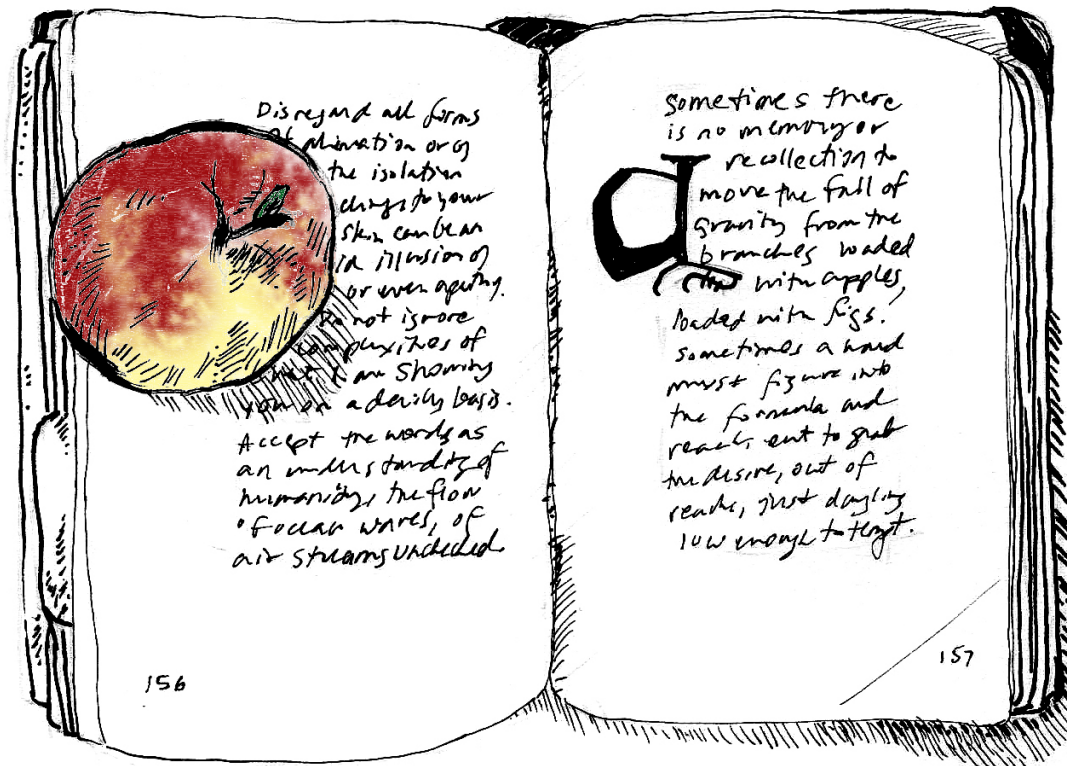


# Tales of King Arthur— part 3

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# Marie de France

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**Marie de France was a woman of French heritage and possibly maintained close-ties to the English royal court of Henry II.**

- In the Epilogue of a collection of poems titled *Fables*, she refers to herself: “me numerai pur remembrance / Marie ai num, si sui de France” (ll. 3-4). Translated into English from Old French the lines read:  
“I shall name myself for posterity / My name is Marie, and I am of France” (53).
- It is through this vague self-reference scholars attribute her work. Many theories exist as to whom Marie actually could be. Some historians consider her to be a close relative of Henry II or a woman in a high position within an abbey.
- Modern historians refer to her as a Anglo-Norman writer, the language of the royal courts, law courts, universities, and schools in England after the Norman invasion.
- This dialect was later replaced during the English Renaissance with what is termed Early Modern English, it still left a major influence on English vocabulary.

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Whalen, Logan E. *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press. 2008. Print.

# Marie de France

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**Marie often utilizes a lyric form of verse called a lai (lai).**

With this form of ballad poetry, the intention is for the piece to be sung or recited with music and to display a full story based on familiar characters.

- a lai often uses a four-stress system per line; in this case each line aims for eight syllables, following the standard for French narrative verse
- in this particular form, the work contains a rhyming couplet strategy: AABB
- a translation of the “Prologue” poem by Judith Shoaf is composed closer to Marie’s original intentions:

“Whoever gets knowledge from God, science,  
and a talent for speech, eloquence,  
Shouldn’t shut up or hide away;

No, that person should gladly display” (ll. 1-4).

- the focus of the work as a whole is the construction of a narrative, usually with a romantic theme dealing with courtly love situations
- considered a short form narrative work, under one thousand lines

# Marie de France

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**Marie's version of the poetic lay form is perhaps the earliest known recorded version.**

She often supplies credit to Breton minstrels at the close of her poems.

- she states the compositions are based on oral traditions of these minstrels
- none of these earlier anonymous works from Breton have survived
- however, as a creative force on her own, Marie often transforms the original story into something new; it has been stated Marie creates a pointed criticism of the male-dominated royal court system
- it is also noted her depiction of characters has a strong sense of realism, despite the elements of fantasy and magical effects, and as well—
- often she also will show more sympathy towards women in conflicting situations of love; but she is critical of unfaithful wives
- partially she displays both positive and negative actions resulting from love
- either gender is shown at fault within the different poems

# “Prologue”

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**The opening poem “Prologue” establishes her objectives in the full collection.**

Using a model of Ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric she proposes a discussion with both an entertaining and moral mind set.

- likewise the opening lines she uses the pronoun “whoever” which is inclusive of male and female genders
- line 31 also uses a common conventional practice in introductory works showing the poet-writer dismissing his/her primary intentions were to obtain notoriety and fame; she carries this a step further by stating her goal is to draw more attention to the “*lais* I heard / [... because] I dont want to neglect or forget them” (l. 33/40).
- by presenting them to a “noble King” (l. 43) she hopes the original stories will gain a greater sense of merit in the current emerging English culture

# Marie de France

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**In the full collection of *Lais* are two stories relating to courtly events during King Arthur's reign.**

However, unlike the traditions established in *Beowulf*, notice Marie's characters do not use lengthy monologues or extreme dialogue sessions.

Furthermore, "Lanval" specifically targets characters from the Arthurian folk cycle and the poem "Chevrefoil" mentions elements of the same stories.

- "Lanval" details a twisted love plot between the title character, a knight named Lanval, an unnamed fairy lady, and the queen Guinevere
- through the context of the poem the reader is presented with two contrasting female characters in an inverse presentation of the situation in *Beowulf* with Grendel's mother and Queen Wealhtheow
- another more subtle theme lies connecting the female gender with material goods and possessions; Marie constructs an elaborate commentary about the status of a female within the Anglo-Norman society

# Marie de France

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**To begin with**, notice King Arthur in the opening sections of the poem rewards his members of the Round Table by providing “wives and lands” (l. 17) in a typical formula of the time.

- women are seen as possessions of wealth and contract
- likewise, when Lanval is presented for the first time with the fairy-maiden notice her own servants, possessions, and monetary value are presented first, *then* her beauty, not her personality or intellect (see *Longman*, p. 205 ll. 80-106).
- The presentation of the fairy-mistress follows female archetypes established in the Ancient world; these prototypes of female models were rarely challenged until fairly recent times

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*Virgin*

*Mother*

*Whore*



# Marie de France

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<u>Virgin</u>	<u>Mother/Wife</u>	<u>Promiscuous/Whore</u>
Prelapsarian Eve	Postlapsarian Eve	Jezebel
Virgin Mary	Virgin Mary	Mary Magdalene (reformed)
Athena / Artemis	Hera	Aphrodite

# Marie de France

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**However**, notice how Marie challenges the formula of these archetypes.

She inverts the expectations of the women's roles in the story.

- The pagan/Celtic based creature (non-Catholic) is promiscuous, yet in the end she saves Lanval from injustice.
- She seeks him out from “far away” (l. 112), that is not from this realm of reality, but instead the “Otherworld,” a common fairy tale plot device.
- She becomes the ultimate male fantasy, a product of a dream which slightly shifts to reality— see *Longman*, page 206 ll. 127-142.
- The Christian-based symbol of a Queen-wife who should follow a system of chaste behavior, displays infidelity and adulterous attitudes, acting as an unfaithful wife.

# *Marie de France*

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## **Lanval himself is presented as a loner.**

In the opening section of the poem he is displayed almost as an out-cast; although being “the son of a king of high degree” (l.27), Arthur fails to provide him with reward (l.31).

- Notice the positive nature of his personality however in lines 21-23.
- Yet, being far from his unnamed country, without further funds, he is emotionally depressed and lonely, “he doesn’t know where ti look for help” (l. 38). His presence in the poem echoes the isolated figure of the Wanderer from the previous reading. Whereas the Wanderer has no hope of happiness, Lanval is offered a hopeful resolution. This poem is a Romance after all.