ("Stringed Instruments"), and it was commissioned by Norway's King Haakon IV in the 13th century.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In her Prologue, the author, Marie de France, argues that a person who's gifted with eloquence shouldn't hide their talent but is obligated to share it. For this reason, and in order to resist vice, she has put lays she's collected into verse form.

Marie begins with "Guigemar," a story in which the knight Guigemar isn't interested in romance. When Guigemar fatally shoots a **hind** on a hunting trip, the arrow ricochets and wounds him. The dying hind curses Guigemar, telling him that he'll only be cured if he and a woman fall in love and suffer greatly for that love. Guigemar then wanders through the woods and finds a luxurious, empty ship sitting in a harbor. He gets aboard, falls asleep, and is quickly whisked off to an ancient city.

In the city, a beautiful young lady, married to a jealous elderly lord, lives in a guarded enclosure. When the lady and her maiden companion discover Guigemar aboard the ship, they promise to shelter him until he's healed. Guigemar and the lady fall passionately in love and live together for the next year and a half, but the old lord discovers their affair and expels Guigemar from his city. After two years, the lady escapes to Brittany aboard the enchanted ship. She and Guigemar eventually cross paths in the lord Meriaduc's castle and confirm their respective identities. In order to claim the lady for himself, Guigemar lays siege to Meriaduc's castle, and at last, the couple is joyfully reunited.

Next, Marie tells the story of Equitan, a Breton king who falls in love with his seneschal's beautiful wife. They try to resist each other before starting a secret affair. Worried about losing Equitan to a princess, the seneschal's wife plots to kill her husband with Equitan's help. A few weeks later, they arrange for two bathtubs to be brought into the seneschal's chamber; the seneschal will be invited to join Equitan for a bath, unaware that his tub is filled with boiling water. However, the seneschal barges in on his wife and Equitan unexpectedly while they're having sex. Panicked, Equitan jumps into the scalding tub and dies instantly. The seneschal tosses his wife into the same tub, and she, too, boils to death. Marie says this is a cautionary tale for anyone who seeks somebody else's misfortune.

The story "Le Fresne" begins with a knight's slanderous wife claiming that her neighbor gave birth to twins because she'd had sex with two different men. When the wife herself gives birth to twin girls, she panics and decides to abandon one of the babies so that she won't be accused of adultery. After wrapping the baby in expensive blankets and attaching a ring to her arm (signs of her noble lineage), a maid leaves the baby at an abbey. The abbess names the baby "Le Fresne" after the ash tree in which she's found. Le Fresne grows up in the abbey, and eventually, a lord named Gurun falls in love with her and convinces her to live at his castle. However, Gurun's knights persuade him to marry a noblewoman named La Codre. (At this point, nobody realizes that Le Fresne and La Codre are twin sisters.)

On the wedding night, La Codre's mother helps her daughter get ready for bed. Le Fresne is also there helping with the preparations, and she puts her old baby blanket on the bed. When La Codre's mother recognizes the blanket and sees Le Fresne's ring, she realizes, rejoicing, that Le Fresne is her long-lost daughter. Everyone agrees that Gurun and La Codre's marriage must be annulled, and the next day, Gurun marries Le Fresne instead.

In "Bisclavret," the titular Breton baron disappears three days a week and transforms into a werewolf. Bisclavret only reluctantly tells his wife about this. When he transforms, he leaves his clothes in a hollow stone, and if he can't find the clothes, he has to remain a werewolf. The wife decides her husband's secret identity is grounds for separation, and one day, she has her lover steal Bisclavret's clothes. Then, she and her lover get married.

A year later, the king's hounds track down Bisclavret in the forest. The king takes the werewolf under his protection, and Bisclavret goes to live at the castle. One day, when Bisclavret's wife comes to visit the king, Bisclavret mauls her face, tearing off her nose. The king has the lady interrogated and learns the truth about Bisclavret. He also makes her bring Bisclavret's clothes. Once Bisclavret is human again, the king banishes Bisclavret's ex-wife and her lover. But the exiled couple has many children, and the girls are often recognizable: they're born without noses.

"Lanval" is the story of a lonely, forgotten knight of King Arthur's Round Table. One day, two mysterious damsels invite Lanval into an extravagant tent. Inside, he finds a gorgeous fairy lady to whom he instantly becomes devoted. The lady promises to give Lanval limitless gold and silver—as long as he keeps their

love a secret. One day, however, at Arthur's castle, Arthur's Queen tries to tempt Lanval, and he rashly reveals his affair with his fairy lover, saying her beauty surpasses the queen's. Later, when the queen vengefully claims that Lanval insulted her, King Arthur decides that Lanval must face trial, and unless this supposed lover comes forward, he'll be executed. Just as the king's barons are about to render a verdict, the fairy lady appears on horseback and defends Lanval. Awed by the woman's beauty, the barons all agree that Lanval's boast was justified and acquit him. Then, Lanval jumps on the lady's horse, and they ride to Avalon. They're never heard from again.

In "Les Deus Amanz," The lord of the Pistrians decrees that his beloved daughter will only marry the man who can successfully carry her up a nearby mountain. For a long time, no one succeeds. Meanwhile, the daughter falls in love with a young man. They form a plan: the young man travels to Salerno to visit the girl's aunt, an accomplished herbalist. The aunt sends the young man home with a strengthening potion to aid his quest. Soon, the lord grudgingly allows the young man to attempt the climb. Incapable of moderation, the youth neglects to drink the potion and staggers up the mountain with the girl in his arms. When he reaches the top, he dies, and the girl then dies of a broken heart. The couple is buried in a marble coffin atop the mountain.

In "Yonec," the lady of Caerwent is married to the paranoid old lord of Caerwent, who keeps her locked away. One day, the woman wishes for a handsome rescuer, and suddenly, a hawk flies through her window and turns into an attractive knight. The knight, Muldumarec, says he's loved her from afar for a long time but could only visit her in response to her wish. They enjoy a short-lived affair, but the lady is so happy that the lord grows suspicious. He sets spikes in the lady's window, which kill Muldumarec the next time he visits. As he dies, Muldumarec tells his lover that she's pregnant with their son, Yonec, who will someday avenge them both. Before he dies, he gives her a sword for Yonec. Years later, after Yonec grows up and becomes a knight, he beheads his stepfather with Muldumarec's sword in revenge for his father's death, and the people proclaim Yonec king.

"Laüstic" is the story of a courtly couple—a married lady and a bachelor knight—that live next door to each other and exchange words and gifts through their windows, often in the middle of the night. When the lady's husband complains about her absence from bed, she claims she enjoys listening to the nightingale's song so much that she can't sleep. In response, her husband spitefully kills a nightingale in front of his wife. Grieving, she sends the nightingale's corpse to the bachelor knight, who carries it around with him from that day forward.

In "Milun," the knight Milun and his damsel in Wales conceive a son, whom they conceal and send to Northumbria to be raised by the damsel's sister. Meanwhile, the damsel is forced to marry someone else. Over the next 20 years, the couple communicates by sending a swan back and forth with letters hidden in its feathers. Milun and his adult son reunite when they inadvertently end up jousting with each other. The son vows to kill his mother's husband so that she and Milun can marry, but when the pair travels to Wales, they learn it's unnecessary: the husband has just died. Then the widowed damsel is reunited with her son, and Milun and his beloved finally marry.

Next is a lay called "Chaitivel," or "The Unhappy One." In Nantes, there's a lady who falls in love with four knights and refuses to settle on just one. Unaware that they're rivals, the four men strive in tournaments to win the indecisive lady's favor. One day, three of the men are killed in a fight, and the fourth is grievously wounded. The lady, horrified, realizes she is to blame for pushing the men to fight to impress her. She tends the wounded knight in her own chamber, deciding to compose a lay about the four fallen men called "The Four Sorrows." But her lover objects that it should be called "The Unhappy One," because though he survived, he is too badly injured to enjoy more than conversation with his beloved lady.

Next, in "Chevrefoil," Tristram is banished from court by King Mark because of his love for Queen Iseult. Eventually, he travels from South Wales to Cornwall, hoping to intercept the queen's procession on its way to a festival. While hiding in the woods, he whittles his name into a hazel branch—their special signal. Iseult sees the branch and finds Tristram in the woods, where they talk for a long time. Before a tearful parting, the queen tells Tristram how to reconcile with King Mark so that he can return to court. After she leaves, Tristram composes a lay about the joy of their reunion—calling it "Chevrefoil," or "honeysuckle," because honeysuckle and hazel depend on each other for survival.

In the last story, "Eliduc," Eliduc is banished from his Breton court on the basis of a false rumor. He bids his beloved wife, Guildelüec, goodbye and travels to Britain, seeking work as a mercenary knight. He soon enters the service of a king and falls in love with the king's daughter, Guilliadun. Guilliadun doesn't know Eliduc is already married, and Eliduc avoids cheating on his wife. Eventually, though, he sneaks Guilliadun out of the country aboard a ship. During the voyage, Guilliadun learns that Eliduc is married, and she falls into a swoon. Believing she's dead, Eliduc places her body inside a hermit's chapel, where he visits and laments daily. When Guildelüec visits the chapel, she finds the dead girl. While there, she also sees a weasel retrieve a special flower that revives its dead companion. Guildelüec places the weasel's flower into the girl's mouth, and Guilliadun suddenly revives, too. When Guildelüec sees Eliduc's love for the girl, she gladly releases Eliduc from their marriage and becomes a nun. Eliduc and Guilliadun get married, and all three spend the rest of their lives doing good deeds and serving God.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Marie de France** – Marie is the author of the *Lais of Marie de France*. In her Prologue, Marie defends her writing by stating that someone who's gifted with knowledge and eloquence is obligated to share their talent. She says she has heard many lays from the land of Brittany and decided to write these down in verse form; now, she wishes to dedicate the resulting collection to the king.

**Guigemar** – Guigemar, a brave Breton knight, is the protagonist of Marie's first lay. When Guigemar comes of age, he sets off for Flanders to win fame, and no other knight can equal him in skill or courage. Despite his renown, however, he also gains a reputation for his indifference to romance; because of this, everyone thinks there's something wrong with him. But one day, while hunting, he shoots a **hind** in the forest. He gets injured in the process, and the magical animal utters a curse that Guigemar won't heal until he falls in love with a woman, and until Guigemar and the woman suffer for each other. Then, Guigemar wanders aboard an enchanted ship that conveys him to an ancient city, where he falls in love with a beautiful young lady, an elderly lord's wife, who offers to shelter him and nurse him back to health. After she reciprocates his feelings, they live together for a blissful year and a half. They also exchange love tokens as pledges of faithfulness to each other (a knotted shirt and a belt that only the two of them are able to undo). But after the elderly lord discovers them, Guigemar is forced to sail back to Brittany. Eventually, he finds the lady again at his friend Meriaduc's castle, and they confirm each other's identities using the love tokens. After laying siege to Meriaduc's castle and killing him to win the lady for himself, Guigemar happily takes her away with him for good.

**The Young Lady** – The young lady is married to the elderly lord and lives a closely guarded, secluded life in the ancient city the lord rules; she can only escape by boat. When Guigemar arrives, she and her maiden companion agree to shelter and tend him until he heals from his hunting injury. She and Guigemar then fall passionately and tormentingly in love. After many happy months together, the couple is found out and forced apart by the elderly lord, and the lady falls into despair. Finally she resolves to drown herself, but before she can do so, Guigemar's magical ship whisks her away to Brittany, leaving her at Meriaduc's castle. Though Meriaduc falls in love with her, she repeatedly turns him down. Eventually, Guigemar finds her at the castle, the two open each other's love tokens (a knotted shirt and a belt) and decide to flee together. After Guigemar lays siege to Meriaduc's castle and kills him, the couple is reunited for good.

**Meriaduc** – Meriaduc is the lord of a castle in Brittany. When the young lady appears at his castle, he immediately falls in love with her, but she doesn't reciprocate. When Meriaduc holds a tournament with his friend Guigemar as his guest, Guigemar and the lady are reunited, and Guigemar challenges Meriaduc for the lady's hand. In the ensuing combat, Meriaduc is killed.

**Equitan** – Equitan is the lord of Nantes and a beloved king of Brittany. Equitan is devoted to chivalry and spends much of his time pursuing pleasure. His trusted seneschal conducts much of the business of the kingdom on his behalf. When Equitan hears about his seneschal's wife, he falls in love with her from afar, and when they finally meet in person, he finds the lady to be everything he'd hoped—beautiful, wise, and good company. At first, though, Equitan berates himself for falling in love with her, feeling it's a betrayal of his loyal seneschal. Gradually, however, he rationalizes that it wouldn't be right for a courtly lady like the seneschal's wife to lack a lover, and he talks the seneschal's wife into having an affair with him even though they're of unequal status. He also goes along with her eventual plot to murder the seneschal so that they can get married. But he's not the most cautious man, and when the seneschal interrupts the two of them having sex, Equitan panics, jumps into a tub of boiling water, and dies.

**The Seneschal** – The seneschal works for Equitan, faithfully ruling Equitan's Breton kingdom on his behalf. The seneschal's wife, beautiful but ill-fated, begins an affair with Equitan behind the seneschal's back and plots to murder the seneschal. Constantly absorbed in kingdom business, the seneschal remains oblivious. However, when he interrupts his wife and Equitan having sex, he furiously throws his wife into the boiling bath she'd intended for him.

**The Seneschal's Wife** – The seneschal's wife falls in love with Equitan, whom her husband, the seneschal, works for. Like most noblewomen in the *Lais*, she is described as being beautiful, intelligent, and delightful company. She is also more cautious than her would-be lover. She argues that it isn't possible for a king like Equitan to have a truly equal relationship with her, his vassal's wife. However, she finally accepts Equitan's pleas, though she continues to feel insecure about the possibility that Equitan will eventually abandon her and marry a princess instead. So, she comes up with a plan to kill off her husband the seneschal in a boiling bathtub, allowing her and Equitan to marry. However, when the seneschal unexpectedly thwarts the plan, he throws his wife into the bath intended for him, killing her along with Equitan.

**The Slanderous Wife (Le Fresne's Mother)** – Le Fresne's mother is described as an arrogant, envious woman. When a neighbor gives birth to twin sons, Le Fresne's mother is so jealous that she slanders the woman by claiming that she must have gotten pregnant by two different men. However, her own words come back to haunt her when she, too, bears twins later that year. Ashamed, she plans to abandon one of the infant girls in hopes that somebody else will raise the child. When her other daughter, La Codre, grows up and marries neighboring

lord Gurun, she has a shocking reunion with Le Fresne in the newlyweds' chamber, and the mother and daughter are reconciled.

**Le Fresne** – Le Fresne is one of the slanderous wife's twin daughters; she is La Codre's sister. When Le Fresne is a newborn, her mother abandons her; she is wrapped in a rich brocade and left in a tree near a wealthy abbey. After the baby is found, the abbess names Le Fresne and raises her as a niece. She grows up beautiful, well-educated, and beloved by all. After she and Gurun become lovers, she even humbly accepts the fact that Gurun will ultimately marry a noblewoman instead of a supposed orphan like her. On Gurun's wedding night with La Codre, Le Fresne even adorns their bed with her brocaded blanket, wanting them to have all the nicest things. This leads to her mother's recognition of Le Fresne, Le Fresne's reunion with her family, and her eventual marriage to Gurun instead of her twin sister.

**Gurun** – Gurun is a lord who falls in love with Le Fresne. He is so taken with her, in fact, that he determines to patronize and enrich the abbey where she lives so that he can visit her there without raising suspicion. After Le Fresne comes to live at his castle, however, Gurun lets his knights talk him into seeking a noble wife instead—La Codre. After Le Fresne's mother identifies Le Fresne as her daughter, Gurun agrees to get his marriage to La Codre annulled, so that he and Le Fresne can marry after all.

**La Codre** – La Codre is Le Fresne's twin sister and one of the slanderous wife's daughters. When she grows up, she marries Gurun, lord of a neighboring estate. However, once the long-lost Le Fresne's identity is discovered, La Codre's marriage is annulled so that her sister can marry Gurun instead. La Codre's feelings about this aren't mentioned, but she does go on to make her own rich marriage later.

**Bisclavret** – Bisclavret is a Breton baron who regularly turns into a werewolf. After Bisclavret's wife betrays him by making it impossible for him to transform into a human again, he lives in the forest. One day, he encounters the king hunting in the forest, and when the king sees the creature's intelligent gaze, Bisclavret is taken to live in comfort at the king's castle. Sometime later, when Bisclavret's ex-wife visits the king, Bisclavret attacks her in a rage and disfigures her face. Soon after, Bisclavret's human identity is found out, and his ex-wife returns his clothes, allowing him to become human again. Then the king vindicates Bisclavret, restoring his lands and status to him.

**Bisclavret's Wife/Ex-Wife** – Bisclavret's wife is, of course, married to Bisclavret. She is a suspicious and discontented spouse. Unaware that Bisclavret is a werewolf, she presses him mercilessly about his whereabouts each week, and when she learns the truth, she betrays him by sending her lover to steal Bisclavret's clothes and ensuring that he can't become human again. Later, when she brings the king a gift, Bisclavret attacks her in revenge, tearing her nose off. Then, the king has her tortured to find out the truth about Bisclavret. She quickly tells him everything and brings Bisclavret's hidden clothes. After Bisclavret's transformation and the restoration of his baronage, the ex-wife and her lover are banished from the kingdom. Bisclavret's wife goes on to have many children, and the girls are born without noses, a reminder of their mother's disloyalty.

**Bisclavret's Wife's Lover** – Bisclavret's wife's lover is a knight who unsuccessfully woos Bisclavret's wife for a long time. But once she rejects her werewolf husband, she responds to the lover's advances, hoping to gain his help. Accordingly, he steals Bisclavret's clothing for her, ensuring Bisclavret can't become human again and thus allowing the two of them to marry. A year later, the knight attends a festival at the castle where Bisclavret the werewolf lives, and Bisclavret bites him. Later, the king banishes him and Bisclavret's ex-wife from the kingdom, and the couple has many children—some of them born with disfigured faces like their mother's.

**Lanval** – Lanval is a Knight of the Round Table. He's poor and not originally from Britain, and the other knights regard him as an outsider—perhaps especially because he's so handsome and chivalrous that he provokes their jealousy. One day while wandering alone in a meadow, Lanval is invited into a luxurious tent, where he meets a fairy lady. The lady offers to become his lover and to supply him with as much gold and silver as he wants, as long as he keeps their relationship secret. If he simply thinks of her, she will appear to him. She bestows such riches on Lanval that he's able to be generous to his fellow knights and to the poor. While the other knights enjoy socializing and flirting with Queen Guinevere and her ladies, Lanval keeps to himself. This prompts Queen Guinevere to try to woo Lanval; in a panic, he tells her about his beautiful lady, whose servant girls alone are more beautiful than the Queen. Jealous and insulted, Guinevere then gets Lanval into trouble with King Arthur, who decides Lanval must face trial. Just when it seems that the fairy lady won't respond to Lanval's desperate summons, she appears on horseback and vindicates him before Arthur and the other knights. Lanval jumps onto her horse, and they disappear together to Avalon, never to be heard from again.

**The Fairy Lady** – The fairy lady appears mysteriously in an extravagant tent on the meadow where Lanval wanders one day. She is attended by two damsels dressed in purple. The lady offers to become Lanval's lover and to enrich him with as much gold and silver as he could possibly want, as long as he keeps their relationship secret. If Lanval merely thinks of her, she appears to him. When Lanval gets in trouble with King Arthur because of Queen Guinevere's false accusation, the Lady appears on horseback at the last moment and testifies on his behalf. Then she and Lanval ride off to Avalon together, never to be heard from again.

**King Arthur** – King Arthur, who features in the story "Lanval," is the king of Britain and head of a group of knights called The

Round Table. He puts Lanval on trial for allegedly insulting his wife, Guinevere. The figure of Arthur appears in many medieval English, Welsh, and Breton romances and folklore.

**Arthur's Queen** – The queen is King Arthur's wife. When Lanval resists her romantic advances by claiming that even his secret lover's serving girls are prettier than her, the queen is furious. She accuses Lanval of preferring the company of young men (implying that he's gay). Later, she tells King Arthur that Lanval approached *her* and, when rebuffed, insulted her.

**The Lord of the Pistrians** – In "Les Deus Amanz," the Lord of the Pistrians is the king of Pistria, a city in Normandy. A widower, he is devoted to his daughter and reluctant to marry her off. So, he comes up with a plan he thinks is foolproof: to be allowed to marry his daughter, a man must carry her up a nearby mountain without stopping.

**The Lord of the Pistrians' Daughter** – In "Les Deus Amanz," the Lord of the Pistrians' daughter is devoted to her father, the lord of the Pistrians. He is reluctant to marry her off, requiring suitors to successfully carry her up a mountain before they're allowed to marry her. As a result, she stays single for a long time. Meanwhile, she falls in love with a count's son. Instead of eloping, they agree to obtain a strengthening potion from the young woman's aunt; this will allow the young man to successfully carry her up the mountain, fulfilling the lord of the Pistrians' quest and winning his daughter's hand. Despite the girl's urging, however, her lover is too eager to stop and drink the potion during the climb. Though he reaches the top, he dies from the exertion, and the girl dies of heartbreak soon after. They're buried together in a marble coffin atop the mountain.

**The Young Man** – The young man falls in love with the lord of the Pistrians' daughter. Instead of eloping, they agree to obtain a strengthening potion from the young woman's aunt. This will allow the young man to successfully carry the daughter up the mountain, fulfilling the lord of the Pistrians' quest and winning her hand. The young man's flaw, however, is that he "knows[] no moderation." In his haste to carry her up the mountain, he disregards the potion, and though he reaches the top, he immediately dies of heart failure. The lord of the Pistrians' daughter dies of heartbreak soon after, and she and the young man are buried together in a marble coffin atop the mountain.

**The Lady of Caerwent** – The lady of Caerwent is married to the wealthy lord of Caerwent. She's much younger than him and very beautiful, so he keeps her locked up in a tower. After seven years of confinement, she loses her beauty and despairingly wishes for a knight to discover and rescue her. Immediately, Muldumarec appears in her window. She agrees to have an affair with him, as long as he proves that he's a devout Christian, which Muldumarec does by taking on her appearance and receiving the Eucharist. Muldumarec also cautions the lady to observe moderation so that their affair isn't found out. However, she's an affectionate woman, and she can't help it when her appearance transforms from happiness—arousing the lord's suspicion further and prompting him to spy on her. After Muldumarec is fatally injured from a trap the lord sets, she learns she's pregnant with Yonec, who will someday avenge both his parents. Before he dies, Muldumarec gives her a ring that will make her husband forget everything that's happened, and a sword for Yonec after he's knighted someday. After Yonec grows up and learns the story of his paternity and Muldumarec's death, his mother hands over the sword and immediately dies, her duty fulfilled.

**Muldumarec** – Muldumarec, king of Caerleon, is a handsome knight who appears to the lady of Caerwent in the form of a hawk. He can transform between man and **bird** at will. He even assumes the lady's likeness briefly in order to receive the Eucharist, in order to prove to her that he's really a Christian. He tells the lady he has loved her from afar for a long time, but he could only visit her in response to her spoken wish. They enjoy a short-lived affair. However, the lord of Caerwent mounts spikes in his wife's chamber window so that Muldumarec is mortally wounded the next time he flies through. Before he dies, he comforts his lover with the news that she is pregnant with their son Yonec, who will someday avenge them both. Many years later, after he's grown up, Yonec kills the lord with Muldumarec's sword and succeeds his father as lord and king of Caerleon.

**Yonec** – Yonec is the son of Muldumarec and the lady of Caerwent, conceived during their brief affair. Though the tale "Yonec" is named for him, he appears only briefly in the story. When Yonec grows up, he's given Muldumarec's sword and told the story of how his stepfather, the lord of Caerwent, brought about Muldumarec's death. To avenge both his parents, Yonec promptly beheads his stepfather. Then, the people of Caerleon proclaim Yonec their king.

**The Lord of Caerwent** – The lord of Caerwent is a wealthy, elderly British lord who marries the lady of Caerwent in hopes of having an heir. He's very jealous of her youth and beauty, though, and keeps her locked in a tower to prevent her from having an affair. Though he's thwarted in this, he kills his wife's lover, Muldumarec. Many years later, his wife's son Yonec, conceived with her lover, avenges both his parents by beheading the lord of Caerwent.

**The Married Lady** – In "Laüstic," the married lady is the wife of a knight in St. Malo. She starts a love affair with a neighboring bachelor knight, talking with him through her window in the middle of the night. When her husband questions her about her absences, she claims that a **nightingale**'s sweet song keeps her awake. In response, her husband traps the nightingale that lives in their garden and kills it before his wife's eyes. The lady is devastated, knowing she's lost her pretext for standing by her window at night. She sends the bird's body to the bachelor knight to remember her by.

**The Bachelor Knight** – In "Laüstic," the bachelor knight, who lives in the region of St. Malo, begins an affair with a married lady, the wife of the fellow knight next door, talking with her through his window at night. As an excuse, the lady tells her husband that she stands by the window listening to the garden's **nightingale** each night. After her husband spitefully kills the nightingale, she sends the knight the bird's body. He places the bird's body in a golden casket, which he carries around from that day forward.

**Milun** – Milun is a Welsh knight who's renowned throughout Europe for his skill. He and the damsel fall in love and begin meeting in secret. After the damsel becomes pregnant with their child, he helps smuggle the baby to Northumbria to be raised by the damsel's sister. After the damsel is forced to marry another man, Milun communicates with her by sending her a **swan** with a letter tied to its neck; they maintain this correspondence for 20 years. When Milun is an old man, he hears about a famous young knight and travels to Brittany to joust with the youngster and prove he's still the most praiseworthy knight. At a tournament at Mont St. Michel, the two meet and fight, and though Milun breaks the other knight's lance, he is knocked off his horse. He and the young knight start talking, and Milun realizes his opponent is his long-lost son. The two joyfully travel to Wales together, and after learning that the damsel's husband is dead, Milun finally marries his beloved.

**The Damsel** – The damsel is a nobleman's daughter who falls in love with Milun. A resourceful young woman, she initiates their relationship by sending the knight a message. After their secret meetings lead to her pregnancy, she arranges for the baby to be raised by her wealthy sister in Northumbria. Meanwhile, the damsel's father forces her to marry a powerful nobleman. For the next 20 years, she and Milun communicate by sending a **swan** back and forth with letters hidden in its feathers. After her husband dies, she finally marries Milun and is reunited with their son.

**Milun's Son** – Milun's son is born in secret after Milun and the damsel have an affair. As an infant, he's taken to Northumbria to be raised by his aunt, the damsel's rich sister. When he grows up, he becomes a skilled knight himself and decides to go abroad to gain fame—after all, he's told that his father Milun was a great knight, too. After competing in some tournaments in Brittany, he soon gains a reputation as "The Peerless One." At a tournament at Mont St. Michel, he knocks an older knight off his horse, then learns that the old man is his father. Overjoyed at their reunion, the pair travels to Wales, where Milun's son plans to kill the damsel's husband so that she and Milun can marry at last. They quickly learn that the husband's recent death makes this unnecessary, and soon Milun, the damsel, and their son are reunited.

**The Indecisive Lady** – In "Chaitivel," the indecisive lady lives in the city of Nantes in Brittany. She is so beautiful and charming that she's irresistible to knights. In fact, four knights woo her, and instead of settling on just one lover, the lady courts all four of them. Accordingly, all four knights fight and perform their hardest in hopes of outdoing rivals. But at a tournament at Nantes, all four knights encounter fierce fighting, and only one of them survives. She takes in the wounded knight to convalesce in her home. After this catastrophe, the lady declares she can never be happy again. She later composes a lay to commemorate the four fallen knights, titling it "The Unhappy One" at the wounded knight's suggestion.

**The Wounded Knight** – In "Chaitivel," the wounded knight is one of the indecisive lady's four wooers and the only one who survives deadly fighting during a tournament at Nantes. The knight is badly injured, and the lady takes him home to recuperate in her chamber. When the lady composes a lay about the tragedy, the wounded knight suggests that she title it "The Unhappy One" in honor of him—even though he survived, he faces the unhappy fate of being unable to consummate his love for the lady.

**Tristram** – In "Chevrefoil," Tristram is kicked out of his uncle King Mark's court because he loves Mark's queen, Iseult. Depressed, Tristram goes home to his native Wales, but he eventually travels back to Cornwall in hopes of seeing the Queen. One day, after learning from peasants that Iseult will be passing by on her way to a festival, Tristram hides in the woods. While he waits, Tristram whittles a sign into a hazel branch—a honeysuckle vine—since the two plants depend on each other for survival, just like him and Iseult. When Iseult spots the sign, she finds Tristram in the woods, and they enjoy a happy but fleeting reunion. Afterward, Tristram, a skilled harpist, composes the lay "Chevrefoil" in memory of this event.

**Iseult** – In "Chevrefoil," Iseult is a queen, married to King Mark of Cornwall but in love with Tristram. On her way to a festival, she sees Tristram's honeysuckle symbol on a hazel branch and finds him in the nearby woods. After a happy reunion, Iseult also counsels Tristram on how to reconcile with her husband King Mark, who'd banished Tristram due to his love for Iseult.

**Eliduc** – Eliduc is a brave Breton knight who is married to Guildelüec. Though the King of Brittany loves Eliduc, he banishes the knight from court on the basis of a jealous rumor. Then Eliduc travels to the kingdom of Logres in search of work and enters the service of a king near Exeter for a year. He soon falls in love with the king's daughter, Guilliadun. However, he feels guilty because he wants to remain faithful to Guildelüec, and he doesn't tell Guilliadun that he's married. Yet when he returns to Brittany, his wife is grieved by Eliduc's evident depression. He sails back to England at the earliest opportunity, summons Guilliadun, and sneaks her aboard a ship. But on their voyage back to Brittany, they're nearly shipwrecked, and Guilliadun falls into a deathly swoon. Regretting his decision to bring her to France, Eliduc places her body in a remote chapel in the forest, where he visits and weeps over her daily. After Guildelüec discovers Guilliadun and releases Eliduc from their

marriage, Eliduc joyfully marries Guilliadun instead. At some indefinite point in the future, however, he devotes himself to God and sends Guilliadun to live in his ex-wife's convent.

**Guildelüec** – Guildelüec is the wise and noble wife of Eliduc. She is sensitive and perceptive, especially where Eliduc is concerned. When she notices that Eliduc is disappearing into the forest every day, she takes matters into her own hands and investigates. After she finds Guilliadun's body in the forest, she notices a pair of mysterious **weasels** nearby, one weasel reviving the other with a special red flower. Guildelüec resourcefully takes the flower and uses it to revive Guilliadun as well. When she hears the girl's story, she is so moved that she decides to release Eliduc from their marriage and become a nun. She later founds her own convent.

**Guilliadun** – Guilliadun is a princess, daughter of a king near Exeter in England. She falls passionately in love with Eliduc, a knight in her father's service. Unaware that he's already married to Guildelüec, she hopes Eliduc will become her husband and pines for him when he goes home to Brittany. Later, Eliduc returns to England and sneaks Guilliadun onto a ship back to Brittany, but they face fierce storms during the journey. Worse, Guilliadun hears for the first time that Eliduc is actually married. Crushed by the betrayal, she swoons and appears to be dead, so Eliduc remorsefully places her body in a forest chapel. Later, Guildelüec finds and revives Guilliadun from her sleep, and Guilliadun explains how Eliduc wrongly tricked her. But Guildelüec assures Guilliadun that Eliduc is still devoted to her, and that she's even willing to give him up so he and Guilliadun can marry. After happy years of marriage to Eliduc, Guilliadun joins Guildelüec's convent for the rest of her days.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Elderly Lord** – The elderly lord is the ruler of the ancient city to which Guigemar travels. Jealous of his beautiful wife, a young lady, the lord keeps her imprisoned and closely guarded until she abandons him by escaping and reuniting with Guigemar in Brittany.

**The Maiden Companion** – The maiden is the elderly lord's noble and intelligent niece. She lives with the young lady as a companion in her imprisonment and does anything she can to support the lady's love affair with Guigemar.

**Gawain** – Gawain is a Knight of King Arthur's Round Table along with Lanval.

## TERMS

Lay/Lai – Lays, or *lais* in Breton, are short, rhyming tales that were popular in medieval English and French literature, especially in courtly settings. Lays circulated by oral recitation and performance between France (especially the region of Brittany) and Britain. Lays often included romantic and supernatural elements and an emphasis on chivalry, or the knightly code of conduct. For the work known today as *The Lais of Marie de France*, **Marie de France** collected a dozen Breton *lais* and wrote them down as narrative poems, translating them into Anglo-Norman.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### LOVE AND SUFFERING

In the *Lais of Marie de France*, a collection of 12 short tales from the 11th century, the idea of courtly love is everywhere. Courtly love is a medieval literary motif in which a knight undertakes chivalrous quests in pursuit of a noble lady whom he loves from afar. But in Marie de France's stories, love isn't always particularly romantic—it's a source of profound joy, but it also brings about peril and misery for the characters. For instance, in a scenario that recurs in several tales, the knight Guigemar and his desired young lady are so "wounded" by love that until they admit their feelings for each other, they are despondent, each believing the other could never love them back. Yet throughout the *Lais*, characters continue to pursue love in spite of emotional or physical suffering, suggesting that courtly love is nonetheless a noble and worthwhile pursuit. And indeed, there are stories in which true love prevails in the end and seems to genuinely fulfill the characters, such as in "Eliduc," when Eliduc and Guilliadun finally get married even though they're from different countries, Eliduc is married to someone else at first, and Guilliadun temporarily falls into a coma. Though the *Lais* offer various perspectives on love, they present courtly love as a delicate balance between longing and fulfillment, grief and joy, and ardor and restraint. Beyond that, the *Lais* demonstrate that true love is generally worth enduring the suffering it causes—and that love can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

### VIRTUE, VICE, AND JUSTICE

The *Lais* don't always offer clear-cut moral lessons. To an extent, they emphasize chivalry, a code of virtuous conduct for knights, and Christian behavior more broadly. The knight Lanval is an exemplar of chivalry: he stays devoted to his fairy lady despite jealous accusations from Arthur's queen, and he wins acquittal at trial and a happy ending. And in "Le Fresne," when Le Fresne's lover

Gurun chooses a nobler lady to marry, Le Fresne is kind and generous to the bride instead of jealous. Her selflessness is rewarded when Gurun ultimately marries her instead.

At the same time, Marie de France seems to take it for granted that people misbehave, especially when passion overrules virtue. In "Chaitivel," an indecisive lady can't pick just one knight to love, then suffers grievously when three of her four lovers are killed in one day. In "Bisclavret," consequences are more grotesque: after Bisclavret's wife betrays and abandons Bisclavret for another lover, Bisclavret (a werewolf) mauls and disfigures her face. Yet even where excess and disloyalty are clearly punished, Marie is notably restrained in her judgments—like when Equitan and the seneschal's wife, plotting to murder the seneschal in a scalding bath, are instead scalded to death *themselves* when they're caught in bed together and panic. Marie bluntly sums up this lai with the remark, "Evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another's misfortune." The moral of the story is more of a wry observation than a pronouncement on right versus wrong. Overall, the stories suggest that because love is such an overpowering experience, people realistically commit all sorts of misdeeds in the midst of passion. Still, passion isn't an excuse: Marie suggests that even when people are in love, they shouldn't discard virtue, because vicious behavior often does bring painful consequences to those who commit it—and virtue is sometimes rewarded.

### GENDER ROLES AND CLASS STATUS

Marie de France generally flatters her noble audience's sense of social superiority while subtly critiquing the conventions of her time (the 12th or 13th century). In particular, Marie largely adheres to the gender expectations of the day while highlighting struggles faced by women in particular. For example, courtly men in the *Lais* tend to be insecure and suspicious: both the young lady in "Guigemar" and the Lady of Caerwent in "Yonec" are imprisoned in castles by their elderly husbands in order to prevent them from having affairs. Such scenarios hint that men saw marriage as a status indicator that had to be jealously guarded, even to a paranoid extent. Given such restrictions, women had to be more resourceful, like Milun's damsel, who's forced into an unwanted marriage and has to communicate with Milun by sending a **swan** back and forth with love letters hidden in its feathers. Though Marie portrays women as clever and capable of taking initiative, she also hints that they were forced to cultivate these qualities because they had less control over their destinies than men.

To a lesser extent, both men and women also struggle with the expectations their noble status brings with it. While high status brings privileges, it also limits options for marriage and thus tends to hinder romance (like when the nobleman Gurun rejects his beloved Le Fresne, an orphan of unknown status, as unmarriageable because he believes she couldn't give him a legitimate heir). Overall, Marie de France portrays gender roles and social status as fixed, but she nevertheless suggests that occasionally, people—especially women—can use their ingenuity to make the best of their given roles.

### MAGIC AND STORYTELLING

In the *Lais*, supernatural elements (like talking **animals** and fairy lovers) are sprinkled throughout the stories in no obvious pattern. When love is involved, such phenomena are simply expected. Often, magic is mainly a narrative element that serves to entertain the audience while moving a story along. For instance, the knight Guigemar, who's been unable to find love elsewhere, is conveyed in a magical ship to the city where his future beloved lives. And in "Bisclavret," Bisclavret becomes a werewolf for no apparent reason except that this twist gives an opportunity to show how heartless his wife is and that Bisclavret deserves his king's pity and favor. Indeed, characters seem to take magic for granted as part of life. In "Eliduc," a princess is restored to life by means of a magic flower that's brought into a church by a resourceful weasel. The characters don't regard this event as strange or even surprising—in fact, they embrace it as a fitting miracle, and it enables the story's happy ending, when Marie vindicates Eliduc's and the princess's chaste love by having them get married. Marie's matter-of-fact use of magic throughout the *Lais* suggests that the purpose of storytelling is to convey lessons that apply to humanity as a whole, which means that the particular details of a story don't necessarily have to be true—or even plausible—to make the story worth telling.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### ANIMALS

Animals symbolize the suffering that's unavoidable in human love. Throughout the *Lais*, both magical and non-magical animals play supporting roles in human love affairs, often by suffering for the lovers' sake in some way. In "Guigemar," Guigemar fatally shoots an enchanted white hind, or deer, and gets wounded himself when the arrow rebounds through his thigh. Suddenly the hind speaks, cursing Guigemar for killing it and saying that the knight won't heal until a woman cures him, and until Guigemar falls in love with her. After this encounter, Guigemar wanders aboard a magical ship that carries him to the young lady who fulfills the deer's prophecy. In this case, the hind clearly has enchanted attributes—it's self-aware, and it sees the future—but its main function is to die

while pronouncing the curse that compels Guigemar toward his life-saving love. In this sense, the hind's death dramatizes the suffering that Marie de France suggests is inherent in romantic relationships.

In "Yonec," an animal also has supernatural associations: the knight Muldumarec transforms into a hawk at will. In this case, the knight's bird form serves as both a means for reaching the trapped Lady of Caerwent, as he can fly through the window of the chamber where she's imprisoned. His transformation is also a factor in his own death, when he's wounded by a trap the Lord of Caerwent sets in the window. The bird-man rescues the Lady from her misery by giving her an opportunity for love—yet the fact that Muldumarec's bird form makes him susceptible to death suggests that courtly love (in which a knight chivalrously pursues a noble lady) inevitably involves suffering. Muldumarec's son Yonec does eventually vindicate him, though—suggesting that the suffering was worthwhile and admirable.

In other lais, even mundane animals symbolize the hardships associated with love. In "Laüstic," the married lady blames her wakefulness on the singing nightingale in the garden, which her husband—implicitly aware that she's *really* chatting with her lover in the middle of the night—spitefully traps and kills, eliminating his wife's excuse. Her beloved bachelor knight carries the bird's body around with him in a gold casket as a symbol of their love which, though ill-fated, is apparently still worth cherishing. In "Milun," a swan enables Milun's and the damsel's affair by carrying letters back and forth between the couple for 20 years. There's nothing supernatural about this bird. In fact, the couple manipulates it by natural (if improbable) means: the swan's recipient starves the bird for a few days until it gets so hungry that, when released, it quickly flies back to the other person. The bird's physical suffering in these interim periods mirrors the lovers' emotional suffering throughout the years they're separated from each other. All in all, then, animals in the *Lais* invariably suffer, and their pain reflects the idea that human love is defined by struggle and anguish.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Lais of Marie de France* published in 1986.

## I. Guigemar Quotes

❝ Whoever has good material for a story is grieved if the tale is not well told. Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents. Those who gain a good reputation should be commended, but when there exists in a country a man or woman of great renown, people who are envious of their abilities frequently speak insultingly of them in order to damage this reputation. […] But just because spiteful tittle-tattlers attempt to find fault with me I do not intend to give up. […]

I shall relate briefly to you stories which I know to be true and from which the Bretons have composed their lays.

**Related Characters:** Marie de France (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening sentences of "Guigemar," the first lay in *The Lais of Marie de France*. Even though she offered a justification for her writing in her Prologue, Marie offers another, bolder self-defense here. She gives several reasons: first, she implies that a story should be told well if at all possible. Next, she implies that if she didn't tell her stories, she would be squandering her talents. Her third reason is perhaps the most interesting: she suggests that envious people have been trying to damage her reputation, but that she's not going to let them win. Marie doesn't offer any other hints about these supposed critics' identities. However, her remark about people of "great renown" being targeted suggests a great deal of self-confidence, as Marie clearly classifies herself among such people. In the Prologue, Marie spoke of her writing in terms of moral obligation, suggesting that if a person has knowledge and the ability to communicate well, failure to write is selfish. But here she's more straightforward, asserting more directly that she has talent and intends to use it.

Marie also explains her aim—to retell stories she's collected from Breton lays. Lays were short, rhymed tales that were often recited or sung in medieval European courts. Such tales were especially popular in northwestern France (Brittany), which shared elements of a common cultural heritage with England. Marie translates and adapts the lays from Breton into Anglo-French, the Old French dialect still used in England in the 12th century.

> The animal, wounded and in great pain, lamented in these words: 'Alas! I am mortally wounded. Vassal, you who have wounded me, let this be your fate. May you never find a cure, nor may any herb, root, doctor or potion ever heal the wound you have in your thigh until you are cured by a woman who will suffer for your love more pain and anguish than any other woman has ever known, and you will suffer likewise for her, so much so that all those who are in love, who have known love or are yet to experience it, will marvel at it.

**Related Characters:** Guigemar

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 44

**Explanation and Analysis**

The knight Guigemar has gone hunting in the forest and mortally wounded a white hind, or deer. In the process, Guigemar's arrow rebounds and pierces his thigh. Suddenly, the dying animal speaks and pronounces this curse on Guigemar.

The significance of the hind's curse is that it establishes the idea—both here and throughout the *Lais*—that romantic love is the most devastating "wound" of all. Guigemar's physical wound thus provides a pretext for, and symbolizes the much greater severity of, the emotional "wound" he'll receive when he meets the woman who will nurse him back to health. She will also heal the "unnatural" wound of Guigemar's lack of interest in romance up to this point—something the story pinpoints as a deep flaw, probably because it would render Guigemar unlikely to produce heirs and perpetuate his noble lineage. The *Lais* regard love as sought-after but also as a sickness—something that makes a person weak, sad, and paralyzed by longing until their love is returned and ideally consummated. So, to have his wounds healed (both the wound in his thigh and the more metaphorical wound of his romance-avoidant nature), Guigemar must suffer a deeper wound still.

Throughout the *Lais*, animals often fill a supporting role in human romance. Deer were an especially common creature in medieval literature, though they didn't have a clear, consistent symbolism across different works. But deer were often associated with nobility simply because noblemen had the leisure to go hunting for sport. Sometimes, as here, an encounter with a deer—especially a rare, white doe like this one—simply propelled the hunter onward into a quest of some sort. A talking deer like this one certainly signals that supernatural powers are accepted as fact in the world of the story.

> But love had now pierced him to the quick and his heart was greatly disturbed. For the lady had wounded him so deeply that he had completely forgotten his homeland. He felt no pain from the wound in his thigh, yet he sighed in great anguish and asked the maiden serving him to let him sleep. As he had dismissed her, she returned to her mistress, who was, like Guigemar, affected by the ardour which had kindled within her heart.

**Related Characters:** Guigemar, The Young Lady, The Maiden Companion, The Elderly Lord, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 48

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Guigemar is cursed by the talking hind (who says that Guigemar will never be cured of his hunting injury until he loves and is loved by a woman), he boards an enchanted ship which carries him to a remote city. There he meets a beautiful young lady, who is confined to a chamber and garden by her jealous old husband. Immediately, he falls passionately in love with her.

It's apparent that Guigemar's passion for the lady fulfills the hind's curse. The hind described love as a "wound," and that's clearly what Guigemar experiences: love has "pierced him to the quick" (to his deepest, rawest core) and unsettled his spirits. Indeed, the lady has "wounded" him so badly that he's forgotten the more immediate crisis of a short time ago—getting injured and then exiled from his home by a magical ship. His desperate injury no longer bothers him, compared to what the lady makes him feel.

Guigemar's condition is a perfect example of the lovesickness that befalls a number of characters in the *Lais*; it's a common trope in romantic literature of the period. Lovesickness is an all-consuming heartache and longing that the sufferer assumes will never be requited. By describing lovesickness as a greater "wound" than his physical injury, Marie communicates that romantic love affects a person's whole being both for good and ill, and she implies that love is worth such suffering. When Marie mentions that the lady is also experiencing "ardour," she hints that the hind's curse

is about to be fulfilled—Guigemar and the lady are mutually suffering, and that means Guigemar's inner wound is about to be healed as well as his physical wound.

❝ Guigemar besieged the town and would not leave until it was captured. His friends and followers increased in number so much that he starved all those inside. He captured and destroyed the castle and killed the lord within. With great joy he took away his beloved. Now his tribulations were over.

**Related Characters:** Guigemar, The Young Lady, Meriaduc, The Elderly Lord, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 54

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Guigemar is healed from his wounds, and his affair with the young lady has been discovered, both he and the lady ultimately wind up back in Brittany. However, the lord Meriaduc, a friend of Guigemar's, keeps the lady in his castle, and when Guigemar finds her there, Meriaduc refuses to give her up. So, Guigemar declares war on his friend to win the young lady by force.

At first, this story sounds like a stereotypical tale of chivalry—the valiant knight finds off challenges in order to keep the helpless lady for himself. And the story does showcase such valor. However, it's worth noticing a few other details: for one thing, the young lady's husband, the elderly lord, is never mentioned again in the story. But by besieging this town, conquering the castle, and rescuing the lady by his own hand, Guigemar could be read as symbolically killing the elderly lord and rescuing the young lady from his prison. In any case, this sequence of events shows that he's not a passive victim (as he was when the magic ship brought him to the elderly lord's city in the first place, helplessly injured), but a powerful knight who's capable of seizing whatever he wants. In a similar vein, it also shows that, far from being uninterested in romance (as he was at the beginning of the story), Guigemar is now prepared to kill people in order to be with the lady he loves. And the elderly lord's disappearance from the story also portrays him as an unsympathetic, even laughable character who deserves whatever misfortunes fall on him. In other words, Marie presents the story's conclusion as simple justice.

## II. Equitan Quotes

❝ Because you are a powerful king and my husband is your vassal, you would expect, as I see it, to be the lord and master in love as well. Love is not honourable, unless it is based on equality. A poor man, if he is loyal and possesses wisdom and merit, is of greater worth and his love more joyful than that of a prince or king who lacks loyalty. If anyone places his love higher than is appropriate for his own station in life, he must fear all manner of things.

**Related Characters:** The Seneschal's Wife (speaker), Equitan, The Seneschal, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 58

**Explanation and Analysis**

Equitan is a king who falls in love with the wife of his seneschal (a kind of chief administrative official). However, though the seneschal's wife seems to reciprocate his feelings, she resists his romantic advances. This speech reveals her reasoning and also gives some interesting insights on courtly love.

Typically in medieval courtly love tales, a knight attempts to woo a lady of higher status. In the story of Equitan, the situation is reversed: the king falls in love with the wife of his vassal, somebody who serves him. The seneschal's wife slyly suggests that this dynamic isn't going to work out well for them. In particular, she argues that despite his claims to the contrary, the king's social status will impact their romantic relationship no matter what—he will assume the right to be her "lord and master." Furthermore, the seneschal's wife claims that equality is the indispensable foundation for true love. There's also a thinly veiled criticism in the wife's next words—suggesting that a disloyal king (like the king betraying his seneschal) won't even enjoy love as much as a poor man. The seneschal's wife sums things up by arguing that if someone pursues love above their own social station, then they're just asking for trouble.

While one shouldn't read too much into the seneschal's wife's words about "equality"—she isn't a modern woman, after all—her observations *do* suggest that even in the courtly love context, lovers were well aware that unequal social status can put strain on relationships. Perhaps by having the seneschal's wife speak these words, Marie is suggesting that medieval women had to be especially aware of these potential strains. In addition, the wife's words foreshadow the disastrous end of the couple's affair.

His evil plan rebounded on him, whereas the seneschal was safe and sound. […] Seizing his wife immediately, [the seneschal] tossed her head first into the bath. Thus they died together, the king first, then the woman with him. Anyone willing to listen to reason could profit from this cautionary tale. Evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another's misfortune.

**Related Characters:** The Seneschal, The Seneschal's Wife, Equitan, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 60

**Explanation and Analysis**

The seneschal's wife always feels insecure about the possibility that Equitan will go off and marry a princess, as a king would be expected to do. So, she hatches a plan to get rid of her husband so that the way will be clear for Equitan to marry *her* instead. The plan involves tricking the seneschal into taking a scalding hot bath that will boil him to death. However, things go awry when she and Equitan start having sex just before the seneschal is set to arrive. When the seneschal walks in on them, Equitan panics and jumps into the deadly bath instead; then, the seneschal throws his adulterous wife in, too.

Marie concludes this lay with a moral—something she doesn't typically do. Interestingly, she doesn't say that adulterous affairs or disloyalty are wrong—instead, she says that when a person tries to harm another, their wickedness might come back to bite them. It's possible that she is using dry humor here, and that her rather restrained moral condemns the entire mess by implication. After all, the couple's gruesome death speaks for itself as recompense for their actions. Or she might be avoiding a broader judgment. Throughout the *Lais*, Marie takes it for granted that when people give in to passion, they'll do all sorts of questionable things. Instead of judging that behavior, Marie might be more interested in warning her audience to avoid hurting anyone else when they rush into love.

## III. Le Fresne Quotes

I have been my own judge: I spoke ill of all women. Did I not say that it has never been the case and we had never seen it happen that a woman has had two children unless she has known two men? Now I have twins and it seems that I am paying the price. Whoever slanders and lies about others does not know what retribution awaits him. […] To ward off shame, I shall have to murder one of the children: I would rather make amends with God than shame and dishonour myself.

**Related Characters:** The Slanderous Wife (Le Fresne's Mother) (speaker), Le Fresne, Marie de France, La Codre

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 62

**Explanation and Analysis**

The lay "Le Fresne" begins with Le Fresne's mother making a cruel and slanderous claim about a neighbor: that the woman gave birth to twins because two different men impregnated her. It's not clear why she would slander her neighbor in this way, unless out of jealousy. And it's clearly a silly claim—though folk beliefs like this probably existed in the Middle Ages, people generally knew that such things weren't true.

Whatever her motivation, the slanderous wife's words soon come back to bite her when she gives birth to twins herself. She sees this event as just retribution for spreading a false rumor about her neighbor and, by extension, condemning women in general as inclined toward sexually promiscuous behavior. Now that she's given birth to twins herself, people will judge her as promiscuous, too. She admits that she deserves this, yet she still looks for an easy way out. She decides the only solution is to get rid of one of the newborns.

Though the slanderous wife's plan is horrible, Marie characterizes her as very human: the wife knows killing a child would be a damnable offense, yet that's a problem for the future; she has to face her judgmental peers *now*. This speaks to the fragility of reputation among the nobility, especially for a woman; the wife would literally rather live with the burden of damnation than suffer shame and dishonor (including the loss of her social status).

She brought her the ring and the lady looked at it carefully, easily recognizing it and the brocade. She had no doubt, for she now knew for sure that this was indeed her daughter, and, for all to hear, she said openly: "You are my daughter, fair friend!"

**Related Characters:** The Slanderous Wife (Le Fresne's Mother) (speaker), Le Fresne, Marie de France, La Codre

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 66

**Explanation and Analysis**

Le Fresne watches as her lover Gurun marries a woman

named La Codre, who's wealthy and therefore a suitable wife for him, unlike Le Fresne. What Le Fresne doesn't know is that La Codre is her twin sister.

On La Codre's wedding night, Le Fresne puts her fanciest brocade on the bridal bed, and when La Codre's mother sees the blanket and Le Fresne's ring, she finally recognizes Le Fresne as the child she'd abandoned many years ago. Le Fresne's mother recognizes these as the items her maid had left with the baby so that whoever found her would recognize her as noble and treat her with due respect and honor. Now, the ring and brocade also prove Le Fresne's relationship to the rest of her family. This also means that she can marry her beloved Gurun, which happens the next day.

It's interesting that Le Fresne's mother acknowledges her "for all to hear [...] openly." This contrasts sharply with the mother's shame-filled secrecy when she sent Le Fresne away at the beginning of the story. The story doesn't say what happened to Le Fresne's mother over the course of the story, but it's clear that she's had a change of heart about being the mother of twins. Perhaps she figures that by this time, people will have forgotten her foolish slander. More than anything, it seems that the joy of the reunion simply overwhelms any concerns about reputation or consequences. (And the mother *did* leave Le Fresne for somebody else to raise—a great deal better than her initial, panic-stricken plan to kill the child.) In any case, Marie de France seems to think that the mother's years of separation from Le Fresne have been punishment enough, and she gives the whole family a happy ending.

## IV. Bisclavret Quotes

❝ Not long afterwards, as I understand it, the king, who was wise and courtly, went into the forest where Bisclavret had been discovered. Bisclavret accompanied him and on the way home that night the king took lodging in that region. Bisclavret's wife learnt of this and, dressing herself elegantly, went next day to speak to the king, taking an expensive present for him. When Bisclavret saw her approach, no one could restrain him. He dashed towards her like a madman. Just hear how successfully he took his revenge. He tore the nose right off her face.

**Related Characters:** Marie de France (speaker), Bisclavret, Bisclavret's Wife/Ex-Wife

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 71

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Bisclavret's wife finds out he's a werewolf, she betrays him—having his clothes stolen so that he's forced to stay in werewolf form—and marries another man. In the meantime, the king, who recognizes Bisclavret's human intelligence, takes him in. The wolf gains a reputation for his gentleness.

In the meantime, it appears that Bisclavret's ex-wife has dismissed him from her thoughts. She seems to think that Bisclavret occupies the animal realm and thus no longer has anything to do with her life. So, it's all the more shocking when Bisclavret not only recognizes his ex-wife but brutally maims her.

Marie seems to regard Bisclavret's behavior as justified and his ex-wife's punishment as totally deserved. Bisclavret *isn't* simply an animal—underneath, he's still a respectable nobleman with thoughts and feelings—so Marie considers his wife's betrayal as especially grotesque. It consigns Bisclavret to the margins of human society, and he can only live as a mascot of the human world. By disfiguring his ex-wife's face (a trait her daughters somehow inherit), Bisclavret ensures that she, too, will now be an outcast.

There doesn't seem to be any other reason that Bisclavret is a werewolf. Whether or not Marie or her audience necessarily believed in werewolves (it was surely a common folk belief at the time), she takes this detail in stride. Bisclavret's beastly identity mainly serves to highlight his wife's cruelty.

## V. Lanval Quotes

❝ Arthur, the worthy and courtly king, was at Carlisle on account of the Scots and the Picts who were ravaging the country, penetrating into the land of Logres and frequently laying it waste.

The king was there during the summer, at Pentecost, and he gave many rich gifts to counts and barons and to those of the Round Table: there was no such company in the whole world. He apportioned wives and lands to all, save to one who had served him: this was Lanval, whom he did not remember, and for whom no one put in a good word.

**Related Characters:** King Arthur, Lanval, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 73

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Arthurian literary tradition was certainly a prominent source for Marie de France as she gathered tales of chivalric romance for her *Lais*. In the lay "Lanval," she adapts certain characters and events from that tradition, evidently expecting her audience to recognize them. In Marie's day (the late 1100s to early 1200s), the semi-mythical King Arthur and his Round Table of knights would have existed about half a millennium earlier. So, Arthur was already part of the legendary past, a fact that gives Marie even more freedom to blend the supernatural with the historic.

Given the popularity of Arthur and knights like Lancelot and Gawain, it's striking that Marie picks Lanval, a relatively inconspicuous knight, to write a story about. But that seems to be a big part of Marie's point: that among the knights, Lanval was an outsider who struggled to gain respect the way his peers did. He didn't come from a rich family, and he was a foreigner, so Lanval lacked the means to entertain his fellow knights, and presumably to pursue romance. Since Lanval always gets overlooked, he ends up gaining "wives and lands" not from Arthur as the other knights do, but from a mysterious fairy lady who exists outside the bounds of King Arthur's court altogether, loving and enriching Lanval to his heart's content. This leads to conflict with the court, and even after Lanval is acquitted, there isn't an obvious place for him in the courtly world. He and the fairy lady ultimately disappear to the mysterious island of Avalon, rather than remaining marginal characters in Arthur's world.

## VI. Les Deus Amanz Quotes

❝ The king led his daughter into the meadow towards the Seine, where a great crowd gathered. She wore nothing but her shift, and the young man took her in his arms. The little phial containing the potion (he well knew that she had no wish to let him down) was given to her to carry, but I fear it will be of little avail to him, because he knew no moderation.

**Related Characters:** Marie de France (speaker), The Lord of the Pistrians, The Lord of the Pistrians' Daughter, The Young Man

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 84

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this lay, the king of the Pistrians has forbidden anyone to marry his daughter unless they can carry her up a nearby mountain without stopping. She falls in love with a young man, who gets a special strengthening potion from the girl's aunt to aid his attempt.

Here, the lay approaches its climax, and Marie builds up the suspense: the whole kingdom gathers to see if the young man will be successful. The young woman has made herself as lightweight as possible, and she carries the bottle of potion for the young man to drink. Notably, the young man is very confident: he knows that the *girl* "[has] no wish to let him down," but he assumes there's no danger of falling short himself. This suggests that in his passion, the young man has grown arrogant.

But Marie's commentary makes this clearest of all: she interjects that the potion won't do the young man much good, because "he [knows] no moderation." When Marie adds her own comments to a story, it's often because she wants to offer a moral, and that's the case here. By "moderation," she doesn't mean that the young man loves the maiden a middling amount, but that he'll observe propriety and restraint in demonstrating his love—meaning, in this case, that he'll drink the potion when he needs it. But it soon becomes clear that the young man will keep hurrying up the mountain without using the potion and will die just as he reaches the summit—suggesting that because of his undeveloped virtue, magical aids like potions would never have done him good anyway.

## VII. Yonec Quotes

❝ The lady, now assured, uncovered her head and spoke. She answered the knight, saying that she would make him her lover, provided he believed in God, which would make their love possible. […] 'Lady,' he said, 'you are right. I would not on any account want guilt, distrust or suspicion to attach to me. I do believe in the Creator who set us free from the sorrow in which our ancestor Adam put us by biting the bitter apple. He is, will be and always has been life and light to sinners.'

**Related Characters:** Muldumarec (speaker), The Lady of Caerwent, The Lord of Caerwent, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 88

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Lady of Caerwent, stuck in a tower by her jealous old

husband, has wished for a valiant knight to rescue her, and one almost instantly appears in her chamber. Perhaps suspicious because the knight initially appeared in the form of a hawk, the lady says she can't become his lover unless he can prove that he's a devout Christian. The knight obliges with this somewhat flowery speech demonstrating his religious piety. ("Biting the bitter apple" refers to Adam's fall from grace in the book of Genesis, condemning Adam's posterity to sin and damnation until Christ died to save them.)

This exchange is somewhat humorously ironic, given that the two are negotiating about having an adulterous affair—something that Christian teaching would never endorse, no matter how tyrannical one's husband. It seems the lady is more concerned about the knight's outward adherence to Christianity (he later receives the Eucharist to prove his sincerity) than the consistency between his belief and practice. Above all, this passage from "Yonec" suggests that the world of the *Lais* stood on the boundary between Christianity and magic, and that while this was an uneasy tension at times, Marie didn't see this realms as incompatible—at least for the purposes of storytelling.

❝ "Fair son, you have heard how God has brought us here! It is your father who lies here, whom this old man unjustly killed. Now I commend and hand over to you his sword, for I have kept it long enough." For all to hear, she revealed to him that this was his father and he his son, how he used to come to her and how her husband had betrayed him. She told him the truth, fell into a faint on the tomb, and, while unconscious, died. She never spoke again, but when her son saw she was dead, he struck off his stepfather's head, and thus with his father's sword avenged his mother's grief.

**Related Characters:** The Lady of Caerwent (speaker), Muldumarec , The Lord of Caerwent, Yonec

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 93

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage comes near the end of "Yonec," when Yonec, the son of the Lady of Caerwent and her late lover, Muldumarec, learns the truth of his origins and gets revenge on his stepfather, the Lord of Caerwent, for killing his father and ending his parents' affair. Since Muldumarec is now dead, it's the Lady's job to tell Yonec the story, which she does when the family attends a festival and visits Muldumarec's grave. She also gives Yonec his father's sword. However, her duty fulfilled, she dies before she can see how Yonec will respond.

Yonec doesn't waste any time; he immediately kills the Lord of Caerwent, whereupon the local people proclaim him their king and his father Muldumarec's successor. Folklorists have suggested that this lay was influenced by ancient agricultural myths in which the fertile new year slayed the old, barren year.

It's also interesting that Muldumarec's ability to turn into a bird, which was such a big deal at the beginning of the story, ultimately fades into the background. It seems to have mainly been a device to bring Muldumarec and the Lady of Caerwent together, allowing Yonec to be conceived and eventually become a hero.

## VIII. Laüstic Quotes

❝ When the lord heard what she said, he gave a spiteful, angry laugh and devised a plan to ensnare the nightingale. [...] When they had taken the nightingale, it was handed over, still alive, to the lord [...] She asked her husband for the bird, but he killed it out of spite, breaking its neck wickedly with his two hands. He threw the body at the lady, so that the front of her tunic was bespattered with blood[.]

**Related Characters:** The Married Lady, The Bachelor Knight, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 95

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this short lay, a married lady and a bachelor knight carry on an affair—really more like a flirtation—through the windows of neighboring houses. The lady claims she gets up in the middle of the night to listen to the nightingale's sweet song, so her jealous husband quickly traps a nightingale and kills the bird before her eyes.

This rather horrifying display is obviously meant to terrorize the married lady. The implication is that her husband knew all along she was flirting with the neighboring knight, and breaking the bird's neck symbolizes what he'll do to *her*, or maybe both her and the bachelor knight, if they keep this up. There are several paranoid and tyrannical husbands throughout Marie's *Lais*, but this unnamed husband is perhaps the most violent. Marie hints that such husbands drove many women to seek happiness elsewhere, and that

the women faced potential violence as a result. It's also another instance of a bird symbolizing a love affair, though in this case (unlike in "Yonec" or "Milun"), the bird itself is really incidental—it's just an excuse for the married lady's absences at night.

## IX. Milun Quotes

❝ But hear now what happened next. Using her ingenuity she got hold of ink and parchment. She was able to write whatever she pleased, and seal the letter with a ring. Having let the swan go without food, she hung the letter round its neck and released it. The bird was famished and eager for food: swiftly it returned home. In Milun's town and in his dwelling it alighted before him. When he saw it, he was full of joy.

**Related Characters:** Marie de France (speaker), The Damsel, Milun

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 100

**Explanation and Analysis**

"Milun" is yet another story of a loveless marriage and a passionate extramarital affair. A young damsel and a knight, Milun, fall in love, but the damsel is forced to marry somebody else and to communicate with Milun another way. Here, Marie explains how the damsel coped with her difficult situation.

It's interesting that Marie makes a point of calling out the damsel's "ingenuity." The plan to send the swan back and forth was really Milun's idea, but Marie seems to want to highlight the fact that the damsel can read and write. This wasn't necessarily commonplace for *anyone* in Marie's day, much less a young woman. But the damsel is able to "write whatever she pleased[]," which would indeed be freeing for a young woman who's otherwise trapped in an unhappy marriage without many options. As elsewhere in the *Lais*, an animal serves as an aid to human romance, and in this case it's quite a direct role: the bird flies messages back and forth between the lovers for many years. It's possible that Marie chose a swan for this role because swans are usually mate for life, and some species live for decades. Milun's swan serves as the lovers' messenger for 20 years, not out of any magical abilities, but out of loyalty (and hunger).

❝ When Milun heard the news, it seemed quite wonderful to him. He explained this to his son. There was nothing to hinder or delay them. They travelled until they reached the castle where the lady was. She was delighted by her son who was so valiant and noble. They summoned no kinsmen and without the advice of anyone else their son united them and gave his mother to his father. Thereafter they lived night and day in happiness and tenderness.

**Related Characters:** Milun, Milun's Son , The Damsel, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

Milun and the damsel have a son together, who's smuggled off to England to be raised by a relative. Twenty years later, Milun and his son, both skilled knights, are reunited at a jousting tournament and plan to go to the damsel's castle to kill her hated husband. Before they get there, they learn that the husband is already dead.

The death of the husband clears the way for Milun and the damsel to get married at last. Usually, Marie has no qualms about killing off an unwanted spouse through more violent means, but in this story, it's unnecessary. She doesn't explain why this is the case, but it's as if everything has fallen into place almost miraculously for this family—Milun and his son meet when they start jousting without knowing each other's identities, for example—so the husband's tidy demise is almost expected. Along the same lines, it's notable that the family doesn't ask for anybody's advice or summon witnesses before Milun and the damsel marry. In fact, it's not even clear that a formal wedding takes place. The story suggests that Milun and the damsel *should* have been married all along, so no external recognition of their love and union seems to be necessary: as often happens in the *Lais*, love prevails despite suffering and without regard for others' views on the matter.

## X. Chaitivel Quotes

❝ It would be less dangerous for a man to court every lady in an entire land than for a lady to remove a single besotted lover from her skirts, for he will immediately attempt to strike back. […] Yet, even if a lady has no wish to listen to their pleas, she should not speak insultingly to her suitors: rather should she honour and cherish them, serve them appropriately and be grateful to them.

**Related Characters:** Marie de France (speaker), The Indecisive Lady

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 105

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the short lay "Chaitivel," four eager suitors simultaneously woo an indecisive noblewoman. Marie gives an interesting perspective on courtly love in this lay: while she definitely finds fault with the lady's failure to commit to a single lover, she softens her critique by pointing out that noblewomen often faced impossible choices.

Marie suggests that while men can court as many ladies as they like, women don't enjoy the same freedom. In fact, if a woman tries to rid herself of an unwanted lover, she might find herself in an even more vulnerable position because the rejected lover might seek revenge in some way. Marie doesn't say what kinds of revenge, whether by reacting violently or damaging the lady's reputation in some way. However, it's clear that for a lady, being courted by lots of men wasn't a wholly enviable position; there were risks involved. She adds that even if a woman doesn't especially like the attention she's getting, she should still flatter her suitors and be grateful to them. Marie's perspective suggests that courtly love wasn't always as romantic as popular stories made it sound.

❝ "My lady, compose the new lay, but call it *The Unhappy One*. I shall explain why it should have this title. The others have long since ended their days and used up their span of life. What great anguish they suffered on account of the love they bore for you! But I who have escaped alive, bewildered and forlorn, constantly see the woman I love more than anything on earth, coming and going; she speaks to me morning and evening, yet I cannot experience the joy of a kiss or an embrace or of any pleasure other than conversation. You cause me to suffer a hundred such ills and death would be preferable for me."

**Related Characters:** The Wounded Knight (speaker), The Indecisive Lady , Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 108

**Explanation and Analysis**

When the indecisive lady's four lovers get involved in a violent skirmish, three of them end up dead and one of them badly wounded. She cares for the injured knight personally. Here, the pair discusses the lady's plans to compose a lay about her sorrowful story.

At first, the lady wants to call her lay *The Four Sorrows*, because she's lost all four of the men she loved. She feels guilty because her indecisiveness kept her from settling on a lover, and as a result, all four men kept trying to distinguish themselves on the battlefield to prove their worth. But the surviving knight argues that his fate is actually worse than theirs, so the lay should be all about *him* instead. The dead knights are now beyond their sorrows, but the injured man has to endure proximity to his beloved without being able to enjoy it much. The implication is that he's now sexually impotent (though the lay just says that he was injured "in the thigh") and thus has to pine for the lady without ever being able to consummate their desire.

Marie settles the matter by calling the lay "Chaitivel" ("The Unhappy One"), but acknowledging that both titles—and both characters' perspectives—are equally legitimate.

## XII. Eliduc Quotes

❝ With gentle mien, honest expression and very noble demeanour, he spoke with much breeding and thanked the damsel, Guilliadun, who was very beautiful, for having sent for him to come and talk to her. She took him by the hand and they sat down on a bed and spoke of many things. [...] Love dispatched its messenger who summoned her to love him. It made her go pale and sigh[.]

**Related Characters:** Eliduc, Guilliadun, Guildelüec, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 114

**Explanation and Analysis**

In "Eliduc," Marie's longest *lai*, a knight named Eliduc falls in love with a princess named Guilliadun. This quote describes their first encounter, which is the epitome of courtliness.

With characteristic boldness, Guilliadun has taken the initiative to invite Eliduc to her chamber. However, Marie makes it quite clear that nothing unchaste takes place between them. Other stories contain plenty of euphemisms for sex, but here, the couple just sits on a bed and chats. The biggest reason, perhaps, is that Eliduc is not only married, but *happily* married. While Marie doesn't apologize for affairs when one of the lovers is stuck in an unhappy

marriage, she portrays Eliduc as faithful to his wife, Guildelüec, back home—even though he desires Guilliadun, too.

Another clue that the interaction is chaste is that after it's over, Guilliadun grows "pale" and sighs—characteristic symptoms of lovesickness. If she were certain of Eliduc's feelings for her, and certainly if they'd had sex, then Guilliadun wouldn't be melancholy with longing.

"I have behaved badly! [...] Here I have deeply loved a girl, Guilliadun, the king's daughter, and she has loved me. If I must leave her thus, one of us will have to die, or perhaps even both. But nevertheless I must go, for my lord has summoned me in a letter and required me by my oath, and my wife as well. [...] If I were to marry my beloved, the Christian religion would not accept it. Things are going badly in all respects."

**Related Characters:** Eliduc (speaker), Guilliadun, Guildelüec

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 118

**Explanation and Analysis**

Eliduc falls in love with Guilliadun and struggles with his inevitable return to Brittany, when he must leave his beloved behind. This quote—in which the knight talks to himself in despair—sums up his competing loyalties.

Eliduc still hasn't technically cheated on his wife, Guildelüec, but he nevertheless feels guilty about the fact that he's fallen for Guilliadun. This is partly because of his continued loyalty to his wife, but also because he's never admitted to Guilliadun that he's already married. While serving Guilliadun's father as a knight, Eliduc has been able to avoid the subject, but now that he's duty-bound to return to the Breton king's aid, the matter comes to a head. He even muses about the possibility of marrying *both* women, but he somewhat wryly admits that the church would never accept this. Though this is a comical understatement, it does prepare for the audience for the story's rather improbable resolution, when Eliduc marries Guilliadun with Guildelüec's blessing.

Eliduc heard what he said and almost went demented with anger. "Son of a whore," he said, "wicked and evil traitor, say no more!" [...] But he held her in his arms and comforted her as best he could [...] She fell face down, quite pale and wan, in a swoon in which she remained, for she did not come round or breathe. He who was taking her away with him truly believed that she was dead.

**Related Characters:** Eliduc (speaker), Guilliadun

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 122

**Explanation and Analysis**

Eliduc eventually returns to England to bring Guilliadun home to France with him, but their voyage turns disastrous. When the ship runs into a storm, the crew panics and urges Eliduc to throw Guilliadun overboard, saying God is judging him for having an affair. Here, both Eliduc and Guilliadun react.

Eliduc, enraged at the sailor who spoke up, quickly throws him overboard. The bigger problem is Guilliadun—she didn't know Eliduc was already married, and the sailor's complaint gave everything away. She promptly falls into a deathlike swoon. Even though the ship survives the storm, Guilliadun's swoon is, by all appearances, a kind of divine judgment on Eliduc. He thinks she's dead and laments bringing her to France under dishonest pretenses. Even though Eliduc and Guilliadun remained chaste all this time, Eliduc's dishonesty is still highlighted as a grave failing, an affront to the young princess even more than to Eliduc's wife. It also builds suspense, since at this point, the audience doesn't know if Guilliadun will ever revive.

With its teeth the weasel picked a flower, bright red in colour, and then quickly returned, placing it in the mouth of its companion, whom the servant had killed, with the result that it quickly recovered. The lady noticed this and shouted to the servant: "Catch it! Throw your stick, good man, do not let it escape!"

**Related Characters:** Guildelüec (speaker), Guilliadun, Eliduc, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 124

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Guilliadun swoons, Eliduc brings her to a remote chapel in the forest, and when Guildelüec notices her husband's frequent disappearances into the woods, she goes to investigate. In the chapel, she weeps for the mysterious girl, then notices two weasels behaving strangely. When her servant kills the first weasel, the second runs into the woods and feeds its companion an apparently magical flower, which brings it back to life.

Watching this bizarre scene, Guildelüec acts quickly. She is a wise and perceptive woman, and she immediately senses that the red flower is the key to reviving Guilliadun, too. Her eagerness to heal Guilliadun also shows her great compassion. She doesn't know who Guilliadun is and even has plenty of reason to believe that her husband loves this stranger instead of her, yet she does everything she can to help the girl.

This is one of the oddest animal scenes in *The Lais of Marie de France*—yet another occasion when animals play a supporting role in human love. Medieval bestiaries (books describing the properties and habits of animals, as well as their moral symbolism) sometimes describe weasels as being able to use medicinal plants, and Marie picks up on that imagery in order to provide a way of healing Guilliadun.

❝ He often kissed the maiden and she him tenderly, for together they were very happy. When the lady saw how the looked, she spoke to her husband and asked him for permission to leave and to separate from him, for she wanted to be a nun and serve God.

**Related Characters:** Eliduc, Guilliadun, Guildelüec, Marie de France

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 125

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Guilliadun is revived from her swoon, Eliduc is overjoyed. Not only that, but Guildelüec sees how happy they look together and decides to let Eliduc marry the other woman instead.

Even though Guildelüec has been established as a selfless, kind, and noble character, this is an unlikely scenario. Even if Guildelüec did agree to a marital separation, Eliduc almost certainly couldn't have remarried. While it wasn't unheard of for a woman to get her husband's permission to enter a convent, the Catholic Church wouldn't have regarded this as grounds for an annulment (basically a declaration that the marriage was never valid), much less grounds for Eliduc to remarry. Both Marie and her audience probably knew this, so the story's conclusion is just a fictitious way of letting Eliduc and Guilliadun wind up together while still showing sympathy to the saint Guildelüec. She also has both Eliduc and Guilliadun enter the religious life after some year of marriage, so perhaps this is her way of saying that even though Eliduc's marriage is a bit morally questionable, all three characters are still admirably devout.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

If someone has received the gift of knowledge and eloquence from God, it's that person's duty to not keep quiet; they should willingly share their talents. A beneficial thing doesn't fully flower until many people know about it and praise it. For example, the "ancients" used to write obscure books so that later generations would have to interpret their meanings.

*It was customary for medieval authors to offer an apology, or defense, for their writing. As a woman author, which was rare at this time, Marie may have deemed this especially necessary. Marie justifies her writing by arguing that those with God-given talents are obligated to share them instead of selfishly hoarding them. Writing allows knowledge to be more widely disseminated and understood, even in generations yet to come. By the "ancients," Marie refers to classical Roman authors—a bold move, since she implicitly puts herself on the same level as these literary giants. The allusion also signals that Marie is unusually educated for a 12th-century woman, bolstering her authority to write.*

In order to "guard against vice," Marie decided to undertake a demanding project—to put "lays" she has heard into verse form. She has worked on these poems late into the night. She dedicates them to the king, begging him not to find this gift presumptuous.

*Marie further defends her writing by suggesting that she wrote her* Lais *in order to occupy herself with something useful instead of drifting into idleness and other "vices." Again, the defense is formulaic, but it shows that as a writer—especially a woman writer—Marie felt it necessary to offer a positive case for her work. She didn't assume it would be regarded as self-evidently valuable. Lays were short, rhyming tales that were typically recited or sung. Marie says that she collected the lays she's heard and wrote them down in narrative verse form. In doing this, she essentially pioneered a literary genre. Marie closes her prologue by appealing to the king—often, a king or noble would commission a written work, but Marie offers this one on her own initiative. It's unknown which king she addresses here, but it could have been England's King Henry II, who reigned in the late 12th century.*

## I. GUIGEMAR

Whoever has a good story is grieved if it isn't told well. Marie invites "my lords" to hear her words. She notes that a talented person often gets slandered by envious people, but that this won't deter her from writing. She intends to briefly tell stories that she knows to be true and that the Bretons have used to compose lays. She will start with an adventure in long-ago Brittany.

*It's not clear whether Marie has specific critics in mind here, but again, she defends her writing against those who would disapprove of it, dismissing them as jealous. She also points out that she won't be making up stories from scratch. Brittany is a region in northwestern France; it shared a Celtic cultural heritage with Britain, and people in these regions exchanged tales, or lays. Marie has collected and rewritten Breton lays in her own style and language (Anglo-Norman, an Old French dialect that would have been spoken in England at the time), and she assures her audience that the stories are true.*

At that time, Brittany is ruled by Hoilas, and the land is often at war. One of the king's barons is a brave and trusted knight named Oridial, who has a beautiful daughter named Noguent and a handsome son named Guigemar. When Guigemar is old enough, his father places him in the service of another king. Later, when Guigemar comes of age, that king knights him, and Guigemar sets off for Flanders seeking renown. In all of France, there is no knight equal to him.

*In spite of their fairy tale elements, some of the* lais *have at least some historical basis. It's possible that Hoilas refers to Duke Hoël II, who ruled Brittany in the mid-1000s. Scholars also speculate that Guigemar might be based on a nobleman called Guihomar II who lived at the time. Either way, it wasn't unusual for a promising young man to be placed in a different household to train as a knight, as Guigemar was in the story.*

There is just one problem with Guigemar—"Nature [has] done him such a grievous wrong" that he has no interest in romance whatsoever. Any lady on Earth would be happy to have him, and many flirt with him without success. Eventually, everyone decides that when it comes to love, Guigemar is a hopeless case.

*Marie presents Guigemar's lack of interest in romance as unnatural, something that places him outside the bounds of normal society—especially as a nobleman, who would be expected to produce heirs so that his title and property could be passed on to future generations. Since lays were typically romances, Guigemar's "flaw" subverts the audience's expectations and introduces a conflict.*

Once, Guigemar goes home to visit his family. After a few weeks, he decides to go hunting. Early in the morning, he and his men come upon a **hind** and its fawn in the forest. The hind is completely white with a stag's antlers. When the hind darts out of the brush, Guigemar fires his bow and strikes the animal in the forehead. The hind falls at once, but the arrow ricochets, shooting Guigemar through the thigh. He falls down behind the suffering animal, which suddenly speaks, cursing Guigemar for mortally wounding it: "May you never find a cure […] until you are cured by a woman" who will suffer terribly for Guigemar's love. Guigemar, the hind says, will suffer for the woman in turn.

*A hind is a female deer. Deer often appear in medieval stories as the objects of knights' hunts, and sometimes, like here, these hunts serve as a pretext to draw characters into a supernatural encounter. White stags were especially common in Arthurian literature and often somehow prompted the knight who slayed the deer to undertake a quest, but they didn't have a consistent symbolism. In this case, the deer itself is apparently enchanted. Guigemar is identified with the slain hind: both of them have literal, physical wounds that represent the metaphorical "wound" of love. The hind's warning builds suspense—since the audience knows that Guigemar has never shown interest in romance, it's uncertain if Guigemar will ever find a woman to cure him.*

Dismayed, Guigemar sends his squire for help and binds his wound with his shirt, wondering what to do. Finally he gets on his horse and follows a path through the woods and out onto a plain, from which he glimpses a ship sitting in the harbor below. The ship has ebony trim and a beautiful silken sail. Puzzled, Guigemar gets off his horse and clambers painfully aboard. To his surprise, there's nobody else on the ship. In the middle of the ship, he finds a luxurious bed made of gold, cypress wood, and ivory and covered with a silk quilt. Marveling at everything, Guigemar lays down on the bed to rest.

*Guigemar seems to be in a helpless situation: he's never loved a woman before, and even if that's possible, where would he find one now? Here, the lays' fairy tale logic becomes evident. The appearance of the luxurious, empty ship, apparently out of nowhere, is never explained, and its connection to the hind's curse isn't clarified. Given the talking hind, however, the audience is prepared to expect that the ship, too, might be enchanted and might have a role in Guigemar's healing.*

By the time Guigemar gets up from the bed, he discovers he can't disembark, as the ship has sailed off onto the high seas. At first he panics, but then he prays to God for protection and goes back to sleep. By evening, the ship reaches an ancient city. The city is ruled by an elderly lord who's married to a beautiful young lady. The lord is quite jealous, as one would expect, "for all old men […] hate to be cuckolded."

*Guigemar's ship is clearly magical, propelled by some supernatural force to an undetermined destination. Though he's also in a weakened state, Guigemar seems to accept the ship's journey as normal within the parameters of his world. Old husbands and young wives were a common trope in medieval literature, and a comic one, as cuckoldry (a man being shamed by his wife's adultery) was often regarded as a satiric element in such literature. Here, in a trope that will be repeated in other stories in the* Lais, *the elderly lord basically expects his wife to cheat on him. Marie's comment is sardonic—what men, old or not,* wouldn't *"hate to be cuckolded"?—but it also anticipates the possibility that this very thing will occur.*

The elderly lord keeps his wife in a thickly walled, closely guarded enclosure in the castle garden; it can only be escaped by boat. The enclosure contains a beautiful chamber whose walls are covered with paintings of Venus. In one painting, Venus is depicted throwing the book "in which Ovid teaches the art of controlling love" into a fire. The young lady isn't totally alone in her prison: the lord has provided her with a maiden companion, his noble and intelligent niece, and the two women are devoted friends. An old priest (who's also a eunuch) guards the enclosure.

*Marie seems to want her audience to feel sympathetic to the young lady's plight. Ovid was an Ancient Roman poet whose works were widely studied and imitated in the medieval period. Marie alludes to Ovid's work* Remedia Amoris, *or* Love's Remedy, *a poem that gives advice on how to avoid lovesickness. Venus was the Roman goddess of love. The fact that the painting depicts Venus* destroying *Ovid's poem communicates that Ovid's advice should be ignored—in other words, that love is worth the pain it brings, and therefore that lovesickness shouldn't be avoided. Because this painting hangs in the young lady's chamber, it's implied that this idea is always present in her environment, and it hints at how she'll later respond to Guigemar. Again, the Ovid reference also serves to show that Marie is well-educated.*

That same day, while in the garden, the young lady and her maiden companion spot the ship coming toward them, and the lady is frightened. The maiden, reassuring her friend, steps aboard the ship and finds the sleeping Guigemar. She assumes he's dead and calls her lady. The lady grieves over the handsome young man, but when she places her hand on his chest, she discovers he's still alive. Just then, he wakes up and greets her, glad to discover he's reached shore. He explains to the lady that he's come from Brittany, and he explains his hunting accident and **the hind**'s curse. He begs the lady for help. In turn, the lady explains her own situation and promises to shelter the knight in her prison until he's healed. He accepts.

*The meeting between Guigemar and the young lady confirms what Marie's audience would have already begun to suspect—that this imprisoned young wife will be the one to heal Guigemar and save his life. But recall that the hind's curse specified that Guigemar would only be healed after he and a woman had suffered for the sake of one another's love. The curse looms over the story and lends an ominous tone to what seems, at first, like a straightforward mutual rescue.*

With difficulty, the women support Guigemar until he's settled into the maiden's bed. They wash his wound and feed him. But by now, the knight feels deeply "wounded" by love. He can't even remember his homeland and can no longer feel the pain of his wound, but he's tormented, nonetheless. The young lady feels the same way.

*Here, the details of the hind's curse start to go into effect. Apparently, his deadliest wound isn't the injury to his leg, but the "wound" of love. Lovesickness overwhelms everything else, including physical suffering. And it seems that, fulfilling the hind's prophecy, the lady does indeed reciprocate Guigemar's feelings.*

That night, Guigemar frets in solitude, realizing that because of the curse, he's bound to suffer no matter what. He constantly thinks of the beautiful young lady; if only he'd known that she loved him, too, his anguish would have been lessened. Meanwhile, the lady also spends a sleepless night pining for him. The maiden, watching, figures out her lady's feelings. So, when the lady goes to chapel the next morning, the maiden goes to Guigemar's bedside. She reassures the sighing knight that his love is reciprocated, and that he should tell the lady the truth; the maiden will do anything to help them.

*Guigemar and the young lady continue to suffer lovesickness, each longing for the other, neither believing that their feelings will be reciprocated. Marie seems to make a point of showing that the young lady is a devout Christian who attends Mass regularly—again making her sympathetic to the audience. In other words, the young lady is virtuous and religiously observant, so even though she's married and starting a relationship with Guigemar would be adulterous, Marie encourages her audience to root for the lady.*

Still lovelorn, the young lady returns from mass, and her maiden urges her to speak to Guigemar. When they greet each other, the knight is afraid to speak of his feelings, since he's a stranger and a foreigner, and he's afraid the lady will reject him. Marie interjects that a person who won't speak up about their illness cannot expect a cure, and that because love is "natural," it's a long-lasting illness. It's different from mere debauchery, like "ignoble courtiers" who "philander." Rather, a worthy lover ought to be faithfully served.

*Marie's interjected commentary is notable here. She draws a distinction between different kinds of love: "philandering," (having casual sexual relationships) and faithful, genuine love, or courtly love. Marie frames the latter as morally superior to the former—even when courtly love involves adultery, as it typically did in lays and other medieval romances. Marie further comments that love—even when it goes against social conventions like marriage—is "natural," and that the only proper way to resolve it is to openly deal with it.*

Finally, love forces Guigemar to speak his feelings. He tells the young lady that he's dying of his longing for her, and that if she refuses to love him, he'll die. She lightly replies that such a matter can't be decided hastily. Guigemar begs her to be merciful and bring his suffering to an end, and when she sees he's telling the truth, she readily "grant[ed] him her love." They kiss and lay together talking. "May the final act," Marie says, "give them pleasure."

*Love is presented as an external force that ultimately can't be resisted. In this case, Guigemar takes the initiative to speak his feelings, and the lady playfully resists at first. But their suffering is quickly resolved when they not only admit their mutual attraction but consummate their feelings sexually. In courtly literature, expressions like "granted[] him her love" and "the final act" are thinly veiled euphemisms for sex. Though extramarital relations and adultery were widely regarded as morally wrong in Marie's world, courtly literature used euphemisms to present it as acceptable and even sympathetic, as Marie does here.*

Guigemar stays with the young lady for a year and a half, and it's a happy time. But "fortune […] soon turn[s] her wheel," and eventually, the couple is discovered. One summer day, while the two lie kissing, the lady predicts that she's going to lose Guigemar soon, and that she wants to either die along with him or remain alone with her grief forever. To assure her that he will never leave her and take another lover, Guigemar gives her his shirt in pledge; the lady knots the shirt's tailpiece and makes him promise that he will only love the woman who can untie it. He promises, and in return, he makes her promise to wear a belt around her loins; she can only love the man who can open the buckle without tearing the belt. She promises.

*Lady Fortune was a common image in medieval literature. When she "turn[ed] her wheel," those on top could suddenly find themselves on the bottom—as Guigemar and the young lady do here, abruptly going from blissfully in love to facing adversity. Love tokens were also common in medieval literature. Often these were things like rings or garments that lovers exchanged; here, the tokens specifically serve to deter any other lovers. It's not clear whether the young lady's belt is actually meant to prevent her from having sex with anyone else, but the fact that it goes around her "loins" suggests so. Even in a case of mutual love, Guigemar, like the elderly lord, deems it necessary to lock up his lover in a way.*

That same day, the couple is discovered by a crafty chamberlain, sent by the elderly lord, who peeks through the chamber window. The lord is heartbroken when he hears of their affair, and he takes a few trusted men with him to break down the chamber door. When he sees Guigemar inside, he orders the knight killed, but Guigemar fearlessly wields a wooden pole, ready to maim anyone who gets close. He explains **the hind**'s prophesy, and the lord doesn't believe him—but says that if there's a ship as the knight claims, he'd better get on it. They find the ship in the harbor, and the lord and his men put Guigemar aboard. The ship sets sail.

*Now it becomes clear what Marie meant by the turning of Fortune's wheel, as the young lady's prediction comes true, and the happy couple are found out. Though the old man comes across somewhat sympathetically here, it's worth remembering that a year and a half has passed since Guigemar's arrival—during which time the elderly lord has been oblivious to his wife's affair. This fact would have made him a laughable cuckold in the eyes of Marie's audience, not to mention an inattentive husband. For the time being, however, the elderly lord seems to prevail, as Guigemar is forced off the island. But knowing the ship's magical properties, the audience can hope it will somehow help Guigemar again.*

As Guigemar sails, he laments and prays that if he'll never see the young lady again, then God will just let him die quickly. However, the ship soon docks at Guigemar's homeland, and he disembarks. He sees a young man who once served him, and the youth offers Guigemar a horse for his journey home, overjoyed that Guigemar is still alive. But even as his friends celebrate, Guigemar continues grieving, and as time goes on, he refuses to marry. Guigemar's story travels throughout Brittany, and many women try to untie the knot in Guigemar's shirt, but nobody succeeds.

*At first, the fact that the ship returns Guigemar to Brittany suggests that his adventure is over, and that his love affair with the young lady will go unresolved. Upon his return, as far as it looks to everyone else, Guigemar hasn't changed: he is still averse to love, he refuses to get married, and his knotted shirt now serves as an extra deterrent. But the audience knows that everything has changed for Guigemar who, once wounded by love, can never go back to the way he was before.*

Meanwhile, the elderly lord has imprisoned the young lady in a marble tower, and she suffers there, grieving for Guigemar, for over two years. At one point, distraught, she decides to drown herself at the spot where Guigemar set sail. She finds the tower door unlocked, but when she reaches the harbor, she finds the ship sitting there. As soon as she boards, the ship whisks her away to Brittany and deposits her beneath a big castle.

*In response to what's happened, the elderly lord puts the young lady under a stricter guard than before. This seems arbitrarily cruel, since as the story established earlier, the island can only be escaped by boat. But the lord didn't count on the magical ship's intervention. This sequence of events suggests that magic or the supernatural is on the lovers' side, which again encourages the audience to root for them, too.*

The castle's lord, Meriaduc, is standing at a window when the ship arrives and is delighted to find the beautiful young lady aboard. He doesn't know how she got there, but he can see that she's noble, and he falls in love with her immediately. He entrusts the lady to his sister's care, and she is well looked after and honored, but she remains depressed, even when Meriaduc approaches her to beg for her love. She shows him her belt and explains she can only love the man capable of undoing it. Angrily, Meriaduc tells her about the knight with the knotted shirt, at which point she faints. Meriaduc then tries to undo the belt buckle, but he fails. He summons many knights to try, but they have no luck, either.

*A new character is introduced, and Meriaduc's role in Guigemar's and the young lady's relationship isn't clear at first. In fact, he quickly gets established as not just an obstacle, but an adversary. Though Marie doesn't come right out and say so, she implies that when the young lady faints and Meriaduc tries and fails to undo her belt, he was attempting to rape her. This makes it even crueler that he keeps bringing in other knights to try the same thing. But it now appears that Guigemar's belt serves a defensive function for her.*

Things go on like this for a long time until, one day, Meriaduc holds a tournament against a neighboring enemy. Meriaduc invites his friend Guigemar to come, and Guigemar duly arrives with many knights of his own. Then Meriaduc summons the young lady to the hall, and when she hears Guigemar's name, she faints. Looking at her, Guigemar asks if it can possibly be his beautiful lady. He urges her to untie the knot in his shirt, and she does so easily, but Guigemar is still afraid to hope. When he touches her hips, he feels the belt and realizes it's truly her. The lady tells him about her imprisonment and sufferings and, becoming joyful, tells Guigemar to take her away.

*There's dramatic irony in the fact that Meriaduc invites Guigemar to the tournament, since the audience knows what Meriaduc doesn't: that the imprisoned young lady is the one Guigemar loves. Their reunion is dramatic; they don't instantly recognize each other out in the ordinary world, but the love tokens do their job and confirm their respective identities. (This also confirms that the lady's belt is a type of undergarment, since Guigemar clearly isn't inclined to unbuckle it in public.)*

When Guigemar declares his intention to take the lady away from Meriaduc, Meriaduc refuses to let her go. At once, Guigemar issues Meriaduc a challenge and rides with his knights to Meriaduc's enemy's castle. The next day, Guigemar's men and the enemy's men ride together to attack Meriaduc's castle and the surrounding town. Eventually, after a siege, Guigemar succeeds in capturing the castle and killing Meriaduc. Then, he joyfully claims his beloved young lady. The lay of *Guigemar*, performed on harp and rote, was composed from this tale.

*Before the reunited couple can run off together, however, there's unfinished business to resolve. Since Meriaduc is apparently unwilling to let the young lady go, the men resort to combat. Notice that, after Guigemar wins her hand once and for all, the elderly lord is never heard from again. This implies that, in Marie's view, mutual love wins out over all, even if the couple can't get married (since the young lady is still technically the old lord's wife). On another note, Marie assumes that her lay should be sung rather than simply read or recited: it's meant to entertain a larger audience than just a private reader.*

## II. EQUITAN

Marie will now tell the story of Equitan—lord of Nantes, justiciary, and king—as preserved in one of the Breton lays. In the story, Equitan is beloved in Brittany and has a fine reputation. He's also devoted to chivalry. Unless there's a war going on, Equitan spends all his time hunting and pursuing other pleasures. A trusted seneschal governs his territory for him.

*In this lay, Marie immediately establishes a conflict between the carefree King Equitan and his loyal seneschal. Seneschals were officials who managed practical matters for households, courts, or kingdoms. They sometimes appeared in lays as villains because, in their administrative role in royal households, they typically controlled the entertainment that would be permitted to take place in court—leading to conflict with writers and performers of lays. Marie, however, frames Equitan's seneschal as comically oblivious rather than wicked. It's unclear why she's sympathetic to this seneschal, but it might be more that he serves as a foil for the misbehaving king and the seneschal's wife.*

The seneschal's wife is beautiful but will one day bring misfortune on the kingdom. Hearing of her beauty, Equitan often sends the lady gifts, and even though they've never met, he develops strong feelings for her. Hoping to meet her, Equitan goes hunting near her castle and lodges with the seneschal that night. When he has the chance to speak with her, Equitan finds the lady as beautiful, noble, wise, and cheerful as he'd hoped.

*Marie makes it clear from the beginning that this story isn't going to end happily, though she doesn't yet reveal how. It's common in lays for couples to fall in love from a distance, without having laid eyes on each other. That's what happens between Equitan and his seneschal's wife, but Equitan immediately plays with fire by seizing on an opportunity to visit the wife in person.*

At this point, Love "let[s] fly […] an arrow" which wounds Equitan deeply. Wisdom and logic are no longer of any effect. He is overcome with grief, staying up all night berating himself for falling in love with his faithful seneschal's wife. Yet it seems to him that if the seneschal's wife had no lover, that would be a worse fate than betraying his seneschal. After all, without a true love, she wouldn't be a true courtly lady. Equitan figures that if the seneschal finds out, he won't be too upset and will even be willing to share his wife.

*As in "Guigemar," love is personified as a force that "wounds" its objects, who can't escape or resist its impact. Equitan's rationalization for pursuing the seneschal's wife as a lover is interesting for what it reveals about courtly love ideals. By this logic, a "courtly lady" should be pursued by a lover. It's not clear whether Equitan really believes this (especially that the seneschal would happily go along with it); it's possible that through Equitan's foolishness, Marie is mocking the ideal. In any case, it's clear to the audience that Equitan is talking himself into doing something he believes is wrong.*

Equitan lies awake all night and gets up to go hunting in the morning, but he soon returns to the castle, complaining of a fever. Not realizing that his wife is the cause of Equitan's distress, the seneschal sends her to cheer up their ailing guest. Equitan takes this opportunity to confess his feelings to the seneschal's wife and explain that he's dying because of her. The lady replies that she needs time to think. She doesn't consider herself wealthy enough to be worthy of such a noble king's passion.

*It's not clear if Equitan is really sick, is making up an excuse, or—more plausibly, given the genre—is suffering the effects of lovesickness. The oblivious seneschal faithfully "helps" by sending his wife right into the king's bedchamber. However, things don't immediately go as Equitan hopes since, whether for appearance's sake or from genuine concern, the seneschal's wife voices some objections.*

The seneschal's wife thinks that if Equitan "had [his] way" with her, he'd soon abandon her—and even if she loved him in return, things wouldn't be equal between them, since he's a king and she's his vassal's wife. Inevitably, then, he'd expect "to be the lord and master in love" as well as in status. Love, she explains, can only be honorable if it's based on equality. If anyone loves someone above their station, they're just asking for trouble.

*Equitan and the seneschal's wife have an interesting exchange, almost a debate, about the ideals of courtly love. Typically, in a courtly love relationship, a knight would pursue a higher-status lady. But the opposite is happening here, and the seneschal's wife suspects that no matter how sincere his feels at first, Equitan would inevitably assert his higher class status in the end.*

Equitan begs the lady not to talk this way. Men who behave that way, he argues, aren't truly courtly. Any courtly lady who's faithful in love deserves to be loved by a rich prince, even if she lacks material riches herself. Equitan offers himself to the seneschal's wife, telling her to regard him as her vassal and promising to do whatever she wishes. Finally the lady relents, promises her love, and they have sex. They also exchange rings. Later, this union will result in both their deaths.

*In his turn, Equitan turns the seneschal's wife's arguments back on her. He argues that a man who behaved the way the lady describes wouldn't be a true courtly gentleman anyway, and that for the purposes of their love, he will be her "vassal," or servant. This seems to satisfy the seneschal's wife, and the couple fatefully consummates their love.*

For a long time, the couple loves each other faithfully and in secret. Whenever they meet, Equitan tells everyone he is being bled and needs his privacy; nobody dares enter his bedchamber. The seneschal is oblivious, focused on carrying out court business, but other courtiers gossip about the king's unwillingness to marry, and the seneschal's wife worries that their affair is doomed. One day, while visiting the king, the lady weeps in fear that he will marry a princess and abandon her. The king promises that this will never happen, and that if the seneschal died, he would marry her and make her his queen.

*For the time being, the couple successfully carries out their relationship in secret, aided by the busy seneschal's comical oblivion. There are some similarities to "Guigemar" here: Equitan's lack of interest in marriage arouses concern like Guigemar's did. But because he's a king, the concerns are even more pronounced: if he fails to marry, the kingdom won't have an heir. The seneschal's wife has different concerns—she fears that the kingdom's expectations will wear Equitan down, and that he'll leave her in the end.*

Comforted by this, the seneschal's wife says that if Equitan promises not to abandon her and will give her his aid, she will bring about the seneschal's death. He agrees. The lady tells the king to be bled and then take a bath on a certain day; she will arrange for the seneschal to join him to keep him company. Two heated bathtubs will be brought in, and the water in the seneschal's bath will be made boiling hot so that the seneschal will be scalded to death as soon as he steps into the tub. Then the king will be able to summon his vassals and show that the seneschal died accidentally.

*Though Equitan and the lady's relationship started out with a lofty discussion of courtly love, it takes an unexpectedly coarse turn here, undercutting genre expectations. The seneschal's wife is so concerned about losing Equitan that she decides killing off her husband is the solution. Bleeding was a medical procedure that was used as a preventative measure; in fact, it was something like a modern spa treatment, with both a recreational and a wellness aspect. In this case, the boiling water might symbolize uncontrolled passion, a recurrent concern in the lays.*

Several weeks later, Equitan carries out the plan, arranging to be bled at the seneschal's castle as a precaution against illness. The seneschal agrees to join the king for a bath. The seneschal's wife has two tubs brought in, with boiling water for the seneschal's bath. Before the seneschal arrives, the lady comes in to talk to the king, and they have sex. While they're lying there together, the seneschal suddenly returns and bangs on the door so forcefully that it opens, revealing the guilty couple. Seeing the seneschal approaching, Equitan panics and jumps naked into the scalding tub, dying instantly. When the seneschal sees what's happened, he grabs his wife and throws her head-first into the scalding tub, too, killing her. Any reasonable person, Marie says, should be able to learn a lesson from this tale: "Evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another's misfortune."

*Marie follows the familiar folktale pattern of the trickster—in this case, both Equitan and the seneschal's wife—getting tricked themselves in the end. And their plan is ultimately foiled because they can't control themselves and start having sex just before the plan goes into action. The couple's love is socially disruptive on multiple levels: the king betrays his seneschal's loyalty; the seneschal's wife betrays her marriage vows; and, by refusing to marry, Equitan will fail to produce an heir. Even though Marie portrays the seneschal as a bit of a laughingstock, she seems to want her audience to sympathize with him overall. Justice is served decisively, and yet Marie's moral is pretty restrained: she doesn't denounce love between people of different social classes, for example, but warns that if people do shifty things in pursuit of their love, they should be aware that bad things could happen to them as a result.*

## III. LE FRESNE

Once upon a time in Brittany, there were two rich, valiant knights who were neighbors. The wife of one of the knights conceives and gives birth to twin sons. Her husband, elated, sends an announcement to his neighbor, promising that the knight can be godfather to one of the babies, who will be named after him. When the knight receives the message, he's delighted, but his arrogant, slanderous wife reacts differently. In front of the whole household, she declares that the other knight and his wife should be ashamed—everyone knows that when a woman gives birth to two sons at once, it's because two men are the cause of it. Her husband rebukes her for attacking her neighbor's reputation this way.

*The association of conceiving twins with infidelity might have been a medieval folk belief, and it shows up in other literature from the period, though Marie clearly shows here that she thinks this old wives' tale is nonsense. In this case, such slander would be especially troublesome because, in addition to the implied adultery, it would mean that it would be difficult to determine which twin was a man's rightful heir. At this point, though, it's not clear what effect the neighbor wife's slander will have.*

When the messenger returns to the other knight, he reports the slanderous wife's claim. Disturbed, the knight becomes mistrustful of his wife and starts keeping a close watch on her, though she doesn't deserve it.

*Even though the slanderous wife's accusation sounds silly, Marie suggests that it would've been legitimately concerning to an audience in her day. In any case, it helps undermine the neighbors' marriage.*

That same year, however, the slandered lady is avenged: her accuser *also* gets pregnant with twins. When the slanderous wife gives birth to twin girls, she's greatly distressed, knowing her husband and relatives will never believe her innocence now—she is paying the price for slandering all women. She decides that the only solution is to murder one of the children. She would rather face God's judgment for this act in the future than face shame before her peers now.

*The slanderous wife's accusation comes back to bite her, and Marie interprets this as the wife's punishment for speaking against other women in general. Panicked, the wife can't bear to be accused of adultery in her turn and believes she has no alternative but to dispose of one of the children before the second baby's existence becomes known. As happened to her neighbor, she knows the shame for the supposed adultery would fall on her alone.*

The slanderous wife's faithful maid hears her crying and comforts her, promising to take one of the baby girls away and abandon her at a church, where some virtuous person may find and raise her. The lady agrees, so they wrap the baby in fine blankets, including a brocade from Constantinople, and also attach a ring to her arm. The ring is pure gold with a ruby setting, so whoever finds the baby will know she's of noble birth. That night, under cover of darkness, the maid carries the baby out of town and through a forest. She follows the sound of a dog's barking to another town, which houses a wealthy abbey. When the maid sees the beautiful abbey, she drops to her knees and prays for God's protection over the baby. Then she places the baby in the boughs of a nearby ash-tree and returns home.

*Though child abandonment was an accepted way of dealing with unwanted children in many ancient societies, it was frowned upon in medieval Europe—hence the maid's secrecy in hiding the infant at night. Constantinople was quite far from Northern Europe, but it basically stands for any incredibly far off, wealthy, luxurious city. Only a wealthy nobleman could afford a brocade from such a mythically rich place. And even though the wife never wants the baby to be traced back to her, she still wants to be sure the child is recognized as possessing noble status—suggesting that if this is known, her baby will be treated much better than if she were regarded as a poor orphan.*

Very early in the morning, the abbey's porter gets up to light the church candles for services. He spots the luxurious garments in the ash-tree and finds the baby wrapped inside. Thanking God, he takes the baby home to his widowed daughter, who's currently nursing her own baby. His daughter immediately warms the baby, bathes her, and nurses her. When they notice the ring attached to the baby's arm and the expensive cloths in which she is wrapped, they realize she's of noble birth. Later that day, however, the porter shows the infant to the abbess, and the abbess insists on raising the child as her own niece. Because she was found in an ash-tree, the baby is called Le Fresne.

*The motif of an identifying ring may have been something Marie picked up from a medieval French version of Virgil's* Aeneid, *again showing her familiarity with classical writings and her creativity in weaving allusions into her own work. As the slanderous wife had hoped, the abandoned baby is quickly found. Furthermore, the signs of her noble status mean that she's quickly moved from a mere porter's household to the much more privileged atmosphere of a rich abbey. "Le Fresne" comes from the French* le frêne, *which means "ash."*

Le Fresne grows up in the abbey. By the time she comes of age, Le Fresne is both beautiful and cultivated in her speech, and everyone loves her. Meanwhile, an excellent lord names Gurun is living in Dol. When Gurun hears about Le Fresne, he immediately begins to love her. On his way home from a tournament, he detours to the abbey and asks to see the girl. He is delighted with her beauty, education, and courtliness, but he knows that if he drops by the abbey too often to visit her, the abbess will grow suspicious. So Gurun thinks of a solution: he will enrich the abbey with much of his wealth and land, becoming its lord. That will give him an excuse to visit as much as he wants.

*Here is another instance of a couple falling in love without ever having seen each other first. In this case, Gurun's lordly wealth provides the means to secure Le Fresne for himself—even to the extent of becoming the abbey's patron just so he has a pretext for seeing her as often as he wants. This could also be Marie's veiled remark on the fact that worldly wealth could easily infiltrate even an abbey (a point that wouldn't have been disputed much in her day).*


Gurun talks to Le Fresne often, and once he's assured of her love, he persuades her to go away with him—after all, if she gets pregnant while living at the abbey, her aunt the abbess will be furious. Le Fresne agrees to join Gurun at his castle, taking her fancy brocade and ring along with her, storing them in a casket. Everyone at Gurun's castle loves Le Fresne. However, his knights criticize him for not taking a noble wife instead; Le Fresne can't give him a legitimate heir, after all.

*Gurun's argument clearly implies that he and Le Fresne are having sex regularly—Marie seems to take it for granted that this is what happens when people fall in love, even if one of them lives in a convent. But going to live with Gurun doesn't solve Le Fresne's problem; since she's a penniless orphan as far as anyone knows, she isn't viewed as a suitable wife for a lord. But it seems like Le Fresne's treasures, like the brocade, will end up being significant somehow.*


Eventually, Gurun is persuaded to seek a wife. On his knights' advice, he approaches a wealthy maiden named La Codre on a nearby estate. The knights point out that "On the hazel there are nuts to be enjoyed, but the ash never bears fruit." Unfortunately, nobody realizes that the two young women are twins. Le Fresne is kept hidden from Gurun's bride, and though unhappy about his marriage, she continues to serve him and his people as before.

*Gurun's attitude is an interesting contrast with other examples of courtly love in the* lais*—unlike, say, Equitan, he thinks his beloved's social status is a sufficient reason to break off their relationship and pursue marriage with a noblewoman instead.* La Codre *means "hazelnut tree," and* Le Fresne *means "ash," so the knights' quip basically means that La Codre will bear good offspring for Gurun, while a relationship with Le Fresne is a dead end. The irony, as the audience knows, is that Le Fresne's social status is the same as La Codre's due to their noble birth.*

On the day of Gurun's wedding, all his friends show up, as well as the Archbishop of Dol. La Codre's mother, the slanderous wife, comes, too, but she's worried that Gurun's lover will get between him and her daughter. But after the festivities, when La Codre and her mother are in the bedchamber, the mother marvels that Le Fresne (who's there serving the bride, and whom the mother doesn't recognize) seems like such a lovely person; she almost wishes that Gurun hadn't been taken away from Le Fresne.

*Gurun's wedding is a big event, as indicated by the fact that the Archbishop presides over it. At this point, the slanderous wife reenters the story. Even with her jealous character, Le Fresne's mother finds it difficult to resent Le Fresne, seeming to recognize that if status weren't an issue, Le Fresne would make a better wife for Gurun. But at this point, it seems to be too late.*

That night, when the marriage bed is being prepared, Le Fresne shows the chamberlains how Gurun likes the bed to be made, since she's seen it done many times. She doesn't think the sheet is nice enough, so she pulls out her old brocade and covers the bed with it. Later, when it's time for bed, the slanderous wife brings La Codre into the bedchamber and notices the brocade. She's never seen another one like it. Trembling, she asks Le Fresne where it came from, and Le Fresne tells her it was given to her by her aunt, the abbess. She also shows her the ring that was left with her as an abandoned baby. The mother declares, "You are my daughter, fair friend!" and faints.

*This passage is rather poignant, since Le Fresne is giving up her place as Gurun's lover without complaint and even goes out of her way to make things nice for the newlyweds. Then her old baby blanket, the fancy brocade from Constantinople, resurfaces. Like the love tokens in "Guigemar," the brocade helps Le Fresne's mother recognize Le Fresne as her daughter. The reunion is a great shock, since Le Fresne's mother presumably hasn't seen or received word of her for all this time.*

When she revives, Le Fresne's mother sends for her husband and tells him the whole story, since he'd played no part in baby Le Fresne's abandonment. Instead of blaming his wife, he rejoices and greets Le Fresne as his daughter. Then he and the archbishop go to Gurun and explain everything to him. They all agree that the archbishop should separate Gurun and La Codre the next day, so that Gurun can marry his beloved Le Fresne. Their marriage is duly celebrated the next day, and La Codre goes home with her parents. She later makes a rich marriage of her own.

*The implication here is that Gurun and La Codre do not consummate their marriage on the wedding night, so the archbishop can, by church law, easily annul their marriage (declare that it was never valid) the next day. This story has a happy ending for most of the characters: the loving couple gets to marry after all. (And the story implies that rank really* is *important after all, since if Le Fresne's noble identity hadn't been found out, nothing would have changed.) With this joyful reunion, even Le Fresne's mother isn't harshly judged for her terrible behavior back when Le Fresne was born. La Codre's ending is a bit ambiguous, however—it seems her feelings are never consulted, either about her initial marriage or the immediate annulment.*

## IV. BISCLAVRET

Marie now tells the lay *Bisclavret*, as it's called in Breton, or *Garwaf*, as the Normans call it. It used to be that men sometimes turned into werewolves, ferocious, forest-dwelling beasts. Once, a respected baron named Bisclavret lived in Brittany with his beautiful wife. But Bisclavret's wife is worried: each week, her husband disappears for three full days, and nobody knows where he goes. One day, the lady confronts her husband about this, admitting she's afraid that he has a lover. He denies this, but he claims he can't tell her the truth about where he goes, or else he'll be gravely harmed.

*"Bisclavret" means "the werewolf." This lay shares many details with another Breton lay called "Melion," in which a woman helps her husband transform into a werewolf and then elopes with another man; the two stories probably came from the same source. It's never explained exactly how or why the baron Bisclavret becomes a werewolf every week. Marie takes for granted that her audience accepts the existence of werewolves, as it was a widespread medieval folk belief.*

Bisclavret's wife persists, however, and finally, Bisclavret reveals the whole story: he becomes a werewolf. Each week, he disappears into the depths of the forest in order to feed. When he transforms into a werewolf, he goes around naked, leaving his clothes in a secret location. He can't tell her where, because if he were unable to recover his clothes, he would have to remain a werewolf forever. But the lady continues pestering her husband, saying that unless he tells her all the details, it will seem like he doesn't truly love her. He finally tells her that there's an old chapel near the wood, and he hides his clothes in a hollow stone there.

*The biggest problem with Bisclavret's werewolf identity is the conflict it creates in his marriage. It's implied that Bisclavret doesn't really trust his wife; if he did, why wouldn't he tell her where his clothes are kept? Bisclavret's wife is already portrayed somewhat unfavorably: she nags Bisclavret relentlessly, she's mistrustful, and it doesn't seem like Bisclavret really minds leaving her behind each week.*

Bisclavret's wife is so disturbed by this story that she decides she must separate from her husband. She sends a message to a knight who's been wooing her for a long time. She's never responded to his advances before, but now she offers to become his mistress. When they're together, she tells him everything about her husband the werewolf. Then she sends her lover in search of Bisclavret's clothes, and after the knight finds and takes them, Bisclavret seems to have disappeared for good. Then the knight and the lady get married.

*Again, it seems likely that Bisclavret's marriage is already on shaky ground, at least judging from his wife's eagerness to separate. In fact, it seems like she's been waiting for an excuse to get together with her wooer, and the opportunity for revenge on Bisclavret seems like a great opportunity. She uses her lover to cruelly force Bisclavret to remain a werewolf and abandon her marriage.*

A whole year passes. One day the king goes hunting in the forest, and his hounds sniff out Bisclavret and pursue him mercilessly. But just as the dogs are about to destroy the werewolf, Bisclavret runs up to the king and starts kissing his foot. Astonished, the king sees that the beast has human intelligence and takes it under his protection. Bisclavret goes to live at the king's castle, where he's well-treated and is greatly devoted to the king.

*The details Marie gives about Bisclavret suggest that he isn't a typical, bloodthirsty werewolf. While he looks like a beast and lives in the forest, he retains human characteristics and a distinctly mild personality. Marie wants her readers to be sympathetic to the werewolf, even though it seemed at first like he was being set up as an antagonist.*

When the king holds a festival, people come from all the surrounding fiefs to celebrate. Among them is Bisclavret's wife's lover (now her second husband). As soon as this knight arrives, Bisclavret sinks his teeth into him and would have killed him if the king hadn't threatened Bisclavret with a stick. Everyone is shocked, because the wolf is normally so gentle; they figure he wouldn't have attacked the knight without good reason. At the end of the festival, the knight is one of the first to go; "no wonder Bisclavret hated him."

*It's clear from this passage that Bisclavret still retains human memories and intelligence to some degree. He apparently recognizes his ex-wife's lover as the one responsible for his current state, or at least knows that the man now claims Bisclavret's wife as his own. There's a humorous note in Marie's aside, that Bisclavret obviously hates the man because of his rudeness in leaving the party early.*

Soon after this, the king goes into the forest with Bisclavret at his side. On the way home, he lodges in the region, and Bisclavret's ex-wife goes to visit the king with an expensive present. As soon as Bisclavret sees her, he charges her and tears the nose right off her face. Everyone is outraged, but before anyone can kill the wolf, a wise man advises the king to look into this matter—the wolf clearly has something against this lady. The king agrees, takes the lady away, and has her tortured. The lady quickly reveals everything she knows about Bisclavret and everything she and her lover did to him. The king makes her bring Bisclavret's clothes. At first, the wolf ignores the clothes, so they leave him in the king's bedchamber to give him privacy.

*When Bisclavret encounters his ex-wife, his violence escalates to a shocking degree as he disfigures her. It's notable that everyone ultimately sympathizes with the wolf more than the woman—the wolf is regarded as justified in whatever he does to her, even when nobody else has a reason to suspect Bisclavret's wife of anything. It seems she's regarded as even more subhuman than the werewolf. The use of torture to force a confession, though not uncommon at the time, supports this idea. Bisclavret, meanwhile, behaves with a human-like sense of dignity, even wanting privacy.*

Later, when the king returns, he finds the human Bisclavret sound asleep on his bed. The king embraces Bisclavret, restores his lands to him, and banishes Bisclavret's ex-wife from the region, along with her lover. Together, Bisclavret's ex-wife and her lover have many children, who are always recognizable by their appearance: many of the women in that family are born without noses.

*Marie seems to want her audience to see her characters' fates as just. In particular, the ex-wife's disfigurement, banishment, and their effects on her offspring are supposed to be a just penalty for her betrayal of her husband. Adulterous spouses are sympathetic elsewhere in the Lais, but Bisclavret's wife, much like the seneschal's wife, is condemned for tricking and wishing harm on an innocent husband. The daughters' nose-less condition obviously doesn't make sense from the perspective of modern genetics, but that isn't the point here.*

## V. LANVAL

King Arthur is staying at Carlisle while the Scots and the Picts are threatening the country of Logres. While there, he gives lavish gifts to all the knights of the Round Table, except for one—Lanval—whom he's forgotten about. In fact, because Lanval is so brave, generous, and beautiful, nobody likes him, and the other knights secretly wish something bad would happen to him. Far from his native country, Lanval is poor and despondent.

*"Lanval" is the only one of the lays that takes place in King Arthur's court. Lanval, or Launfal, is one of the lesser-known knights in the Arthurian literary tradition. If there was a historical King Arthur at the heart of that tradition, his origins are lost to history. Medieval romances portrayed him as a king of Britain in the fifth or sixth century, surrounded by a fellowship of knights known as the Round Table who defended Arthur's kingdom and undertook various quests. Unlike the other knights, Lanval stands out because he doesn't have money—perhaps he's a younger son and has already spent what little he's inherited. Still, Lanval has many virtues that provoke others' jealousy.*

One day Lanval rides through a meadow and stops to let his horse roll in the grass. While he's resting there, he sees two purple-clad damsels approaching, one carrying golden dishes and the other carrying a towel. They invite Lanval to their lady's tent, an extravagant structure topped with a golden eagle. Inside, a beautiful fairy lady rests among priceless linens, wearing only her shift. The lady tells Lanval that she has traveled from her own country in search of him and that she loves him above all else. Lanval promptly offers to devote himself to the lady. The lady then offers to give Lanval whatever he wishes; no matter how much he spends, she will grant him yet more gold and silver. The only catch is that he must keep their love a secret.

*Lanval encounters the lady outside the setting of King Arthur's court: in a meadow, a kind of in-between place set apart from civilization, where magical things can happen. This setting contrasts sharply with Lanval's situation at court, where he's overlooked and underprivileged. Here, the lady seeks him out, desires him, and enriches him. This is a typical courtly love scenario: a down-on-his-luck, lower-status knight declaring his love for a lofty lady. A "shift" is basically a slip. It's also implied in this encounter that Lanval and the lady have sex. It all seems too good to be true, and Marie hints that keeping his love secret might be difficult for Lanval.*

Lanval and the fairy lady linger together until evening, but before he goes, the lady tells him that whenever he wishes to see her, he just has to think of her, and she'll be there. The lady's damsels dress him in fancy clothes and serve him a lavish meal before he returns to the city. That night, Lanval richly entertains his fellow knights, though nobody understands how he manages this because he's known to be poor. He even does many generous deeds, like freeing prisoners and clothing jongleurs. As time passes, Lanval has great joy because he's able to see his beloved whenever he wants.

*Jongleurs recited stories and poems in court, and they tended to be poor, so Lanval's gesture is very generous—and perhaps Marie chose to highlight it because she herself was a writer. Lanval has undergone such a dramatic reversal of fortune that his relationship to his fellow knights and his society as a whole has dramatically changed, too. He's no longer looked down on others, but instead benefits them.*

Sometime later that year, a large group of knights, including Gawain and Ywain, is relaxing in the queen's garden. Gawain notices that Lanval is missing and insists that he be brought to join them, since he's so generous and courtly. Meanwhile, the queen and a large number of her ladies join the knights in the garden. While the other knights enjoy the ladies' company, however, Lanval withdraws, only wanting to embrace his own beloved. Seeing this, the queen sits with Lanval and offers him her love. But when Lanval refuses, the queen gets mad and accuses him of not desiring women at all; he probably enjoys himself with young men instead.

*In the Arthurian literary tradition, Arthur's queen is named Guinevere, though she isn't directly named in Marie's telling. Here, as in other Arthurian literature, the queen is portrayed as flirtatious and prideful, more concerned about her own reputation than her faithfulness to her husband, Arthur. In the Middle Ages, the traditional story of Guinevere's adulterous affair with Lancelot, another Knight of the Round Table, was widely known. Gawain was also well-known in the Arthurian tradition, renowned as the most courteous of knights. That seems to be borne out in his kindness to Lanval here. However, Lanval's loyalty to his beloved makes him an awkward fit in King Arthur's court, as he rejects the other knights' carefree flirting—and fatefully rejects Guinevere's advances, too.*

In response to the queen's accusation, Lanval quickly says something he comes to regret: that he enjoys the love of a fairy lady he prizes above all others, and that even the poorest of that lady's servant girls is more beautiful than the queen. Humiliated, the queen retreats to her bed, and when King Arthur returns, she tells him that Lanval has shamed her—he asked for her love, she claims, and when she refused him, he insulted her. The king angrily swears that unless Lanval can defend himself, he'll be executed. He sends for Lanval who, meanwhile, has been desperately calling for his beloved, but to no avail.

*The queen fulfills the role of the temptress, and Lanval fulfills the role of the man who valiantly resists temptation. Stories like this were common in medieval literature: a woman sexually propositions a man, gets rejected, and later makes up an accusation against him in revenge. It's also ironic that King Arthur defends his queen, since she was the one willing to be unfaithful to* him. *In any case, things look bad for Lanval—he's broken his promise to the fairy lady to keep their affair secret.*

When Lanval is brought before the king, he's so despondent that he wishes for death. Still, he denies the accusation that he sought the queen's love, though he admits that his boast about his lady's beauty is true. King Arthur decides that the matter will have to be decided by trial and allows Gawain to stand bail for Lanval in the meantime. On the appointed day, all the king's barons assemble to discuss Lanval's plight. They decide that if Lanval's beloved comes forward and what Lanval said about her proves true, they will pardon him.

*Lanval figures that because he's broken his promise to the fairy lady, she won't come when he calls, and there's no hope of his being vindicated. King Arthur shows his fairness as a king in that, even though he's furious at the supposed insult to his wife, he insists on a fair trial.*

Lanval says this won't be possible, but before the barons can banish him, they see two purple-clad damsels approaching on horseback. They ask Arthur to provide lodgings for their lady, which he grants. The knights are all delighted at the sight of these women, but Lanval says he doesn't know who they are. When the barons resume their deliberations, they're soon interrupted by two silk-clad maidens riding down the street on Spanish mules. They, too, ask for lodgings, and the king hastily sends them to join the other women; this is taking too long, and the queen is growing impatient.

*Drama mounts as it looks like Lanval's lover won't come forward to vindicate him at trial. The appearance of the two different sets of maidens is a little confusing, but presumably all these damsels serve the fairy lady. Their interruptions of the trial help build suspense and anticipation, as well as giving a touch of the supernatural to the scene.*

Just as the barons are about to render a verdict, an extremely beautiful woman appears on horseback, with a sparrowhawk on her wrist and a dog following. Everyone watches her approach with wonder, and when Lanval hears her described, he knows that his beloved has come, and he is saved. The fairy lady explains to King Arthur that the queen was wrong and that Lanval had never sought her love. Then the barons all agree that Lanval's boast was justified and that he should be acquitted. Lanval jumps onto the lady's horse and accompanies her to Avalon, where he's never heard from again.

*The suspense finally breaks as the fairy lady does indeed come forward to speak on Lanval's behalf. In Thomas Chestre's Middle English adaptation of this tale, the fairy lady blows a blinding breath at Guinevere, who remains blind for the rest of her days. Though nothing bad happens to Arthur's queen here, Lanval is clearly vindicated despite her accusations. Avalon was a magical island, an idyllic, otherworldly place inhabited by fairies. The reader can infer that the fairy lady comes from Avalon originally. Just as Lanval first encountered the lady in a marginal setting—the meadow—now Lanval and his fairy lady disappear to a realm outside the bounds of human civilization. This conclusion also represents a reversal of gender expectations, as the fairy lady rescues the knight, and not vice versa. In that sense, it can be read as a parody of the traditional knight in shining armor and damsel in distress story.*

## VI. LES DEUS AMANZ

In Normandy there's a famous story of a young couple who met their demise because of love. Their remains lie on a high mountain in that country. Here's how it happened: near Normandy, in the city of Pitres, the lord of the Pistrians has a beautiful, courtly daughter. She has been a great consolation to the king ever since his wife's death. However, the people have begun pressuring the king to marry her off, so he comes up with a plan: whoever wants to win his daughter must carry her up the nearby mountain without stopping to rest. Many men try, but nobody makes it farther than halfway. As a result, the girl stays single for a long time.

*Taken at face value, the story is moving: the widowed king and his daughter are mutually attached, and the father dreads parting with her when she marries. However, the implication here is actually that the father has an inappropriate desire for his daughter. Even if these disturbing overtones aren't intended, the lord of the Pistrians is the villain, because he plots to keep his daughter all to himself and stop her from marrying and leaving him.*

A noble young man, a count's son, lives in that country and often visits the lord of the Pistrians' court. He and the king's daughter fall in love, concealing the fact as best they can. Unable to stand it any longer, the young man begs her to elope, but she points out that if she ran away, her father would be crushed. Instead, she suggests that her lover visit her aunt, who lives in Salerno and knows all about herbs, roots, and medicines. Surely this relative could give him a strengthening potion. He readily agrees, and when the girl's aunt hears the story, she mixes the young man a potion that will restore all his strength the moment he drinks it.

*Salerno, in south Italy, was the home of Europe's most famous medical school, which would have been near the peak of its influence when Marie wrote. The young woman's aunt is probably placed in Salerno because of the city's association with medicine and healing. Though the lord of the Pistrians' challenge appears to be totally unreasonable and unattainable, the young man and the lord's daughter figure out a clever way—or so they think—to circumvent his demands.*

Excitedly, the young man returns to Normandy and quickly approaches the lord of the Pistrians, ready to carry his daughter up the mountain. The king says yes, but he thinks the youth is being foolish, since so many have failed at the task. On the day of the attempt, an audience gathers from far and wide. The maiden has been fasting in hopes of losing weight, and she arrives wearing nothing but her shift. She also carries the little phial containing the potion, but Marie fears it will do no good, since the young man "knew no moderation."

*Suspense builds as the entire kingdom gathers to watch the young man's attempt. So far, Marie has been sympathetic toward the young couple, but here she hints that things aren't going to turn out well for them. Moderation was an important courtly virtue. Lacking moderation was not just considered unseemly, but could compromise a couple's secrecy or safety. Here, Marie suggests that if someone lacks virtue, then it doesn't matter what other measures they take—their love is doomed.*


The young man carries her halfway up the mountain, so happy that he doesn't think about the potion. When she sees that he's tiring, the lord's daughter urges him to drink, but he insists that his heart is strong; he doesn't want to stir up the crowd by hesitating a moment. Two-thirds of the way up the mountain, he nearly collapses, but he continues to ignore the girl's pleas to drink. When he reaches the top, he falls down, his heart failing him. The maiden offers him the potion again, then realizes he's dead. She throws the phial aside, the potion sprinkling across the mountain.

*The young man is so absorbed in his passion that he sabotages himself: he disregards the potion he went to such trouble to get, and he deludes himself about his strength. This is a good illustration of what Marie means by "[knowing] no moderation." While Marie generally portrays love as worth the suffering it incurs, she also suggests here that it's possible to bring needless suffering on oneself by being unreasonable.*


After embracing and kissing her dead lover, the lord's daughter dies. When the lord of the Pistrians finds them, he swoons, and the people lament. A few days later, the two young people's bodies are placed in a marble coffin which is buried on the top of the mountain. From that time forward, the place is called The Mountain of the Two Lovers.

*Nobody has a happy ending in this story. Marie is still ultimately sympathetic to the ill-fated young couple, even though she points to the young man's lack of moderation as decisive in this death. The lord of the Pistrians is ultimately responsible, though, because of his cruel possessiveness of his daughter. The couple's fate suggests that there was never hope for them to be together under the circumstances.*

## VII. YONEC

Next, Marie intends to tell the story of Yonec and how his father, Muldumarec, met his mother, the lady of Caerwent. In Britain, there was once a rich lord of Caerwent who, when he was already quite old, married a young woman in hopes of having an heir. He loved her very much, but because she was so beautiful, he locked her in a tower with his elderly sister watching over her "to keep her from going astray."

*With its jealous elderly husband and imprisoned young wife motif, this tale has a lot in common with "Guigemar." Though the lord claims to love his wife, it's actually a very dark scenario—he basically enslaves her in hopes of fathering an heir.*

After seven years trapped in the tower, the lady of Caerwent is so depressed that she has lost her beauty. One spring day, the lord of Caerwent goes hunting and has his sister lock the doors behind him. Alone in her chamber, the lady weeps and curses her terrible husband. She wishes one of those old stories could come true for her—that she'd be discovered by a valiant knight who would love her in secret.

*The lady's imprisonment has a terrible toll on her. Notably, the lady appears to have been influenced by stories like Marie's lays. But like Marie's audience, she figures that valiant rescuers are only the stuff of fantasy.*

Just then, the lady of Caerwent notices the shadow of a large **bird** through the window, and then the bird flies into the room—it's a hawk. It lands in front of her, and after a while, it turns into a handsome knight. The lady cowers in fright, but the knight, Muldumarec, assures her that the hawk is a noble bird and that he's loved her from afar for a long time. However, he could only leave his home and become her beloved if she wished for him.

*The motif of the bird-man appears in other fairy tales, probably having originated in medieval Germany and France and since appearing all over the world. Hawks were the most frequently mentioned type of bird in medieval stories and were associated with nobility and courtliness. It's not clear* why *the knight is a bird, except that this enchanted form allows him to answer the lady's summons. Though the lady has been forcibly locked up on a man's whim, here it's* her *desire that summons a desirable man.*

The lady of Caerwent agrees that Muldumarec can be her lover—as long as he believes in God. The knight assures her that he does, in fact, believe in God and the Christian faith. If she has any doubts about this, she should summon her chaplain, claiming that she's ill and wants to hear Mass. Then he'll assume her appearance, receive the Eucharist, and recite the Creed. Accordingly, when the old woman returns, the lady pretends to faint with a deathly illness, and a priest quickly arrives with the *corpus domini*. The knight receives the bread and wine.

*There's a humorous irony here. The lady will agree to an affair with Muldumarec as long as he proves he's a Christian—but willingness to engage in an adulterous affair would suggests that he's not a very devout one.* Corpus domini *refers to the body of the Lord, or the bread of the Eucharist. Presumably, if the knight tried to partake of the eucharistic bread on false pretenses, God would strike him down on the spot.*

After the chaplain and the old woman have left, the lady of Caerwent and Muldumarec lie next to each other, flirting and sharing secrets. When the knight has to go, he promises that he'll come whenever she wishes, but that she must observe moderation—the old woman is sure to betray them, and when that happens, there's no way the knight can avoid death. After he leaves, the lady is transformed—her beauty returns, and she's content to stay in her tower so that she can see her beloved whenever the lord of Caerwent is out of the way. The suspicious lord notices the change in his wife, however, and tells the old woman to spy on her the next time he leaves.

*Love is what makes the lady beautiful. Other lays emphasize how love makes people pale and heartsick, even unto death. Here, though, it beautifies and revives, suggesting that although love often brings suffering, it also brings joy despite that. It's notable, though, that the knight encourages moderation—as in "Les Deux Amanz," being too demonstrative or eager in one's bearing can be dangerous. That quickly proves true in this case, as the lady becomes too happy and arouses others' suspicion.*

Three days later, the old woman hides behind a curtain while the lady of Caerwent thinks she's alone in her room. When Muldumarec comes, the old woman is alarmed, since at one moment the knight looks like a **hawk**, and the next moment he's a man. She reports all this to the lord, who quickly sets a trap, setting razor-sharp spikes in the window. Early the next morning, the lord leaves to go hunting, and the lady summons her beloved. As soon as the hawk flies through the window, however, the spikes pierce him, and he knows he's dying. He tries to comfort the swooning lady, telling her that she is pregnant with his child, a son whom she must call Yonec; Yonec will someday avenge them both.

*Since the lady has failed to stay moderate in her expression of love, she brings disaster on herself and her lover. They only get fleeting happiness before the jealous lord cruelly puts an end to their affair. Once again, love has led to suffering, though it this case, it remains to be seen whether it's been worth the trouble. Muldumarec's bird form has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allowed him access to the lady's prison chamber. On the other hand, it made him vulnerable to being killed, unable to defend himself. It's not clear how much time has passed over the course of their affair, but there have obviously been multiple visits, and they've had sex at some point. The lady's only consolation is that she'll have Muldumarec's child.*

Finally, the knight has to go, because he's bleeding copiously. The lady of Caerwent jumps out a window, miraculously surviving the 20-foot drop, and follows Muldumarec's trail of blood through a tunnel and a meadow until she reaches a city whose buildings are made of silver. She follows the bloody trail all the way into a palace and searches the rooms until she finds her beloved. He urges her to flee, since the townspeople will blame her for his death. However, he gives her a ring that will prevent her husband from remembering what's happened. He also gives her his sword, which must be given to their son someday. When Yonec grows up, the lady must take him and her husband to a feast where they'll see the knight's tomb and hear the story of how he died. When Yonec learns who his father was, they will see what he will do. The lady returns home, swooning with grief as she goes.

*The lady seems to consider that she has nothing to lose and follows Muldumarec, in a sort of quest of her own. Knowing his death is imminent, Muldumarec gives her the ring and sword as protections for her future, as well as the hope that their story isn't yet over—their son will somehow avenge them, though Muldumarec doesn't reveal how. His ability to foretell these events hints at additional supernatural abilities on his part.*

After that, the lady's husband starts treating her better, thanks to the ring's effects, and when Yonec is born, his parents and his whole kingdom adore him. However, the same year that Yonec is dubbed a knight, the family is invited to the feast of St. Aaron in Caerleon. There they lodge in an abbey, and before they can depart, the abbot insists on giving them a tour of the place. In the chapter-house, they see a great tomb surrounded by candles. When they ask who's buried in the tomb, the locals tearfully explain that it contains Muldumarec, the finest knight and king their land has ever known; he was killed at Caerwent because of his love for a lady. Ever since, they've been waiting for his son.

*With the ring's magical help, the lady is able to live in greater peace, since her husband doesn't remember that she cheated on him, and he assumes that Yonec is his own son. When Yonec comes of age, Muldumarec's prophecy is fulfilled. Caerleon was an important location in Arthurian literature, sometimes identified as the site of Arthur's capital and court, and St. Aaron was an early Christian martyr from that place.*

When the lady hears this, she calls to Yonec, saying that his father is buried here, unjustly killed by the lord of Caerwent. She hands over the sword she's kept for him and tells everyone the whole story, then faints on the tomb and dies. Seeing that his mother is dead, Yonec immediately cuts off his stepfather's head to avenge both his parents. The people of Caerleon bury the lady of Caerwent with honor and make Yonec their lord.

*Folklore scholars have suggested that this tale traces back to ancient fertility myths in which a woman (the earth) is imprisoned by an old man (the old year) and impregnated by another man, and her son (the new year) slays the old. Examples include the Egyptian myth of Osiris and the ancient Irish tale of Balor. In any case, Yonec's parents are avenged, and he emerges from the story as his father's heroic successor.*

## VIII. LAÜSTIC

Marie notes that the word for *Laüstic* in French is *Rossignol*, and in English it's *Nightingale*. Once, two renowned knights lived in the region of St Malo. One of the knights has a courtly and elegant wife. The other knight, a man known for his prowess, valor, and generosity, is a bachelor. He desires his neighbor's wife and keeps offering her his love until she finally accepts. For a long time, the bachelor and the married lady enjoy a secret love affair. They manage this because their houses are so close together; they can stand at their windows and talk to each other, and even toss gifts back and forth. It's a happy arrangement, except that they can't get any closer physically, since the lady is closely guarded.

Laüstic *comes from the Breton word for nightingale. This is yet another story where a wife is kept under close guard, presumably due to the husband's jealousy and paranoia. And yet again, the wife finds comfort in a relationship with a much more sympathetic man. This story is a little different from the affairs in "Guigemar" or "Equitan," in that the couple lives right next door to each other and conduct their affair under the cuckolded husband's nose, making him a laughingstock. But also unlike those stories, the arrangement makes it impossible for the two to have sex.*

However, one summer, when everything is green and blooming, the situation changes. The married lady and the bachelor knight have gotten into the habit of standing at their windows in the middle of the night to enjoy each other's company. Eventually, though, the lady's husband gets angry that she leaves their bed so often and asks her what she's been up to. The lady claims that she loves listening to the **nightingale**'s sweet song so much that she can't sleep. The knight laughs disdainfully and makes a plan to trap the nightingale. He has his servants place snares or bird-lime in every tree of the garden.

*Though the setting is idyllic, that doesn't mean that the couple's situation is promising. Like the nightingale's song, the beautiful summer foreshadows a dark turn. Quite simply, the fact that the nightingale sings at night symbolizes the lovers' secret happiness. It's just a pretext for the married lady's frequent absences from bed (suggesting that she's withholding sex from her husband).*

Once the **bird** is caught, the knight carries it, still alive, into his wife's chamber and shows it to her, saying that now she can sleep peacefully—it will never disturb her rest again. With that, he breaks the nightingale's neck and throws it at his wife, spattering her with its blood. The married lady weeps over the dead bird because she knows she can never spend her nights by the window again. So that her beloved will understand what's happened, she wraps up the bird and sends it to the bachelor knight with a message. Though distressed, the knight promptly encloses the nightingale's corpse in a little golden casket, which he carries around with him from that day forward.

*Clearly, Marie is trying to get her audience to sympathize with the wife, not the husband. His breaking the bird's neck suggests that he knows what's really going on and is threatening her if she continues the affair. Like in "Yonec," a bird is associated both with making an affair possible and violently ending it. Marie may have drawn details of this lay from the story of Philomela in Ovid's* Metamorphoses, *in which the gods transform Philomela into a nightingale in order to escape a vengeful husband.*

## IX. MILUN

A knight named Milun was born in South Wales. He's such a bold and skilled knight that he's famous throughout Europe and is both loved and envied. A "most courtly damsel," a nobleman's daughter, hears about Milun and sends him a message, offering to be his lover. He happily agrees and sends a messenger to the damsel with a gold ring. Soon, they start meeting secretly in a garden near the damsel's bedchamber, and Milun "love[s] her so much that she bec[omes] pregnant." When she realizes this, she laments her fate, believing she'll be tortured or enslaved when her pregnancy is found out. Milun offers to help in any way he can. So they plan to send the baby to the damsel's rich sister in Northumbria, with Milun's ring and a letter explaining the baby's origins.

*As in "Yonec," this lay deals with an illegitimate child, though the child's existence is handled differently here. Compare this situation to that of Le Fresne's mother. The young damsel finds herself in a compromising situation—if she's found to be pregnant out of wedlock, she might be disowned, deemed unmarriageable, or worse—and finds a way to send the baby away. Though in this case, there's a conveniently faraway relative. This is also yet another case where a young woman falls in love with a knight on the basis of his reputation and offers herself as a lover.*

When the time comes for the damsel to give birth, an old woman servant, who's in on the secret, helps conceal her so effectively that nobody realizes what's happening. After the damsel's beautiful son is born, they hang Milun's ring around his neck along with a letter, then tuck the baby into a cradle lined with the fanciest linens. Then they hand the baby over to Milun's servants, who are hiding in the garden. The servants, along with a wet nurse, travel slowly toward Northumbria, resting often to tend to the infant. When they finally reach the damsel's sister, the lady is delighted to accept her nephew into her care and loves him at once.

*As in other stories, the damsel benefits from cooperative servants and apparently unobservant parents. And like in Le Fresne, the baby is sent away with prominent symbols of his noble lineage, implying that even if the child can't grow up with his biological parents, he'll still be known for what's most important in this society: his noble blood.*

Meanwhile, Milun travels abroad as a mercenary, hoping to gain fame, and the damsel's father betroths her to a powerful nobleman. The damsel despairs over this, afraid that if she gets married, her husband will figure out she isn't a virgin. But she's trapped, so when the wedding day comes, she duly marries the nobleman. When Milun returns to his country, he sends the damsel a **swan** with a letter attached to its neck. When the damsel receives the swan, she pets its neck and finds the letter. When she recognizes Milun's name on the seal, she weeps.

*Swans are known for usually staying with one mate for life, which might figure into the choice of the swan as the couple's go-between: despite the damsel's forced marriage to a different man and Milun's quest for fortune abroad, they're meant only for each other and will stop at nothing to overcome obstacles to their love. And once again, a bird helps to facilitate human love—it remains to be seen whether this bird will come to a violent end like the others.*

Milun's letter instructs the damsel to figure out a secret way for them to meet and to send a message back with the **swan**. First, however, she should feed the swan well for a time, but then starve it for three days. When she finally lets the swan go, it will be so hungry that it will fly directly back to Milun. So the damsel pampers the swan for a month, then "using her ingenuity," she gets ink and parchment and writes a letter to Milun. After letting the swan go hungry for a few days, she hangs the letter from its neck and sets it free. It flies straight to Milun, who joyfully orders that the swan be fed, then reads the damsel's letter, which promises that she still loves him.

*This swan clearly isn't magical; the humans manipulate its behavior in order to use it as a messenger. It's also notable that although Milun comes up with the swan scheme, Marie highlights the damsel's "ingenuity," too. The pinnacle of her ingenuity is that she's literate, which would have been uncommon in Marie's day. Marie seems to want to highlight the fact that women could take initiative in affairs, too, even when their options were otherwise quite curtailed.*

Milun and the damsel communicate this way for 20 years, with the **swan** acting as their go-between. The couple is able to meet in secret a few times. By this time, their son has grown up into a fine young man and become a knight. When he learns about his parentage, he decides to leave the country at once—since he has such a renowned knight for a father, he figures it would be a shame if he didn't seek to distinguish himself, too. He sails to Brittany, where he competes in many tournaments and wins them without fail. He is also perfectly courtly and generous. Soon, he gains a reputation as "The Peerless One."

*This detail isn't actually as fanciful as it sounds: depending on the species, swans can live for 20 years or more. More remarkable than the bird's longevity, however, is the endurance of the couple's love affair. Despite their distance and the damsel's marriage, they remain in love and apparently undetected. This is another case where Marie's sympathy is clearly with the adulterous couple rather than with the unwanted, unloved spouse. Meanwhile, Milun's son comes back into the picture, apparently taking after his father despite never having known him.*

When Milun hears about this impressive young knight, he feels depressed—as long as he's capable of bearing arms, he thinks, no other knight from his homeland should gain such praise. He decides to sail to Brittany to joust with this upstart and humiliate him. Once that's done, he will go in search of his son, whom he hasn't seen in all these years. The damsel agrees to her beloved's plan.

*Milun seems to regard it as an affront to his knightly honor if anyone bests him. Of course, the audience knows the irony of Milun's plan—that the upstart is his son.*

Milun spends that whole winter competing in tournaments and gathering knights around him. Around Easter, many knights—Normans, Bretons, Flemish, and French, but few Englishmen—gather at Mont St Michel. Milun asks about the famous young knight and studies him closely, envying the youth's skill but grudgingly admiring him, too. When they finally joust, Milun breaks the other knight's lance, but then the young man unhorses Milun. When the youth sees Milun's white hair, he feels ashamed and brings him his horse, apologizing for knocking down a man of Milun's years. Milun, pleased by this, asks the knight about his family background. The young man explains that he's the son of a Welshman named Milun, but that he was raised in Northumbria. He hopes to reunite with his father soon.

*The knights' broad geographic origins point to the cultural proximity between France and England at the time Marie wrote. This part of the story is an instance of dramatic irony, because the audience knows who the mysterious young knight is, while Milun doesn't yet know it's his son. At the same time, the audience also wonders if the young knight will tragically kill his father in combat before the men learn each other's identities. As it turns out, the two knights are fairly equally matched. But the youth feels ashamed of knocking Milun off his horse, because that would be seen as disrespecting an elder. The fact that the youth even cares about this suggests that he's an honorable knight who cares about chivalrous virtues, not an arrogant upstart.*

When Milun hears this, he eagerly seizes the young knight, proclaiming that his life is whole again: this is his son. As the men embrace, onlookers weep for joy. That night, Milun tells his son about his mother, the damsel, and how they've been forced to communicate by **swan** for all these years. The son tells Milun not to worry—he will kill his mother's husband so that she and Milun can marry at last.

*The suspense is relieved as it becomes clear that this story will end in triumph, not tragedy, and Milun and his son are reunited after decades apart. Like the swan, the men's reunion isn't obviously miraculous or supernatural. Still, it seems there's a father-son bond between the two that improbably drew them together over the course of the story.*

The next day, Milun and his son journey to Wales. On their way, they meet a servant of Milun's beloved, who informs them that the damsel's husband is now dead. With no obstacles before them, the men hurry to the damsel's castle, where the lady is delighted to be reunited with her son. The son gives his mother to his father in marriage without delay, and they all live happily ever after.

*This story resolves unusually happily for one of Marie's* Lais. *Again, though, it's a case where little sympathy is shown for the unloved husband—except that, in contrast to Yonec, he doesn't get murdered by his wife's illegitimate son (perhaps because, unlike Yonec's stepfather, the damsel's husband isn't clearly wicked).*

## X. CHAITIVEL

Now Marie will recount a lay that's usually called *Le Chaitivel* ("The Unhappy One") but is also called *Les Quatre Deuls* ("The Four Sorrows"). In Brittany, in the city of Nantes, there lived a beautiful, well-educated lady. Any knight who sees her instantly falls in love with her and starts wooing her. She can't love them all, but she doesn't want to reject all of them, either. Marie observes that it would be "less dangerous" for a knight to court all the ladies in the land than for a lady to reject a single lover, because a rejected lover "will immediately attempt to strike back."

*Marie's commentary is particularly interesting here for its insight on women's roles within the norms of the courtly love tradition. On one hand, it will become clear that the lady's indecisiveness isn't considered a virtue, and that it serves her poorly in the end. On the other hand, Marie suggests that it's more "dangerous" for a lady than for a knight, because a lady who rejects a man is vulnerable to the man's revenge, whereas a knight can court as many ladies as he likes.*

In Brittany there also lived four men whose names Marie doesn't know—handsome, brave, and courtly knights. All four of these men love the indecisive lady and try to outdo one another in wooing her. The lady considers these suitors carefully, wanting to choose the best—yet she knows that if she chooses one, she'll lose the other three. So, she's friendly to all four of them, sending each of them love tokens. Each of the four men thinks he is the lady's only beloved, wears her love token (like a ring, sleeve, or pennant), and uses her name as a rallying cry. Each of them tries to perform brave deeds to please her.

*None of the characters in this lay get distinct names, and the men especially don't have distinguishing characteristics, suggesting that they're meant to be generalized examples. Because the lady doesn't want to reject anyone, she basically encourages all her potential suits, driving them to ever more daring feats in hopes of impressing her. Marie implies that none of the knights is superior to the others, and that the lady would do just as well to pick any of them.*

One year, after Easter, there's a tournament at Nantes. In addition to the four lovers, knights travel from all over in order to compete—French, Norman, Flemish, and other knights. On the day before the tournament, though, fierce fighting breaks out, and the four lovers eagerly charge into combat. The fighting is so violent that all four men are unhorsed. Undaunted, they keep fighting. The indecisive lady watches all this from her tower and, impressed with them all, she doesn't know who to cheer for the most.

*In contrast to the fighting that took place in "Milun," which seemed more orderly, this fighting is basically a free-for-all with no clear objective. There's an ominous note here, as being knocked off their horses and fighting on foot makes the knights much more vulnerable. But they're all so focused on impressing the lady that they don't care.*

As the tournament goes on, all four men distinguish themselves, but by nightfall, each of them has foolishly wandered away from his entourage of knights. This has terrible consequences: during a lateral attack, three of the men are killed, and the fourth receives a severe wound in the thigh. The attackers are grief-stricken, since they hadn't meant to kill anyone. The local townspeople stream onto the field, lamenting, and thousands of knights fling off their visors, tearing out their hair and beards in sorrow.

*Without fellow knights to defend them, the four knights are even more vulnerable, and sure enough, the results are catastrophic. This is basically just playful fighting that escalated until it got out of hand, which makes the deaths all the more tragic: they died for nothing. It's implied that the killed and injured knights took unnecessarily foolish risks under the circumstances, disregarding chivalrous virtue.*

The slain knights are placed on their shields and carried into the city to the lady who loves them. When the indecisive lady sees what's happened, she swoons from grief. When she revives, she mourns the fallen men, both dead and wounded, and laments that she forced them to compete with one another for her love because she couldn't choose just one. She can never be happy again. She will bury the dead knights and provide a doctor for the wounded one, doing whatever she can to help him heal.

*The devastated lady blames herself for putting the knights in this situation. Whereas she began in an enviable position—having many competing suitors—she finds herself in the opposite position, having lost all but one of them.*

One summer day, the indecisive lady is talking with the wounded knight, whom she visits often while he's convalescing in her chamber. The knight notices she looks downcast and asks her what's the matter. She replies that she's thinking of his former companions—never again will a lady love four such men and lose all but one of them in a single day. To commemorate her grief and her love, she decides to compose a lay called *The Four Sorrows*. The knight objects that the lay should be titled *The Unhappy One* instead. It should be called *The Unhappy One* because even though he escaped death, he suffers terrible heartache because he can enjoy nothing more than conversation with the woman he loves. The lady agrees. The lay is composed, and it circulates under two titles—both, Marie notes, "supported by the subject matter."

*Marie seems ambivalent about the indecisive lady. On one hand, the moral seems to be that the lady's indecisiveness and reluctance to commit have led to sorrow all around. It would have been better for her to just choose a knight, since, Marie suggests, one knight is about as good as another. On the other hand, Marie could be making a subtle comment about the thankless position in which a lady could find herself when she's afraid to reject a suitor. Though the wording is subtle, the source of the wounded knight's grief is that he's not able to consummate their affair. The fact that he was wounded in the thigh implies that his injury has probably rendered him impotent. So, both he and the lady are essentially stuck in unrelieved lovesickness for the rest of their lives—an unenviable position.*

## XI. CHEVREFOIL

Marie has often heard recited the lay called "Chevrefoil," which concerns Tristram and Queen Iseult and their pure love, which caused them distress and eventually brought about their deaths. King Mark, knowing that his nephew Tristram loves the queen, angrily dismisses him from court. So, Tristram goes back to his home region of South Wales, but because he can't satisfy his desires for the queen, he's terribly depressed.

*At 118 lines, "Chevrefoil" is the shortest of the* Lais. *Stories of Tristram and Iseult were told all over Europe, and Marie would have expected her audience to be familiar with them. Tristram, or Tristan as he's known in other versions, was charged with bringing Iseult from Ireland to marry his uncle, King Mark. On the way, the two drank a love potion that caused them to fall desperately in love. They concealed this at first, but their affair eventually led to Tristram's banishment from Mark's court. Marie likely drew on other Tristram poems as a source for this story.*

Finally, Tristram leaves Wales for Cornwall, where Iseult lives. He travels secretly through the forest, only emerging at night to lodge with peasants and poor people. His hosts tell him the latest news about the king. Recently, the king has summoned his barons to Tintagel for a big festival at Pentecost; the queen will be there. Tristram knows the queen's procession will pass by him on its way, so on the appointed day, he excitedly hides in the woods. While he waits, he whittles his name into a hazel branch. He and the queen have used this signal before, and he knows she'll recognize it. Tristram and the queen resemble honeysuckle that winds itself around a hazel branch. If left attached, both the honeysuckle and the hazel can survive; if separated, both will die.

*Marie emphasizes the characters' lovesickness—their emotional longing for each other and their inability to fulfill those longings, chiefly because of Iseult's marriage and Tristram's banishment from court. Lovesickness, and the fact that their rendezvous will inevitably be brief, makes Tristram's anticipation even more poignant. Poor people seldom show up in Marie's lays, but in this case, Tristram's association with them highlights his outcast status. "Chevrefoil" means honeysuckle, and the hazel and honeysuckle obviously symbolize the lovers and their longed-for intimacy.*

As Iseult rides along, she spots the hazel branch and commands her retinue to stop. She ventures into the woods and finds Tristram, and they enjoy a long talk together. The queen tells Tristram how to be reconciled to King Mark, who hadn't really wanted to banish him. Then, with many tears, they part ways. Tristram returns to Wales to wait for his uncle's summons. A skilled harpist, Tristram also composes a lay about the joy of seeing his beloved—the English call it *Gotelef* and the French *Chevrefoil*.

*This is just a snapshot from the larger tradition of Tristram and Iseult chivalric romance; not much happens. Yet the longing and the fleeting, secretive reunion in the forest capture some of that tradition's most characteristic emotions. It ends with sadness, yet also the hope that Tristram might be able to see his beloved once again. It also shows that, as plenty of other lays have made clear, adulterous affairs weren't frowned on where true love was concerned—or, at least, stories provided a safe outlet for such relationships.*

## XII. ELIDUC

Marie will now tell the story of a very old Breton lay. In Brittany there lived a brave and courtly knight named Eliduc. Eliduc had a wise, noble wife, Guildelüec, and they were happily married for a long time. But one day, Eliduc decides to go in search of work as a paid soldier. While away from home, he falls in love with a beautiful princess named Guilliadun.

*At 1,184 lines, Eliduc is the longest of the Lais. Surprisingly, the story begins with an apparently happily married couple. Judging from Marie's previous lays, though, that won't last for long. Indeed, the story suggests that leaving home, particularly leaving a virtuous and beloved wife behind, was an ideal way for a knight to set himself up for transgression.*

The King of Brittany loves and trusts Eliduc and gives him many privileges, like freedom to hunt in the forests. Though nobody dares oppose Eliduc, many envy and grumble against him, and he ends up being banished from court on the basis of a false rumor; the king gives Eliduc no chance to defend himself. Sadly, Eliduc decides to leave the country to visit the kingdom of Logres for a while. He leaves his wife at home, promising to remain faithful.

*Eliduc's banishment provides the pretext for his leaving home. There's no indication of what the false rumors were about, merely the suggestion that Eliduc is virtuous, and that the punishment is undeserved. Logres was the name of King Arthur's realm in Arthurian legend, though this story has no other connections to the Arthurian tradition.*

After crossing the sea, Eliduc finds much fighting. One old king near Exeter, who refuses to give his young daughter in marriage to one of his peers, is being besieged by the peer. When Eliduc hears about this conflict, he offers to help, and the king eagerly enlists him and puts him up in fine lodgings. Eliduc starts gathering knights. A few days later, there's word that the enemy plans to assault the town. Eliduc and his knights hide beside a wooded path, planning to ambush the enemy as they're returning home. They quickly succeed in surprising the enemy and taking them captive.

*Here is yet another possessive father—a frequent trope in the lays. It's also not the first time that knights have resorted to violence to try to gain a wife (think of "Guigemar" and "Chaitivel"). Eliduc is portrayed as such a skilled and chivalrous knight that he smoothly deals with both these obstacles—dispatching potential rivals and winning the father's trust all at once.*

After this episode, the king loves Eliduc even more and retains his service for a year. During his stay, the king's daughter, Guilliadun, hears about what a fine knight he is and invites him to visit her chamber. The pair sits on her bed and enjoys a courtly chat. Guilliadun quickly falls in love with Eliduc—love makes her grow pale and sigh—but she doesn't want to bring it up, in case he blames her for it. When Eliduc returns to his lodgings, he is distracted by thoughts of Guilliadun, but then he remembers his wife and repents.

*Recall Marie's other stories of love from afar—like Milun's lover, for example, Guilliadun falls in love with Eliduc without ever having seen him. She also quickly falls victim to lovesickness, seemingly because she doesn't feel free to express her feelings to Eliduc. It's unclear why, since other female characters haven't hesitated to take initiative that way. Notably, Eliduc doesn't want to commit adultery, and Marie portrays his hesitance as virtuous.*

For her part, Guilliadun can't stop thinking about Eliduc. She stays up all night, and early the next morning, she confides in her chamberlain, adding that if Eliduc pledges himself to her, it could greatly benefit him—he might even become king someday. The chamberlain suggests that Guilliadun send Eliduc her gold ring and girdle as tokens. He will observe Eliduc's reaction to try to see whether Eliduc loves her or not. After the chamberlain goes, Guilliadun frets that if Eliduc refuses her, she will never be happy again.

*Guilliadun is crafty: she knows that if Eliduc were to marry her, it could (as far as she knows of his background) elevate his position in the world. So, although she chooses a subtle method, she finds a way to signal her feelings and gauge the knight's response.*

When the chamberlain brings Eliduc the gifts, Eliduc immediately puts on the ring and girdle and offers a gift in return, but the chamberlain refuses it. When he returns to Guilliadun, she begs for his opinion, and he reports that Eliduc is "not fickle […] and he knows well how to conceal his feelings." He isn't sure, though, whether Eliduc received the gifts as love-tokens or not. Guilliadun decides she must find an opportunity to speak to him.

*When the love-tokens don't seem to have gotten the desired results, Guilliadun doesn't hesitate to use a more direct approach. The chamberlain's report is interesting, too. Saying that Eliduc is good at hiding his feelings is, in the courtly context, a compliment, As other lays have shown, being too demonstrative or immoderate tends to get people in trouble.*

Meanwhile, Eliduc continues to pine for Guilliadun, feeling trapped between his desires for her and his promise to his wife back home. He knows that if he asked Guilliadun for her love, he would be acting disloyally to Guildelüec. Distressed, he goes to the castle in hopes of seeing her. While Eliduc is keeping the king company, the king tells his daughter that she should get acquainted with this excellent knight. Overjoyed, the two sit apart and talk. Eliduc assures Guilliadun that he cherishes her gifts, and Guilliadun explains that she sent the tokens because she wants Eliduc to be her husband; she wants no other man. Eliduc replies that he is pledged to the king for a year, which gives them plenty of time to figure things out. They part ways happily.

*Marie portrays Eliduc as an unusually virtuous knight. In other lays, characters haven't hesitated to begin affairs, especially when they're stuck in loveless or abusive marriages. The big difference here is that Eliduc loves Guildelüec, and she's already been established as almost improbably virtuous. Eliduc doesn't want to betray her. Yet he doesn't want to let Guilliadun down, either, so he lets her continue to believe that marriage is a possibility. It's unclear what he expects—if he plans to disappear after his service to the king is up, or if he's simply putting off a decision.*

Meanwhile, the king of Brittany is in trouble—his land and castles are being laid waste. He sends messengers in search of Eliduc, regretting that he ever kicked the knight out of his court. When Eliduc hears the message, he's grieved for Guilliadun's sake. This whole time, there's been no "foolishness" between them; they just talk and exchange gifts. Guilliadun is still holding out hope for marriage, unaware that Eliduc has a wife back in Brittany.

*Even though Eliduc hasn't been totally honest with Guilliadun, Marie continues to make it clear that Eliduc and Guilliadun's relationship has been completely chaste so far, making him a virtuous and therefore sympathetic character. Marie seems to want her audience to root for this unlikely couple.*

Eliduc is distraught. He's duty-bound to return to Brittany, but he's afraid that his departure will kill Guilliadun, or perhaps both of them. Yet he can't marry Guilliadun because "the Christian religion would not accept it." He goes to take his leave of the king, promising to come to his aid whenever he needs it. The king offers Eliduc all the riches at his disposal, of which Eliduc accepts a moderate amount. Then he goes to see Guilliadun.

*It's an understatement that Christianity doesn't recognize bigamy. While this reads as a somewhat wry remark, it's probably meant, again, to portray Eliduc as a genuinely pious and therefore sympathetic character. Eliduc also isn't greedy—he's "moderate" in his acceptance of gifts—another detail Marie uses to make him a sympathetic character.*

When Eliduc enters Guilliadun's chamber, she greets him "six thousand times." When Eliduc explains that he must return to Brittany, Guilliadun faints. Eliduc holds her, kisses her repeatedly, and weeps until she revives. He tells her that he has no choice about leaving, but that he'll obey her wishes, no matter the consequences. Guilliadun begs Eliduc to take her with him, or else she'll kill herself. Eliduc gently replies that this would be a betrayal of Guilliadun's father, whom he still technically serves, but that Guilliadun must simply name the day, and he will return for her. So, they agree on a date and affectionately part ways.

*Medieval literature sometimes uses obviously exaggerated numbers for effect, which is clearly the case with Guilliadun's exuberant greeting here. It also conveys just how attached she's gotten and how much she's counting on the idea of marrying Eliduc. As Eliduc had expected, his departure devastates the girl, and perhaps for this reason, he can't break things off with her. Guilliadun's devastated swoon foreshadows later events in the story.*

When Eliduc arrives in Brittany, he is joyfully greeted by everyone, especially his wife. But he keeps thinking about Guilliadun, and he acts so depressed and withdrawn that Guildelüec is grieved. Eliduc insists it's only because he's still pledged to the king back in England and wants to return there at the earliest opportunity, so Guildelüec lets the matter drop. By the appointed time to reunite with Guilliadun, Eliduc has settled his king's affairs in Brittany and wastes no time sailing back to England, accompanied by only a few trusted friends. He sends Guilliadun a message, and that night she secretly slips out with Eliduc's chamberlain and meets Eliduc just outside the gates, where they kiss and rejoice. Then Eliduc puts his beloved on his horse and sneaks her off to the harbor at Totnes and from there onto a ship.

*The women in Marie's lays are often perceptive, and that's especially the case here—Guildelüec isn't a fool (in marked contrast to some of the cuckolded husbands in the lays) and knows something is going on with her husband. At this point, it's unclear what Eliduc is thinking. He's loyal—he responds to his king's summons, and he hasn't technically cheated on his wife—but at the same time, he seems to have made up his mind to pursue a relationship with Guilliadun after all.*

Before their ship arrives in Brittany, they meet a violent storm that drives them back out to sea and breaks their mast. Everyone prays to God, Mary, and other saints for deliverance. One of the sailors cries out that they're doomed—Eliduc has a loyal wife at home, but he's brought another woman with him in defiance of God. If they throw Guilliadun overboard, the ship will be spared. Eliduc is outraged at this "traitor" and comforts Guilliadun as best he can—besides being seasick, she's just learned for the first time that Eliduc is actually married. To Eliduc's horror, she swoons and appears to be dead. Eliduc knocks the traitorous sailor flat with an oar and kicks the man overboard. Then he steers the boat safely to shore.

*The deadly storm and the sailors' indignation recalls the Bible story of Jonah, which Marie would have known and probably expected her audience to think of here. In that story, the prophet Jonah tries to flee from God's demands by ship, and God sends a perilous storm, whereupon the other sailors discover he's the culprit and throw him overboard. In this case, the story resolves differently: instead of the offending person getting tossed overboard, Eliduc's accuser suffers that fate. In any case, though, the storm forces the truth about Eliduc's marriage to come out, so it does appear to be a judgment on his indecisiveness and failure to tell the whole truth.*

Heartsick, Eliduc tries to figure out what to do with his beloved's body. He knows of a holy hermit who lives in a chapel in a thick forest near his home. He decides to have Guilliadun buried there; he will also establish a convent there, with monks and nuns to pray for her soul. But when they've borne Guilliadun's body into the forest and knocked at the chapel door, they discover that the hermit had died about a week ago. Eliduc decides to lay Guilliadun's body on the altar for the time being and consult with advisors about how best to establish an abbey. Before he goes, he kisses Guilliadun and laments that she ever followed him to France.

*Eliduc assumes that Guilliadun is dead, and that it's his fault for bringing her to France, so he decides to do penance by establishing an abbey. At this point, it appears that God has judged Eliduc to be disloyal and has punished him accordingly.*

When Eliduc returns home, Guildelüec finds him distraught. Two days later, he heads off into the forest again to check on Guilliadun's body. Though she still appears not to breathe, she has a tiny bit of color in her cheeks. Eliduc weeps over her, prays, and returns home. He does this daily, and finally, Guildelüec sends a spy after him. When the spy reports that Eliduc lamented loudly inside the chapel, his wife is disturbed and decides to check things out for herself while Eliduc has business elsewhere.

*There was a body of medieval folklore involving enchanted sleep that could only be reversed by magic ("Sleeping Beauty" being a famous example). This story is a bit different, though, since heartbreak, not a curse, seems to have triggered Guilliadun's swoon. Again, Guildelüec doesn't hesitate to take matters into her own hands when she's worried about her husband.*

When Guildelüec finds the maiden on the chapel altar, she knows this is the reason for her husband's behavior. She says that "either pity or love will prevent me from ever knowing joy again" and sits weeping for the dead girl. Just then, a **weasel** suddenly runs out from beneath the altar. A servant quickly kills it with a stick. But soon, a second weasel appears and circles the first one, touching it with its foot. When the first weasel doesn't respond, the second, seemingly distressed, runs into the woods and soon returns to the chapel with a bright red flower in its teeth. It places the flower into the other weasel's mouth, and the first weasel quickly recovers.

*Guildelüec is a deeply sympathetic person; though she doesn't know exactly what's happened, it doesn't make her husband look good, and yet she's still ready to pity the sleeping girl. In the Middle Ages, some folk traditions held that weasels were capable of using medicine. In the lays' most elaborate example of animals assisting human love, these weasels demonstrate what Guildelüec should do to help Guilliadun.*

When Guildelüec sees this, she orders her servant to catch the **weasel**. She quickly takes the red flower from the animal's mouth and places it into Guilliadun's mouth. A short time later, Guilliadun breathes again. Then she opens her eyes and says, "I have slept so long!" Thanking God, Guildelüec asks the girl about herself, and Guilliadun explains that she is a princess from Logres who fell in love with the knight Eliduc. But Eliduc sinfully tricked her, concealing the fact that he was married. Now he has abandoned her in a foreign land and betrayed her. She concludes that "She who trusts a man is extremely foolish."

*Observant and resourceful, Guildelüec quickly figures out what to do and restores Guilliadun. Though the audience might expect her to be vengeful, both she and Guilliadun continue to come across as sympathetic here. Guilliadun feels deceived and betrayed, and Guildelüec shows her nothing but kindness and sympathy. Guilliadun's remark about trusting men seems to be a bit of wry commentary on Marie's part.*

Guildelüec assures Guilliadun that Eliduc has not betrayed her—in fact, he visits her daily and will be overjoyed to know that she is alive. What's more, she will set Eliduc free so that he and Guilliadun can marry, and she will become a nun.

*This is a surprising turn of events, since Guildelüec loves Eliduc, and it's not clear that such a separation and remarriage would be considered lawful by the church. But the overall point seems to be that Guildelüec is an incredibly unselfish character and that, as often happens in the* Lais, *true love must prevail, even when there's a marriage in the way.*

Later that day, when Eliduc hears the whole story, he is ecstatic. He thanks his wife tenderly and kisses Guilliadun over and over. When Guildelüec sees their happiness, she asks for a separation. After all, even if it weren't illegal, it's improper to keep two wives. Eliduc happily grants this and even gives her the land where the chapel stands so that she can build a church and abbey. Guildelüec soon founds an order of nuns.

*Again, this resolution is a bit puzzling. While it wasn't unheard of for a woman to enter a convent with her husband's permission, church law wouldn't have regarded this as cause for annulling a marriage, and divorce was certainly forbidden. This detail seems to be a fantastical way for Marie to let Eliduc's and Guilliadun's love prevail.*

After that, Eliduc marries Guilliadun, and they live happily together. They give away many alms, and Eliduc also builds a church near the castle, giving it all of his gold and silver. Once the church is ready, he eagerly joins the pious men there, first placing Guilliadun in Guildelüec's convent, where Guildelüec teaches Guilliadun her order. They pray that God will show mercy to Eliduc, and he prays for them in turn. All three of them "came to a good end," thanks to God.

*This story ends with all three main characters as paragons of virtue. In the end, Eliduc doesn't commit adultery, he still gets to marry Guilliadun, and Guildelüec is effectively a saint who makes way for true love to flourish. Again, this is a very unlikely scenario, but it's a fairy tale—it's a way for things to end happily ever after, and as virtuously as possible.*

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To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Lais of Marie de France.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 5 Jan 2022. Web. 5 Jan 2022.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Lais of Marie de France.*" LitCharts LLC, January 5, 2022. Retrieved January 5, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-lais-of-marie-de-france.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Lais of Marie de France* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

de France, Marie. The Lais of Marie de France. Penguin. 1986.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

de France, Marie. The Lais of Marie de France. London: Penguin. 1986.