Textiles and meaning in the lais Guigemar, Lanval, and Laustic of Marie de France.

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TEXTILES AND MEANING IN THE LAIS *GUIGEMAR, LANVAL*, AND *LAUSTIC* OF MARIE DE FRANCE

By

Leslie Dingeldein
B.A., University of Louisville, 2012

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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for the Degree of

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Department of Classical and Modern Languages
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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A Thesis Approved on

April 11, 2014

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ABSTRACT
TEXTILES AND MEANING IN THE LAIS GUIGEMAR, LANVAL, AND LAUSTIC OF MARIE DE FRANCE

Leslie Dingeldein

April 11, 2014

Through an analysis of Guigemar, Lanval, and Laustic, I show how Marie incorporates textiles into her stories to subvert tropes of misogynistic authority and to assert equality and independence, and to invert traditional gender roles.

In Guigemar, a wife uses female knowledge as healing. While keeping her lover tightly-bound through a symbolic exchange, she instructs him in the art of love and ensures his fidelity to her.

In Lanval a mysterious Fairy Queen bestows her love upon the receptive and willing Lanval, enacting a reversal of gender stereotypes. From the onset of their relationship she takes on a masculine role and uses feminine sexuality to highlight her exoticism through her erotic dress.

In Laustic a wife rescues her lover from her husband’s jealousy by sending him a dead nightingale in embroidered silk. This lai parallels Ovid’s “Philomena” as the heroines in both stories use textiles to relay a message.
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INTRODUCTION

Marie de France is one of the most well-known and mysterious female authors of the Middle Ages. While much of her personal story remains uncertain, her person and her work have been the subject of much research and debate. This thesis will analyze elements of textiles, style, and fashion artfully woven into a selection of the *lais* of Marie de France to show how Marie uses textiles to move her heroines into positions to subvert male supremacy during the Middle Ages.

A *lai* is a relatively short poetic narrative ranging in length and subject. There are twelve *lais* attributed to Marie. The *lai* was a popular genre during the Middle Ages at the time when *roman* such as *Eric et Enide* and *Le Chevalier de la charrette* were written.¹ Marie’s *lais* effectively intertwine Celtic and Breton symbols throughout, as well as references to the Classical period and to modern popular works such as the Arthurian and Tristan legends.

The *lais* are a part of the courtly love theme of romances popular during the Middle Ages. Courtly love stories feature mainly the aristocracy, and tales would often be circulated and read aloud at courts throughout Europe (Remensnyder 207). The courtly

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¹ The Romance genre comes from the word *roman*, what we now call Old French. What we call “romance” is a reference to works composed in the vernacular, using the language of the courtly love genre (Remensnyder 204). *Roman* was the Old French term for the vernacular during this period. Authors such as Marie and Chrétien de Troyes were among the first to write in a vernacular language instead of in Latin.
love genre centers upon heterosexual love between knights and noble ladies, and the homosocial ties between kings and vassals (Remensnyder 210).

Marie is believed to have lived at the English court of Henry II Plantagenet, to whom the *lais* are dedicated (Harf-Lancner 8). The *lais* are written in French, which since the Norman invasion “had become the language of royal and princely courts” (Remensnyder 206). There are four manuscripts that include one or more *lais*, and one additional manuscript, Harley 978, that includes all twelve *lais* attributed to Marie (Harf-Lancner 10). “Tous les éditeurs des *Lais* ont donc choisi pour texte de base ce manuscrit H,” and it is therefore the source for the texts being used in this analysis (Harf-Lancner 10).²

Despite much disagreement in the academic community, it is largely believed that the *lais* were written between 1160-1215 (Pappano 338, Ferrante 28, Harf-Lancner 10). This is roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of recognizable fashion in France, indicating the possibility of an increased interest in dress and textiles (Heller *Fashion in Medieval France*, 4). This thesis seeks to address the role of textiles through a literary analysis of Marie’s treatment of female characters and textiles in the *lais Guigemar*, *Lanval*, and *Laustic*.

Many modern scholars who study the *lais* find that Marie was a trailblazer for women’s equality; through her work she creates a space where women can assert themselves and take advantage of their positions. One of her over-arching themes is that love should be reciprocal (Krueger *Women Readers*, 58). It is in this reciprocal love that the heroes and heroines of her *lais* find redemption, freedom, and justice over and over

² I reference the Harf-Lancner 1990 edition of *Les Lais de Marie de France* for the Old French edition as found in the Harley manuscript.
again. Marie often depicts her heroine as a *malmariée*, an unhappily married woman.³

Through the *malmariée* character, Marie shows that she is “concerned with the very real constraints women faced in the realm of marriage” (Remensnyder 215). Marie, through her heroines, does not abandon the institution of marriage in which women have no control; instead, the *malmariées* play the cards they are dealt to their advantage. They arrange affairs and escapes, and they exchange letters and gifts with estranged lovers. Amy Remensnyder aptly notes that “Adultery thus serves as a metaphor for a power that women often did not have in any world but the fictional one created by Marie: the ability to choose one’s mate” (215). Marie’s fictional *malmariées* reflect the real situation of unhappily married aristocratic women of the period (Remensnyder 215).

Each *lai* centers upon a “symbolic creature or artifact” that is paralleled in at least one or more other *lais* (Hanning and Ferrante 2). In the introduction of their translation of the *lais*, Hanning and Ferrante point out a general theme of the *lais*:

> The lovers often live in a hostile world-- a court that rejects, a marriage that enslaves, social conventions that constrain-- and love that offers the only opportunity to escape the world; to free the mind, if not the body, from the world’s oppression… (11).

This quotation perfectly captures the scenarios in which Marie’s heroes and heroines often find themselves, scenarios in which I will argue women “escape from the world” and “free the mind, if not the body” by using their own abilities (Hanning and Ferrante 11). Contrary to Jerry Root’s belief that “these stories suggest that the courtly discourse empowers women only to the extent that they try to correspond to an ideal created by this (mainly male) discourse,” I argue that Marie de France takes advantage of fictional

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³ The *malmariée* is a common character throughout the Courtly Love genre. Marie includes a *malmariée* in *Guigemar, Yonec, Laustic, Milun, Chievrefueil*, and *Eliduc.*
space in writing to present women who have taken advantage of misogynistic traditions common during the Middle Ages in one way or another (Root 20). Similar to how Marie’s heroines often find themselves in fantastical and liberating situations, Amy Remensnyder highlights that “to be free from court and its patriarchal structures, [real] women must take refuge in a magical world… that exists only in the imagination” (215). Through fiction Marie uses her female voice in the setting of the constraints of medieval society to bring escape to her female audience. It is then up to the female reader to find a sense of empowerment and to decide what to do with it.

Although the study of medieval dress, fashion and textiles, and feminist medieval studies have gained popularity, becoming more prominent in the past twenty years, Marie’s use of textiles in the lais has been the focus of little academic scrutiny. This thesis serves to clarify that, regardless of whether a fashion system, a developed and visible industry of dress, continually undergoing change, was in place in the twelfth-century court of Henry II, Marie exploits textiles and dress in her lais to advance her female characters. In Lanval Marie uses elements of high medieval fashion to dress her heroine so that she gains entry into male space. I will also demonstrate how in Guigemar Marie’s heroine uses clothing and accessories to procure security and fidelity from her lover. In Laustic Marie shows how the use of feminine textile skills can subvert a husband’s violent threats.

In Fashion in Medieval France Sarah-Grace Heller systematically proves the existence of a “fashion system” thriving in twelfth-century France as evidenced in medieval literature. A fashion system refers to the consumption of clothing that prefers novelty, is a means of self-expression, undergoes constant superficial change, is highly
stratified based on class, and encourages individuality (Fashion in Medieval France, passim). She states that, “words are crucial evidence for locating the growth stages of a fashion system…” (8). Similarly to how Heller uses textual evidence to prove that a fashion system existed in twelfth-century France, I will use textual evidence from Marie’s *lais* to show how Marie uses textiles and fashion to empower her female characters. Heller suggests the existence of a fashion system as early as the eleventh century based on consumption of illuminated manuscripts as commodities *en vogue*, making it entirely possible that clothing would become a nascent commodity as well; fashionable consumption of manuscripts and prayer books indicate that a complex fashion system was already in place (Heller, Fashion 51).

Although Heller does not analyze Marie’s *lais*, her analysis of Guillaume de Dole, *Jehan et Blonde*, *Flamenca*, and the *Roman de la Rose* is none the less applicable to this study of Marie de France and twelfth-century textiles and fashion. It can hardly be denied that many further developments in fashion were yet to come. Her conclusion that “the fashion system was far from universal in France at this time, being confined to certain urban centers, and to the theatrical stages… of the urban and courtly milieu” (179), I believe, could easily have been true at the court of Henry II Plantagenet.

E. Jane Burns has greatly advanced the field of medieval clothing and textile studies, as well as pioneered feminist medieval studies. In *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, Burns uses *Lanval* as a case study to illustrate gender role reversals through fashion (167-178). She tells us that “the deployment of rich clothes can also enable, symbolically, an increase in the social status
of women,” and that in medieval literature, female desire can be expressed through clothes (3).

In *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*, Burns again argues that clothes and, in particular, textiles play a crucial role in narrative by “speaking without speaking” (116). Her analysis of Ovid’s “Philomena” in *Bodytalk* is particularly applicable to Marie de France’s *Laustic* in that both the heroine of *Laustic* and “Philomena” use textiles as “a speech given material form in fabric” (131). Parallel to Ovid’s tragic heroine, Marie’s *malmarieée* uses needlework “to act upon a body of writing rather than having her body acted upon by others” (131). *Bodytalk* illustrates how women use their craft to overstep the misogynous paradigms of medieval literature.

Nicole Smith’s “Estritement Bendé: Marie de France’s Guigemar and the Erotics of Tight Dress” is a notable analysis of how *une chemise* and *une ceinture* become symbols of fidelity. She discusses the meaning of tight dress as morally honorable, instead of immoral and wanton. In the introduction of her article, Smith states that, “The twelfth century witnessed perhaps the most startling change in the history of women’s dress…” (96). This change is the implementation of belts and lacing. Smith argues that the church’s opposition to immorally tight clothing is counter to Marie’s “poetics of restraint” that is properly learned by being “tightly bound” in love (97). She illustrates how, in comparison to Guigemar who has learned the art of love by being tightly bound, his rival Meriaduc is unrestrained and savage in his love for the heroine (102). Lacking in Smith’s analysis of *Guigemar’s* tight dress is an explanation for the wife’s infidelity to her husband, which I resolve in my chapter on *Guigemar*. 
Smith briefly mentions *Lanval* and the erotic lacing and revealing dress of the Fairy Mistress. She argues that the sensual body of the Fairy is exactly what the church feared about tight clothing (100-101). The superiority of her character, her omnipotence, and her beauty are further brought to light by the quality of her fashion. Smith effectively shows how “Marie’s sartorial style serves as a mechanism of restraint that transforms the immodest into the disciplined, modest, humane, and elegant” (109).

Another contribution to *Laustic* research is Robert T. Cargo’s “Marie de France’s *Le Laustic* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.” In this article Cargo examines the *samite étoffe* and the message embroidered upon it in comparison to Philomena’s tapestry. The analysis he provides gives the impression of a bittersweet resolution to *Laustic*. Similar to how Procne mourns Philomena when she believes her to be dead, the wife in *Laustic* will also be mourning the death of a precious love (166). Cargo sees the loss of her lover as the loss of liberty.

In the first chapter I analyze the *lai de Guigemar* and the symbolic role of the knot and belt motif. This *lai* opens Marie’s collection in the Harley manuscript, and it will set a tone of female subversion of male authority. I will demonstrate how the exchanged knot and belt are used to represent virtuous love, and how the imprisoned wife uses feminine knowledge to instruct the hero and assert her demands. *Guigemar* is a story about navigating the obstacles of love and upholding an honorable vow. In this *lai* Marie uses fashion accessories and traditional Celtic symbolism to exemplify fidelity.

The knot and belt are iconic throughout Celtic history and mythology as symbols of fidelity, and in this Breton *lai*, they continue the Celtic tradition while challenging the
sanctimony and rising importance of marriage during this period of the Middle Ages. These sartorial items directly enforce female capability and demonstrate that true, righteous love can, in fact, be found outside of marriage, so long as the lovers are faithful to each other. These small tokens incorporated into Marie’s narrative communicate more than their mere sartorial value and the belt especially is evidence of an accessorizing aspect to a twelfth-century fashion system.

The second *lai* under examination is *Lanval*, the tale of a disgraced knight who finds love and riches only to lose them because of his pride. I argue that the Fairy Queen uses her vestimentary style to gain entry into male-dominated space, and through her fashion she asserts her authority and superiority while acquitting her devastated and falsely accused lover, Lanval.

This fairy’s fashion is particular in that it is racy. Her wardrobe often leaves little of her body to the imagination, and she exudes comfort and confidence in her erotic and lingerie-esque garments. Her assertiveness in seeking out Lanval, and her boldness and fearlessness before King Arthur set her apart from the typical image of medieval women. In fact, she is not a mere woman; she is entirely otherworldly and far superior to anything and anyone on earth because she is not from this world. Her innate supremacy is exemplified by her manner of dressing and her ornate displays of wealth. In *Lanval* Marie de France uses *la mode* to demonstrate power. The Fairy’s masculine confidence and dominance in her relationship demonstrate a reversal of typical gender roles while clinging to feminine fashion and sexuality. Again, Marie uses fashion to gain ground for her female character and to assert equality, if not superiority.
The final *lai* that I consider is *Laustic*. This tale artfully weaves symbolism of a nightingale, embroidery, and Ovid’s “Philomena” into a story of female subversion and creativity. The article of fashion under inspection is a piece of embroidered silk, enveloping the corpse of the martyred nightingale. One thing that sets this textile decoration apart is the testimony embroidered into it. Whereas in the other *lais*, the heroines use objects of fashion, which are, as far as we know, not self-produced, the *malmarieé de Laustic* employs her own skill and creativity to rise above her situation of despair much like Philomena in Ovid’s poem.

My analysis shows how the heroine writes her own story through her needlework, taking control of the authorship of her life, thus taking on an atypical active female role. She is able to get around her violent husband to deliver a warning to her lover. Her love is then symbolically protected and remembered in a reliquary that holds her message for eternity similar to how reliquaries house holy remains of saints’ bodies.

This thesis will address the present gap in research on Marie de France and textiles by showing how the knot and belt in *Guigemar* allow the entrapped heroine to gain freedom from captivity, sexual freedom, and keep her lover in toe, how the Fairy Queen in *Lanval* is *surnaturelle* and superior to King Arthur through her racy dress, and how a woman’s needlework can allow her to write her own story and save her lover from a tragic fate. These chapters will serve to illustrate women’s resourcefulness during the Middle Ages, arguably throughout time, and how Marie’s use of textiles moves her heroines along in *Guigemar, Lanval*, and *Laustic*. 
CHAPTER I
KNOTS AND BELTS: FIDELITY IS KEY

Guigemar appears as the first lai in Marie’s collection in the Harley manuscript and is one of the longest lais (886 lines) in her œuvre. In The Poetics of Memory, Logan Whalen asserts that Guigemar is Marie’s “most descriptive lai,” perhaps due to its length (61). In line with the style of her works, Guigemar is a blend of Celtic fantastical motifs, oral tradition, and Greek mythology.⁴ Some of the elements specific to this lai are a talking hind, an enchanted boat, a mural of Venus, and an imprisoned malmariée. Many of these themes and symbols are recurring throughout Marie’s lais, the imprisoned wife being a notable example.

Nicole Smith and Emanuel Mickel have touched upon the idea of Christian ideology being blended with or replacing the original Breton or Celtic symbolism in Guigemar (Smith 97-98, Mickel 46). Smith speaks specifically of the knot and the belt, which are central to the plot of the narrative. Mickel notes the significance of the hunt for the hind in Breton myth (34).

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⁴ It is worth noting that Celtic folklore was transmitted orally before the twelfth century, and Marie is one of the first who takes on the task of recording the stories. Marie specifically explains in the general prologue of her lais that she is concerned with the remembrance of certain “aventures… / Plusurs en ai oïz conter, / nez vueil laisser ne oblïer” (adventures… that she has heard, that she does not want to forget, ll. 36, 39-40).
Guigemar is a narrative that unquestionably sets the tone for the following lais in the Harley manuscript, and it establishes key themes and elements. Central to the story are what Nicole Smith has coined “the erotics of tight dress”: a knot and belt tied by the couple as symbols of their fidelity (96). In this chapter I will demonstrate how the malmariée is liberated by her love with Guigemar and how gender roles are reversed when she heals his wounds and teaches him the art of love. The lady ropes Guigemar in when she teaches him faithfulness in love; she seals their fidelity with the exchange of a belt and knot. Through the incorporation of a strong female character, versed in the ways of love, and through sartorial imagery, Marie de France illustrates that for love to be liberating and powerful, it must be unwavering.

Guigemar takes place in Brittany in Northern France (l. 25, Harf-Lancner 27). It opens with a short prologue where Marie says, “Oëz, seignur, que dit Marie, / ki en sun tens pas ne s’oblie” (Listen, sirs, to what Marie, who in her time will not be forgotten, ll. 4-5), asserting her place in history among the writers of her time who were nearly entirely male. Guigemar is “vadlez fu sages e pruz; / mult se faiseit amer de tuz” (a wise and valiant young man, easily liked by everyone, ll. 43-44). He managed to win favor with the king, and was rewarded for his great success in battle.

A cel tens ne pout hom truver
si bon chevalier ne sun per.
De tant i out mepris nature
que unc de nule amur n’out cure.
Suz ciel n’out dame ne pucele,
tit ant par fust noble ni bele,
si il d’amer la requeïst,
que volontiers nel retenist.
Plusurs l’en requistrent suvent,
mais il n’aveit de ceo talent;

5 All translations by the author.
nuls ne se pout aparecuir  
que il volsist amur avenir  
(ll. 55-65).

(No one could find a knight as good as he. However, Nature had given him one fault which no love could cure. No dame, nor maiden, no matter how noble or beautiful, would have refused his love, had he offered it. Many had sought his love, but he gave the impression that he did not want to know love.) Everyone wondered at his rejection of several admirable partners. During a visit home he gathers a group to go hunting. Guigemar, a passionate hunter, hopes that he will be able to track a deer. He finds a white hind with her fawn. This particular doe has the antlers of a stag, making her androgynous. Guigemar shoots his arrow at the doe and hits, but the arrow rebounds, hitting himself in the thigh: “Guigemar fiert en tel maniere / en la quisse desqu’al cheval” (Guigemar pierced his thigh so deeply that it hit his horse as well, ll. 98-99). Dismounting, he falls to the ground, and the doe begins to speak to him. She says that his wound will never heal unless he finds a woman who suffers in love for him as much as he suffers in love for her. “Dunt tuit cil s’esmerveillerunt, / ki aiment e amé avrunt / u ki puis amerunt après” (You will outshine all who love, who have loved, and who will love, ll. 119-121). Guigemar then takes his shirt to bind his wound, “De sa chemise estreitement / bende sa plaie fermement.” (With his tight shirt he binds his wound firmly, ll. 139-140), and wanders off. The choice of words estreitement and bende/bendé recurs throughout this lai as the hero continues on his journey. Being tightly bound is central to the plot because this is how Guigemar’s wound becomes healed and how he learns how to love properly. As occurs in the Tristan legend, Guigemar finds a river and a ship more beautiful than any he has seen before, which
leads him to the lady who will mend his wound.\textsuperscript{6} Aboard the ship there is not a single soul, but he finds a luxurious bed with satin sheets of \textit{purpre} and decoration of pure gold. He lies on the bed to rest, and the ship magically sets sail.

The ship docks at the castle of a jealous old lord who keeps his wife imprisoned and prevents her from interacting with anyone but a young servant girl and an old sterile priest. Marie tells the reader,

\begin{quote}
Gelus esteit a desmesure; \\
car ceo purporte la nature \\
que tuit li vieil seient gelus; \\
mult het chascuns que il seir cus
\end{quote}

(ll. 213-216).

( Jealousy consumed [the husband]; it is in the nature of old men to be jealous. No one can stand to be cuckolded).

When the ship arrives, the wife is in the garden with her servant, and both hurry to see who is on board. They find no one but Guigemar, and he explains what has happened to him and how he has arrived at their dock. The lady offers to help him heal and warns him of her jealous old husband and the constant surveillance of the priest. The lady and her maid bring Guigemar to her chambers and rebind his wound, which is again, “estreitement bendé” (l. 373).

During this time, Guigemar is struck with Cupid’s arrow, “ja ert sis quers en grant estrif” (his heart was in a heated battle, l. 380). He was so head-over-heels, painfully in love with the lady, that he forgot his wound, his pain, and his country. The servant girl discovers Guigemar’s love for her lady and offers to help him. She thinks that they deserve each other and are well suited for each other. The girl tells Guigemar,

\textsuperscript{6} We know that Marie was familiar with the Tristan legend. She herself contributes to the tradition in her \textit{lai} of \textit{Chievrefueil}, which recounts a rendezvous between Tristan and the queen, Iseut.
“Ceste amurs sereit convenable, / se vus amdui fussiez estable” (This love will be ideal, if you can rest faithful to each other, ll. 451-452).

The two soon confess their love and share tender embraces. Marie tells us, “Bien leur covienge del surplus, / de ceo que li alter unt en us!” (As for the rest, that is between them, ll. 533-534). The couple shares their love for a year and a half, until the lady gets a premonition of their being discovered. She is afraid that if Guigemar leaves, he will be unfaithful, but if he stays, her husband will catch them. When she finds a solution she says,

Amis, de ceo m’aseürez!
Vostre chemise me livrez!
El pan desuz ferai un pleit;
cungié vous doins, u que ceo seït,
d’amer cele kil desfera
e ki desplier le savra
(ll. 557-562).

(My love, this is how you can reassure me! Your shirt is the key! At the bottom I will tie a knot; I give you leave to love whoever knows how to untie the knot, no matter who it is).

As a token of fidelity, she ties the bottom of Guigemar’s chemise so that only she can undo the knot, ensuring that he will be with no other woman. In return, Guigemar fastens a belt around her naked hips that only he can undo:

qu’el le face seür de li
par une ceinture altresi,
dunt a sa char nue la ceint:
parmi les flans alkes l’estreint.
Ki la bucle purra ovrir
senz depescier e senz partir,
il li prie que celui aint
(ll. 569-575).
(To be certain of her fidelity, he fastened a belt around her bare skin: tightly around her hips. She is free to love whoever can unfasten the buckle without breaking or ripping the belt).

Only the woman who can untie the knot and only the man who can unfasten the belt can have the love of the individual who is “tightly bound” (Smith 97).

That same day a chamberlain spies the couple through a window and reports to the husband. Guigemar barely makes it back to his enchanted ship alive, and the wife is forced to remain locked in a tower. For two years the wife is imprisoned until she takes a chance at escape and finds Guigemar’s ship waiting for her. Unfortunately, it carries her not to Guigemar, who has been actively searching for the one who can untie his shirt, but to a neighboring land. The lord of the land, Meriaduc, desires the lady, and keeps her locked in his castle, trying to woo her. Finally, exhausted with her persistent refusals, he cuts off her clothes and finds Guigemar’s belt, which prevents him from raping her. She explains that she may only love the man who can undo the belt. Meriaduc, having heard of Guigemar, inquires about a man who is searching similarly for the woman who can untie the knot on his shirt. He calls together a tourney to lure Guigemar to his castle and see if he can undo the lady’s belt. At first Guigemar does not recognize his lover, stating that all women look alike. Nor does she claim to recognize him, until Meriaduc playfully suggests that she try and untie Guigemar’s chemise. She is successful and the couple reunites, only to have Meriaduc steal her away. Guigemar gathers knights to fight to reclaim her, and they lay siege to Meriaduc’s castle. Finally, Guigemar and his love are safe and together, “Ore a trespassee sa peine” (his pain is of the past, l. 882).
Symbolic Objects of Fashion

The overarching symbolism in this *lai* lies in the belt and knot. The symbolism of the knot and belt as objects of fidelity has largely been recognized (Jonin 281), but the proximity of these objects to the sexual organs and the obvious sexual implications cannot be ignored. The lovers are bound sexually to each other to the point that only the other can provide liberation. “Quel symbole que le plait et la ceinture! Chacun de ces êtres est noué, enfermé psychologiquement et sexuellement, et ne peut pas se libérer que par l’autre” (Saly 337). They are also bound by a pact of fidelity to each other symbolically, through traditional Celtic knots, and physically, through the restraining nature of knots and belts. Smith argues that these tightly-tied objects represent a “poetics of restraint” and “that those who remain estreitement bendé…in dress are models of virtue and passionate lovers” (Smith 97).

The *chemise* worn by Guigemar is a long shirt worn by both men and women underneath their outer clothes (see image 1.1 where the man reveals a glimpse of his *chemise* at the neck of his outfit). To ensure Guigemar’s fidelity, the wife ties the *pan* (bottom edges) of his shirt together, perhaps between his legs, so that he cannot take it off, preventing him from sleeping with another woman. In return, the belt that Guigemar places around the lady’s hips

![Image 1: The woman is pulling the man into bed by the tails of his chemise.](http://catalogue.ency.sorbonne.fr/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=32108&shelfbrowse_itemnumber=34203)
prevents her as well from engaging in sexual liaisons. He places the belt estreint (tight) around the char nue (bare skin) of her flans (thighs). Though this belt may be suggestive of a medieval chastity belt, instead of encasing her buttocks and legs in metal, Guigemar’s belt placed around her thighs serves to restrict the thighs from separating enough for sex to occur. Though once though to be a product of male jealousy and control during the Middle Ages, it is now believed that the chastity belt is more or less a myth, and that most existing chastity belts are fake (Keyser 254). The idea behind the chastity belt remains in Guigemar; while it is worn, the malmariée is assuredly chaste.

Throughout the lai, Guigemar has been tightly-bound; first his wound was bound tightly to heal, and then the lady ties his shirt to keep him in line while separated. When Guigemar places the belt on his lady, she becomes tightly-bound for the first time. It is significant that Guigemar now binds his lover to assure fidelity in the same way that he has been tightly-bound to heal and learn the art of love. This shows that he is ready to act upon what he has learned and continue to be a loyal lover.

The knot and the belt are more than just symbols of fidelity that prohibit sex; they also represent moderation and learning the art of love. “Marie’s sartorial style serves as a mechanism of restraint that transforms the immodest into the disciplined,
modest, humane, and elegant” (Smith 109). Marie takes Guigemar, a sexually unskilled man, unlearned in the ways of love, and teaches him how to love correctly, passionately, and faithfully. When Guigemar first experiences love for the lady he describes pain, as if his heart were on fire. What he is experiencing is love that is unlearned and uncontrolled. The servant girl points him in the right direction when she tells him that romance between him and her mistress could be virtuous, so long as their “amdui fussiez estable” (love remains faithful, l. 452). It is important that a woman is giving her consent, as it were, and blessing their affair as long as they remain true to each other. Her advice serves as part of the education Guigemar receives under the tutelage of these women.

The irony of the tale is that while being faithful to Guigemar, the lady is herself unfaithful to her husband. The contradiction between the lady’s tightly-clad lover and her infidelity to her husband is curious. We must look into the wife’s clearly strained marital relationship to find Marie’s meaning. If we know that Guigemar was, at the beginning of the lai, uneducated about love, and only later did he learn the art of love, we can use his “transformed” self as an example of what a good lover looks like. I would argue that the jealous husband is also untrained in love. His wife is unhappy, and their love is doomed because he is a bad lover, locking his wife away from the world and not trusting her to be independent. He believes that in order for her to be faithful, she must be banned from interacting with men. Thus, Marie condemns the unfulfilling relationship with the husband and perhaps the entire institution of marriage. It is evident in her collection of lais that marriage and love do not go hand in hand. In fact,
more often than not in her *lais*, marriage is restrictive and loveless, and freedom and true love are found through extramarital affairs.\footnote{Though Marie seems to acclaim extramarital affairs in *lais* such as *Yonec*, *Milun*, *Guigemar*, and *Chievrefueil*, she portrays many affairs that are not so highly esteemed: See *Equitan* where the wife is killed, *Bisclavret* where the wife is unfaithful and backstabbing, and *Eliduc* where the wife plots her husband’s death.}

Similarly unschooled in the art of love is the menacing knight, Meriaduc. When he desires to have sex with the lady, he is refused. Instead of accepting refusal, he attempts to sexually assault the lady and is prevented by her belt. His hasty and potentially violent act demonstrates his lack of discipline, which is a key ingredient to the art of love. What is interesting is Meriaduc’s ability to recognize the lovers for who they are before they themselves are able to do so. He attempts to play the cards so as to get the belt unfastened and steal the lady from Guigemar, again showing his lack of skill at love. Meriaduc bypasses courtship and the art of love and loses the lady because his love was unworthy.

In *Guigemar*, as in several of Marie’s *lais* “hidden identity comes to light through the association of objects with characters” (Rothschild 99). The lovers must acknowledge their tokens of fidelity in order for their identity to be known. Thus, the knot and belt are also symbols that help to reunite the couple. Guigemar’s blindness to his lover is perhaps odd. He only knew her after she undid the knot in his *chemise*, and not by looking at her and recognizing her face. For two years he has young women come try to untie the knot in his *chemise*; can we believe that during this time he forgot what his lover looked like, or that he saw so many women it was hard to remember the one he loved? I am of the opinion that his “forgetfulness” serves to highlight the magic of the knot and the belt. It is the Cinderella moment when the shoe finally fits-- this
must be the girl who won over the prince, only to disappear afterward. Thus the importance of the symbolic objects is strengthened by the couple’s lack of visual recognition.

Venus and Ovid

To further investigate the role of female desire and authority, it is important to consider the Venus mural painted on the wall of the wife’s quarters. The mural depicts Venus, the incarnation of love, burning one of Ovid’s books. There is much debate over whether Marie and the malmariée are condemning Ovid, or whether it is the husband who is against his ideas. There is also equal debate over which book Venus holds over the flames.

Harf-Lancner states that “ce livre d’Ovide doit être les Remedia Amoris” (39), while others argue strongly for the book being the Ars Amatoria (Smith 104). Knowing which of Ovid’s books Venus burns is less important than answering the question of who chose the mural, and what the seeming condemnation of some of Ovid’s best-known writing signifies.

According to Marie’s lai it seems clear that the jealous husband was responsible for the installation of the mural:

   Li sire out fait dedenz le mur,  
   pur metre i sa femme a seür,  
   chambre; suz ciel n’aveit plus bele…  
   Venus, la deuessse d’amur,  
   fu trespient mise en la peinture;  
   les traiz mustrot e la nature
I agree with Harf-Lancner that the book must be the *Remedia Amoris*, the book in which Ovid teaches, among other recommendations, how to avoid love by staying busy with work and maintaining many sexual partners. The husband’s message against adultery and numerous sexual partners is made clear when Venus burns Ovid’s book. It seems that Venus is depicted representing the exact kind of faithful love in which the lady instructs Guigemar, and the kind of faithful, serving love that the husband expects from his wife. Though the room was constructed and planned by her husband, perhaps this mural has backfired on him; instead of inspiring his wife’s love, the mural encourages her to seek a more honorable lover who does not confine her to her room. The husband was hoping the depiction of the burning of Ovid’s book would show his wife that instead of resisting love, she should loyally serve and love him. Even if the husband chose to have Venus depicting a love he had hoped his wife would emulate, the mural functions as a critique by Marie to show the reader what she thinks of Ovid’s remedy to love and the constrictive jealous love of the husband.
Jerry Root argues that the Venus painting portrays women as “locked-up” in predisposition to love (13). This is perhaps true in regards to the husband who commissioned the murals hoping that his wife would learn obedience, but in the *lai*, when the wife follows Venus’ method of loyal love, she gains her liberation and her escape. “By forming a new, feminine version of narratives that were already known, both the woman in *Guigemar* and Marie de France infuse these narratives with feminine poetics” (Faust 26). In this way the *mal mariée* and Marie were both subversive of male dominance, taking a situation and remaking it to assert female agency.

*La Plaie*

Smith points out that Guigemar’s accidental self-inflicted wound is the first time in the story where being tightly bound is associated with healing. When Guigemar dresses his wound, he is the first to become *estreitement bendé*. The second time the lady dresses his wound in the safety of the castle, and the third time the couple tightly bind each other with the knot and belt (Smith 97). The first mention of *estreitement bendé* in relation to treating and bandaging Guigemar’s wound shows that, in light of the hind’s prophecy, the hero is beginning his education on the merit of being tightly bound. His training continues in the care of the lady, who again, tightly binds his wound, and later, tightly binds his *chemise*. The wound is connected to the textiles in this *lai* because of the correlation of the wound being tightly bound as well as the knot and belt being tightly bound. The act of their knotting each other, ensuring that they are both *estreitement bendé*, in itself evokes the textile imagery of weaving. One can imagine arms entwined
while Guigemar fastens the belt around his lady’s hips and the wife knots his chemise. The couple’s arms are interlacing while they are fastening and knotting, creating a weave between themselves and their symbols of fidelity.

Faust mentions the importance and symbolism of love as a physical suffering in Guigemar (Faust 64). The two wounds mirror each other. Guigemar’s rebounding arrow causes his first wound, and his second wound is caused by love, representing his state of ignorance to love. Through a metaphor that strongly resembles and evokes being physically struck by Cupid’s arrow, what started as a physical wound becomes the pain of being in love. Both of these maladies are cured through being tightly-bound, and both are cured by the care and attention of the malmariée.

Teaching in the Middle Ages was traditionally conducted from male to female, or female to female, but in Guigemar the lady teaches the knight how to love faithfully (Semple 171-172). This is the first of many gender-role reversals featured in Marie’s lais. In Guigemar, “women are not simply passive objects of male desire that have to be removed from sight and mind, rather, they hold the key to greater knowledge of erotic life” (Semple 173). Medieval representations of the female body found in hagiography show the female body as a source of temptation. Semple argues that ultimately, the saint’s lives undermine female authority instead of highlighting the female body as sacred (170). Marie depicts a heroine who uses her body to heal and to instruct in the art of love by teaching Guigemar to remain tightly bound and faithful to her. For Semple, Marie has effectively redefined the female body; the lady in Guigemar is the

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8 Few medieval women would have had the opportunity to get an education. Some noble women could have had tutors or have been educated at a monastery (Remensnyder 205). The transmission of knowledge from the malmariée to Guigemar is significant because it shows a woman who has knowledge about a subject of which men are ignorant.
source of healing, her body is sacred and transformative, and erotic love and sexual desire are part of the “realm of learning” (Semple 178).

The assertion of female capability and the notion that a woman would have knowledge unknown to men are directly represented in Guigemar when the wife cures the initial wound through tight binding, and teaches the eponymous hero the art of love by being tightly-bound. Marie uses the knot and belt to illustrate the effectiveness of female-to-male healing and education, and to show the disparity between Guigemar, who has learned the art, as opposed to men who remain ignorant.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how Marie de France uses sartorial accessories to empower a female character, enact gender reversals, and to illustrate that love must be faithful. The heroine of Guigemar takes control of the fate of her relationship when she escapes from her castle to find her lover. In this first lai in the Harley manuscript, Marie lays the groundwork for the following stories about love, fidelity, hidden identity, and transformation. Through her characters, she establishes from the outset that desire, love, and fidelity go hand in hand.

She has also taken everyday articles of clothing and made them into instruments laden with meaning. At a time when the Church preached against tight dress and adultery, Marie de France cunningly remade sinful dress as the model for loyalty and devoted love (Smith 100). Following Burns’ analysis on how female characters subvert misogynistic tradition (Courtly Love Undressed 3), I find that the
malmariée in Guigemar, like many medieval heroines, was able to express her own female desire through hidden details of dress appearing in the *lai*. In knotting Guigemar’s *chemise*, the heroine is able to assert her voice in the relationship. Medieval women had notoriously little say about what happened in their lives; I imagine that the malmariée was forced by her family into her marriage for political or financial motives. Loving Guigemar was the first time that the wife had her own say, and she reinforced her voice by demanding fidelity from her lover.

The audience is set up for this tightly bound and loyally committed romance by the androgynous hind that curses Guigemar’s wound. The deer warned Guigemar, who had never before entertained the notion of love, that only a profound, aching love can heal his wound and set him straight. The deer in *Guigemar* represents nature, and the story comes full circle since it was nature that gave Guigemar the inability to love romantically, and nature, through the hind, that awakens his desire and passion. The knot that binds Guigemar’s physical wound is a parallel for the binding that will later heal his burning heart. Binding healed both wounds and taught the hero how to love in the process.
CHAPTER II

FAIRY, QUEEN OF FASHION

_Lanval_ is the fifth _lai_ in the Harley manuscript, and the first of two _lais_ that involve a human and a mythical or supernatural being as lovers.⁹ _Lanval_ is teeming with Celtic tradition and mythical elements. It is also full of vivid fashion description. In this chapter I demonstrate how Marie uses fashion in this _lai_ to demonstrate the superiority of the “Fairy Queen,” and to give her entrance into a man’s world.

Although _Lanval_ is not the only _lai_ to mention King Arthur, it is the only _lai_ that is centered on and takes place at his court.¹⁰ Marie has meticulously woven together the Celtic tradition and Arthurian legend into a tale that puts Guinevere’s reputation into question around the time that Chrétien de Troyes’ _Lancelot_ romance was written, making this one of first glimpses of literary infidelity.¹¹

In the _lai_ _Lanval_, the eponymous hero, a noble vassal of King Arthur, is embarrassingly forgotten at Cardoel when Arthur presents land and wives to his loyal knights. Among these knights are many who envy Lanval “Pur sa valur, pur

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⁹ The other being _Yonec_, which tells the tale of an imprisoned woman who takes a mythical and princely man-bird as her lover.

¹⁰ The first known written account of King Arthur is Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around 1138, though the Arthurian legend had been circulated orally long before then.

¹¹ Remensnyder points out that the “adulterous queen is in fact a stock character” of medieval romance and that she reflects the anxiety surrounding inheritance and adulterous wives (213). The medieval husband was unable to know the paternity of his wife’s children and therefore concerned with the threat that adultery could potentially pose.
sa largesce, / pur sa bealté, pur sa pruësce” (For his bravery, for his generosity, for his beauty, and for his prowess, ll. 21-23), and are not the least displeased to see him slighted in this way.

To escape the hypocrisy of the court and the embarrassment of being slighted, Lanval leaves the city with his horse; while walking, beside a river, he encounters two alluringly beautiful demoiselles carrying pitchers of water. The maidens are “Vestues furent richement / e laciees estreirement / en dous bliaz de purpre bis” (richly dressed and laced tightly in two purple tunics, ll. 57-59) and invite the knight to follow them to their lady’s pavilion where she is waiting to meet him. Lanval willingly follows them and is led directly to a scantily clad fairy-esque lady lounging on a bed. Her beauty is such that “Flur de lis e rose nuvele, / quant ele pert el tens d’esté, / trespassot ele de bealté” (fresh spring roses and lilies are nothing to her beauty, ll. 94-96). Marie describes her clothing:

en sa chemise senglement.  
Mult ot le cors bien fait e gent.  
Un chier mantel de blanc hermine,  
couvert de purpre Alexandrine,  
ot pur le chalt sur li geté;  
tut ot descovert le costé  
(ll. 99-104).

(…wearing nothing but a slip. Her body was good and graceful. A priceless white ermine cape, covered with purple Alexandrian silk, was draped over her, exposing her side).

The golden eagle mounted atop her tent was alone so precious that “suz ciel n’a rei kis eslijast / pur nul aveir qu’il i donast” (no king on earth could ever afford to buy [it] no matter what the cost, ll. 91-92).
The lady confesses to Lanval that she has heard much about him and has come from far away to seek his love. Lanval more than gladly accepts: “Il l’esguarda, si la vit bele; / amurs le puint de l’estencele, / ki sun quer alume e esprent” (He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful; love struck him like a spark that set his heart on fire, ll. 117-119). She offers Lanval riches beyond his wildest dreams; anything he should need she will provide, so long as he keeps their love a secret. If not, he will lose her forever.

“Ne vus descovrez a nul hume!
De ceo vus dirai jeo la sume:
a tuz jurs m’avriëz perdue,
se ceste amurs esteit seüe;
mes ne me purriëz veeir
ne de mun cors saisine aveir”
(ll. 145-150).

(“Tell no one of our love! For if you do, you will have lost me forever and will never see me again or hold me close to you.”)

Lanval returns to the city and finds his entire household well dressed and his home miraculously transformed. Lanval summons his love to him frequently and takes great pleasure in her company. He displays his wealth by bestowing gifts upon all his servants and countrymen; “n’i ot estrange ne privé / a qui Lanval n’eüst doné” (there was no stranger or neighbor to whom Lanval did not give, ll. 215-216). Eventually, he is summoned by Arthur and reluctantly returns to court, knowing that to call for his love while there will risk revealing their love.

At court Lanval unintentionally attracts the eye of Queen Guinevere. She seeks him out while he is alone in a garden and confesses her love and desire. Evoking his loyalty to Arthur, he rejects her. The queen, feeling spurned, accuses Lanval of homosexuality stating,
“Asez le m’a hum dit sovent,  
que de femme n’avez talent.  
Vaslez amez mien afaitiez,  
ensemble od els vus dediuiez”  
(ll. 281-284).

(“I have often heard said that women are of no interest to you.  
You prefer to find pleasure with young men.”)

Lanval hastily replies that he, in fact, already has a love who is more beautiful than any 
woman on earth, telling Guinevere that

“qu’une de celes ki la sert,  
tute la plus povre meschine,  
valt mielz de vus, dame reîne,  
de cors, de vis e de bealté”  
(ll. 300-304).

(“The least of her servants, the poorest among them, is worth 
more than you, my queen, in body, face, and beauty.”)

Guinevere runs off, wounded by Lanval’s offensive reply.

Later, Guinevere manipulatively tells Arthur that his vassal, Lanval, has 
attempted to seduce her, and that upon refusing him, he grossly insulted her beauty.  
Lanval is now charged by Arthur with disloyalty, attempted cuckoldry, and with 
offending the queen with his vanity. If he loses his trial, Arthur will disavow him and 
send him away. Only the appearance at court of Lanval’s lady herself, more beautiful 
than all others, will exonerate him. For Lanval, his innocence is the least of his worries. 
He is tormented by the loss of his lover after breaking their agreement and revealing her 
existence.

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12 Guinevere’s attempted seduction and betrayal allude to the biblical tale of Potiphar’s 
wife, who tried to seduce Joseph, and later accused him of taking advantage of her, see 
During the trial two beautiful young girls enter the court riding palfreys “de cendal purpre sunt vestues / tut senglement a lur chars nues” (wearing upon their bare flesh, tunics of purple taffeta, ll. 476-477). All at court marvel at their graciousness and beauty as they request that a chamber be readied for their mistress. Soon after, two more demoiselles arrive, even more beautiful that the first two. They were “vestues de dous pailes freis, / chevalchent dous muls Espaigneis” (dressed in new silks, riding two Spanish mules, ll. 515-516) and requested again that a room be made ready for their lady. Finally, the anticipated arrival of Lanval’s dame;

Ja departissent a itant,  
quant par la vile vint errant  
tut a cheval une pucele;  
en tut le siecle n’ot si bele  
…  
Ele ert vestue en itel guise  
de chainse blanc e de chemise,  
que tuit li costé pareient,  
ki de dous parz lacié esteient.  
Le cors ot gent, basse la hanche,  
le col plus blanc que neif sur branche  
(ll. 553-556, 565-570).

([The jury] was ready to pass judgment, when the whole town saw the most beautiful girl in the world arrive on horseback …The lady was dressed in a white shift and tunic tightly laced on both sides, leaving her sides exposed. Her body was graceful, and her thighs perfection, her neck whiter than snow upon a branch.)

She dismounts and approaches Arthur, kneeling: “Sun mantel a laissié chaeir, / que mielz la peüssent veeir” (she let her mantle slip off her shoulders so that all could better see her, ll. 621-622). Her beauty is surreal, and everyone clearly sees that Lanval was right; the elegance and loveliness of this lady surpass those of Guinevere. The Fairy Queen convinces the court of Lanval’s innocence, placing all blame on Queen
Guinevere. In the final words of the *lai*, Lanval jumps behind his lady on her palfrey, and the pair rides off to Avalon, never to be seen or heard from again.

Erotic Fashion and Power

Of all the *lais*, *Lanval* gives the most description to its characters, especially with regards to the Fairy’s and her entourage’s clothes. With the Fairy herself, it is not so much a question of what she is wearing, which is, of course, always of high quality and luxurious, but more a question of what she is not wearing, and the fact that she exposes her undergarments and her fine figure in ways uncom mon to the twelfth century.

When Lanval and the audience first encounter this mythical woman, she is lounging on a bed wearing an ermine mantle and a shift that exposes her thighs. Ménard and Cross have both discussed the semi-nude appearance of the Fairy, and the significance of her servants carrying pitchers of water (Ménard 156; Cross 24-25). Both present the possibility that the lady has bathed before the arrival of her guest (explaining the erotic dress), though Ménard asserts that the water is later used to wash Lanval’s hands before he feasts with the Fairy (156). Cross, on the other hand, has deftly woven the links between *Lanval* and Celtic narrative tradition. For Cross, the demoiselles and their water pitchers represent a classic Celtic theme of the “Fairy Mistress” being bathed in a fountain by servant girls when a knight stumbles upon them (600). He also theorizes that *Lanval*’s divergence from the traditional fountain scene has been introduced to make the *lai* more relevant to the twelfth-century audience (609). The explicit bath scene is now only hinted at, and the basins of water are instead
perhaps used to wash Lanval’s hands before supping, which was customary at the time (Cross 609). So, if we accept the idea of the Fairy bathing and Celtic tradition, we can perhaps explain her scanty attire, but what is the significance of this?

In the initial scene where Lanval meets the Fairy, she is wearing nothing but a chemise. This chemise would be comparable to Guigemar’s chemise; a long shirt that functions as an undergarment. When thinking of her chemise as underwear, the seductive sexuality of her position is evident. She has an ermine mantle draped over her body, leaving the chemise and her thigh visible, as well as her chest and neck.

I argue that her semi-nudity is the way by which she asserts her power over men and women. First, to Lanval, not only is she seductive, but surrounded by opulence she is clearly the powerhouse of the lai. Lanval never questions her authority; instead he immediately loves the fairy and accepts the relationship she proposes to him. When offered infinite wealth and herself as a mistress, only a fool would resist.

It is noteworthy to mention that this fairy has come looking for Lanval specifically: “pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma terre; / de luinz vus sui venue querre” (For you I have left my country; I have come far in search of you, ll. 111-112). She has taken action and initiated the love affair, and has reversed the stereotypical gender roles of troubadour poetry in regards to amor de lonh.13 Her fresh and attractive body may be a factor in Lanval’s initial infatuation, but her behavior is also a power play as she is surrounded by beautiful servants and is confidant in her state of semi-dress, much the way a queen would be surrounded by servants to dress her and attend to her desires.

13 In the troubadour poetry of southern France, amor de lonh, or love from afar, is a common theme in which the male poet falls in love with a woman whom he has never met, having only heard of her goodness from afar. The theme was first exploited by Jaufré Rudel.
She knows that she is superior, and therefore has no need to feel embarrassment about her body, but instead uses it to assert her confidence.

She later uses her semi-revealed body to gain an audience in Arthur’s court. Many underestimate the influence of the Fairy and claim that her beauty, not to forget her racy and tightly-laced chemise, won the case for Lanval (Burgess 124-25, Smith 107). On the contrary, I argue that her clothes simply gain her entry into a space otherwise inaccessible to women; it is the fact that she is clearly not of this world which gives her clout. She is, in fact inhuman, and therefore not a woman; her luxurious and erotic clothing highlight her otherworldliness. Burns has demonstrated how women in Old French literature use their own capacity to overturn male paradigms of the medieval court (*Courtly Love*, passim). In *Lanval*, the fairy comes into Arthur’s court easily, because her cortege has piqued everyone’s interest, not because she appears in minimal garb. It is only after she has gained entry that she drops her cloak, so that “que mielz la peüssent veeir” (all could better see her, l. 622), revealing that she truly is the most beautiful woman on earth, and proving that Lanval was right.

The Fairy Queen’s laced tunic is of interest in the acquittal scene. In *Medieval Dress and Fashion*, Margaret Scott states that lacing is “one of the oddest features of fashion” (52). Through her analysis of medieval art, she concludes that the Church was against lacing that would expose the undergarments, and that it considered that trend as licentious. The church was also against the kind of tight lacing worn by the Fairy Queen that would leave little of the female figure to the imagination. Laces were common on medieval dresses, often laced up on the sides. Scott adds, “Some
heroines allowed flesh to be seen…” (52). It seems that this is how the Fairy Queen dresses at Arthur’s court in *Lanval*:

Ele ert vestue en itel guise
de chainse blanc e de chemise,
que tuit li costé pareient,
ki de dous parz lacié esteient
(ll. 565-568).

(The lady was dressed in a white shift and tunic tightly laced on both sides, leaving her sides exposed.)

I argue that it is not her exposed flesh, but her *chemise*, which would be the erotic equivalent of exposed underwear or lingerie. What makes her dress erotic is the fact that it is tightly-laced, exposing the shape of her body and highlighting her womanly figure, and revealing glimpses of her *chemise* through the lacing. Image 2 shows an example of a *bliaut*, a laced-up, tunic-like dress worn by women during the time in which Marie lived and wrote. In *Lanval*, Marie describes the two *dameiseles* who originally lead Lanval to the Fairy as wearing “dous blialz,” “laciees estrimet” (two *bliauts*, laced tightly, ll. 56, 57).

Underneath the *bliaut*, a woman would wear a *chemise*. The *chemise* could be revealed through lacing, like the Fairy when she comes to Arthur’s court, tightly-laced in a *bliaut*. The revealed *chemise* below the tunic is as provocative as, and equivalent to, exposed underwear.
In *Courtly Love Undressed*, E. Jane Burns asks us to consider “how literary representations of courtly clothing too might be used for purposes beyond the ostentatious display of wealth” (14). *Lanval* contains the perfect example of a deeper meaning in courtly clothing; here, fashion is a mechanism of assertion for the Fairy’s right to be present and for her voice to be heard. Had she not entered in such a fashion, she would never have claimed such power over a room full of men. Heller touches upon the space that clothing can create when she states that, “Clothing is a guarantee of protection and shelter beyond the simple way it covers the body; it grants the wearer ‘space’ in the community” (“Anxiety” 330). Heller is essentially arguing that clothing lets one know one’s place in the community, and one’s “space,” where one is permitted to be. For the Fairy, her clothing and her entourage were what granted her room in Arthur’s court to, be seen and heard. The Fairy Queen gets away with her inappropriately sexual clothing because she is not of this world, and thus is not restricted by the norms of what is appropriate dress for the time. Her testimony of innocence was all that was needed to acquit Lanval, and her attendants were her ticket in. The validity of her words were unquestioned because she looked unearthly and surreal; the mere sight of her proved that Lanval’s admonishment of Guinevere was, in fact, true.

Better than Arthur

The lai is full of contrasts and character foils. These character differences highlight the Fairy’s superiority: Fairy against Arthur and his largesse, and Fairy against Guinevere and her unfaithfulness. Against Arthur and Guinevere, the Fairy
proves herself more worthy in every way. Burgess points out that the Fairy is the only female character in Marie’s *lais* with independent power and wealth (124-125). She gives Lanval the *largesse* forgotten by Arthur and exonerates Lanval when Guinevere falsely accuses him. I argue that from the beginning, the Fairy’s fashion and all her accoutrements are representative of her singularity and showcase her as a model of royal benevolence that is contrary to Arthur’s inconsideration and Guinevere’s unfaithfulness. The fairy even outshines her lover, Lanval, by showing patience; the Fairy Queen’s slow and prolonged arrival at court foils Lanval’s hasty and rash rejection of Guinevere (Burgess 125).

This Fairy Queen has everything that Arthur and Guinevere lack: patience, fair-mindedness, wealth, beauty, fidelity, and mercy (Burgess 6; Burns *Courtly Love* 169; Root 17). Since it is only she and her retinue whose clothes are described, Marie adds to the element of her otherness and superiority. Arthur and Guinevere are royalty as well, yet Marie never mentions their attire. The dress of other characters is left to the imagination, though it is known from the text that the Fairy is in every way arrayed more richly than a king. Even her palfrey is above Arthur’s level:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Suz ciel nen a cunte ne rei} \\
\text{ki tut le peüst esleiger} \\
\text{senz terre vendre u enguagier} \\
\text{(l. 562-564)}
\end{align*}
\]

(No count or king on earth could have afforded [the horse] without selling or mortgaging their lands).

Her superiority in dress and material possessions parallels and represents her superiority of character. The mere fact that Marie describes only the Fairy and her entourage’s dress shows that these are elite characters compared to Arthur,
Guinevere, and even Lanval. I believe that Marie intentionally chose not to describe Arthur and Guinevere’s clothes so as to give prominence to the Fairy and her entourage and to highlight the difference between them. Compared to the otherworldly creatures, Arthur and Guinevere’s dress is of no concern.

Through the Fairy-Queen’s fashion, Marie has presented a female character whose virtue and power outweigh and outrank the most renowned ruler in medieval literature: Arthur, King of the Britons. Through this female character she creates a space where a woman is worthier, more honorable. Marie expressed the Fairy’s otherworldly goodness and nobility through her expensive and exceptional fashion.

Overturning Gender Roles

Burns has aptly discussed the existence of a gender role-reversal between Lanval and the Fairy (Courtly Love 167-178). She highlights the importance of the woman who provides for her lover, clothes him and his people in rich attire, rescues him in court after he has broken her taboo, and finally leads Lanval away on horseback to her world of Avalon (Courtly Love 167). Burns goes as far as to state that Lanval is the story of “an unconventional love between a knight who often resembles a lady and his amorous partner who is courtly but quite unladylike” (Courtly Love 167).

The gender stereotypes of male dominance and female submission, though less applicable today, would ring true to the medieval audience who saw gender and gender roles as quite fixed. There is importance in a woman dressing a man with clothing and riches beyond a “landless bachelor’s wildest dream” (Krueger 67). Dressing someone lends certain power over the person being dressed, like a mother dressing a child who,
alone, is incapable of putting together an ensemble. The Fairy is telling Lanval that she knows what is best for him and that she can give it to him as long as he plays by her rules. However, he fails to keep his word and is later rescued by this assertive and influential woman. She sweeps into court, telling Arthur that Lanval is innocent, and bringing Lanval with her “en croupe” on her journey home to Avalon (Dubost 52). Ireland points out that even Lanval’s agreement to keep his love secret is like a vassal ceremony in that Lanval makes an agreement to serve the Fairy and abide by her command, thus taking on a traditionally masculine role (138). She “wears the pants” in Arthur’s court, and she wears the pants in her relationship with Lanval. I argue that it is her clothes that are giving her this power over men. Her authority over Arthur’s worldly court is unquestionable because she is not a mortal woman, but a fairy from another world, and her fashion supports her position and right to superiority.

Conclusion

The fashion of Lanval discussed here is atypical because it is foremost a discussion of the lack of clothing in spaces where clothing seems to be necessary, along with the constant eroticism of the exposed chemise. It is not only singular that the Fairy redresses Lanval and his entire household, but also remarkable that she appears to wear the pants despite her habitual negligence in terms of clothing. This chapter has shown how the Fairy’s exposed body and lavish belongings serve to empower her and assert her superiority over others, especially over Arthur and

14 It is not uncommon in courtly love literature to see knights pledging themselves and their love to a noble lady in a vassal-like ceremony. Sometimes, as in Chrétien’s Yvain, ou le chevalier du lion, the ceremony is commemorated with the gift of a ring.
Guinevere. Her fashion seems to say that everything she has, even the exposed chemise and the tightly-laced bodice of her dress, are more worthy and outrank what Arthur and his court have to offer.

Neither Arthur nor Guinevere is loyal; Arthur is disloyal when he ignores Lanval during his display of largesse, and Guinevere is infamously disloyal to Arthur. It is also clear that the Fairy is superior to Lanval because he was unable to keep his promise. Lanval’s pride merits the punishment of never seeing his lover again. Instead, the Fairy was merciful and forgave his transgression. In the end, the couple seems to have had enough of what the court has to offer, and they head off to Avalon with the Fairy leading the way, leaving behind the unworthy and unfulfilling court of Arthur.
CHAPTER III

FEMALE POWER, BIRDS, AND EMBROIDERED MEANING

*Laustic* is a *lai* by Marie de France centered around three elements: female action, a nightingale, and embroidery. Its condensed length makes it stand out against Marie’s other already short *lais*.\(^{15}\) It has 160 lines in comparison to the 886 of *Guigemar* and the 664 lines of *Lanval*. The textile element of this *lai* is a small piece of silk embroidered with a tragic message, eventually becoming the funeral shroud of a nightingale. The bird and the *samite* in *Laustic* are crucial interwoven elements of the *lai* and are both analogous to the tapestry and Philomena’s escape as a nightingale in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The parallels between Ovid’s “Philomena” and Marie de France’s *Laustic* have long been recognized and are impossible to overlook. This chapter will explore the symbolism of both the embroidered silk and the nightingale in *Laustic* by focusing on the *malmariée*, her needlework, and the nightingale in order to demonstrate how the embroidery and the nightingale’s similarities and differences to the “Philomena” narrative are examples of female subversion and optimism woven by Marie into her *lai*. The physical needlework of the heroine of *Laustic* serves to change the woman’s outlook on life and subvert the trope of male dominance.

*Laustic* begins with one of the most detailed explanations of the title by this author. Marie gives the title in three languages: *Laustic* in Breton, *Rossignol* in

\(^{15}\) Marie’s short lais are: Title, number of lines; her longest lais is….. number of lines.
French, and Nightingale in “drei Engleis” (l. 6). Defining the bird in three languages immediately tells the audience that the title is significant and merits extra attention and identification. Marie then tells of two neighbors in the region of Saint Malo, who are equally matched in goodness, nobility, and in wealth. One of these knights has a noble wife, who becomes the bachelor neighbor’s secret love interest. The lovers speak to each other through adjoining windows and exchange gifts both day and night. Eventually, the husband begins to suspect his wife: “e meinte feiz li demanda / pur quei levot e u ala” (several times he asked her why she got up out of bed, and where she went, ll. 81-82). She tells him that

“Oh nen a joie en icest mund,  
kin en ot l’aüstic chanter;  
pur ceo me vois ici ester.  
Tant dulcement l’i oi la nuit  
que mult me semble grant deduit”  
(ll. 84-88).

(“He who does not listen to the nightingale sing knows no joy in this world; this is why I come here. At night his song is so sweet; it gives me such pleasure.”)

Upon hearing this, presuming his wife’s duplicity, the husband plots the bird’s demise, so as to eliminate the nominal cause of his wife’s insomnia. Once the nightingale is caught, he brings it into his wife’s bedroom and says,

“Ieo ai l’aüstic engignité,  
pur quei bus avez tant veillié.  
Des or poëz gisir en pais;  
il ne vus esveillera mais!”  
(ll. 107-110).

(“I have captured the nightingale that so often kept you awake! From now on, you can sleep peacefully; he will never wake you again!”)
The husband proceeds to snap the bird’s neck and throws the body at his wife. She is devastated and heart-broken, knowing that she may never again speak with her lover at the window because of her husband’s violent and symbolic threat. In order to alert her lover, she cleverly “En une piece de samit / a or brusdé e tut escrit, / a l’oiselet envolupé” (She swaddles the bird in a piece of silk with the whole incident embroidered in gold, ll. 135-137). She then has the bird and a message delivered to her lover so that he may know why their affair has ended. The lover is chagrined upon learning of their fate and builds a reliquary in which to house the bird. Marie then tells us, “tuz jurs l’a faite od lui porter” (forever he carried it with him, l. 156). Again, at the very end of the lai, Marie reminds us, “Un lai en firent li Bretun / e l’Aüstic l’apelë hum” (The Bretons made [this story], a lai which is called Laustic, ll. 159-160).

Shared Symbols

As stated before, “Philomena” and Marie’s lai share certain symbols and metaphors. “Philomena” is a tale in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* recounting the lot of a young woman who is deceived and raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus. To ensure that Philomena cannot speak of what he has done to her, he violently cuts out her tongue after raping her, and hides her in the woods. He tells his wife, Procne, that her sister Philomena is dead. While Procne mourns the loss of a beloved sister, Philomena, guarded by an old woman, weaves a tapestry that depicts what Tereus has done. When

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16 I refer to the Humphries translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1983).
the tapestry is completed, Philomena is able to have it delivered to Procne. Her sister immediately understands what has happened and is revolted and vengeful. She sneaks into the woods to rescue Philomena, and the two plot their revenge against Tereus. In the end they kill Procne’s and Tereus’s son and feed him to Tereus without his knowing what he is eating. When he learns of their revenge and the murder of his son, he chases the women, who run from Tereus and take flight out of a window. Philomena becomes a nightingale and successfully escapes from her rapist and captor; Procne becomes a lark.

The embroidered message in *Laustic* is a direct link to Ovid’s “Philomena” and to female subversion through the use of a typical, “gendered” craft. When prevented from using their voices, both heroines resort to using their hands to communicate artistically, choosing labor-intensive projects that naturally take time to produce (a tapestry in “Philomena” and embroidery in *Laustic*); both handiworks represent a level of female subversion, and in *Laustic* the embroidery allows for a reversal of gender roles to occur. Marie’s purposeful allusion to Ovid’s narrative highlights the recurring theme that marital love is not always the most honest or pure and that all does not always end well in love; she evokes the tragedy and revenge of Philomena. Ovid’s heroine enacts revenge and flies away to freedom as a nightingale at the end of her story, whereas the *mal mariée* in *Laustic* is unable to escape physically but instead metaphorically transforms her situation to empower herself. Below, I discuss further the role of the fabric in turning around the wife’s fate and the role of the nightingale as a lasting vestige of her action.
The Nightingale as Voice

While the textiles are a physical link between the two tales, the nightingale is a metaphorical link. Marie uses the wife’s creativity to preserve the history of what her husband did, and she uses the nightingale to represent the wife’s hope and love, both destroyed by the husband. The nightingale is also an obvious link to “Philomena.” Unlike the eponymous heroine of “Philomena,” Marie’s heroine was never physically prevented from speaking; instead she is metaphorically silenced through the martyrdom of the nightingale. At first, the bird’s death reminds us that the suspicious husband is watching, ready to kill any man who covets his wife. Eventually the preservation of the songbird’s body represents the wife’s ingenuity and reversal of masculine power. It is the violence of the husband in Laustic and the brother-in-law in “Philomena” that serves to silence the women of those stories (Faust 23).

It is perhaps poetic irony or poetic justice that the nightingale, a bird renowned for its enchanting song, is a key symbol in these two stories of muted women. By escaping from Tereus in the form of the nightingale, Philomena regains her voice and is metaphorically able to communicate. On the other hand, the malmariée of Laustic is metaphorically silenced when the nightingale in her story is eliminated, and she is prevented from continuing her blossoming relationship with the knight next door. Laustic and “Philomena” differ in regard to the birds because the malmariée is never physically liberated from her situation, while Philomena escapes as a nightingale. Both women do manage to get some level of revenge or justification for what has been done to them when the wife preserves the bird’s body as a relic, and Philomena
kills Tereus’s son. The women also similarly find self-expression through textiles. In both tales the nightingale, which is able to communicate via song, is directly related to the fabric, which becomes the voice of these women as they regain their voices through the fulfillment of the nightingale transformations.

In The Poetics of Memory, Logan Whalen explains how Marie has used the bird to preserve the memory of the lai, “One cannot forget the role of the nightingale in preserving the memory of the adventure in Laustic” (87). It is not simply the nightingale that was sacrificed and entombed in a jeweled reliquary that preserves this memory, but also the pains Marie took to tell her audience the title of her lai, presented in three languages. She uses this bird, and the name of the bird, to tattoo a memory that will be associated with tragedy involving a nightingale and an abused and silenced woman.

Birds and Phalli

Phallic imagery has long been linked to the nightingale. Pfeffer, among others, has aptly picked up on the metaphor that the nightingale is a phallic symbol in Laustic (164). When the wife exclaims that the greatest pleasure on earth is listening to the nightingale’s song, her distrusting husband aptly understands that his wife’s greatest pleasure is another man’s “nightingale,” or penis. In an excessive illustration of what he can do to whoever’s phallus is trespassing on his property, the husband decapitates the bird. In The Change of Philomel Pfeffer argues that in killing the bird, the husband effectively castrates himself and the lover (164). His self-castration is the result of enacting this violence in front of his wife, who is
unlikely to forget his message and the metaphor long enough to find herself in his bed any time soon. The husband is also metaphorically castrating the neighbor as a preventative warning. Luckily for the young knight, the lady returns the phallus to him when she delivers the bird in her embroidered silk, metaphorically reestablishing his importance (Pfeffer 164). The husband, on the other hand, remains alone and impotent after eliminating himself from the conflicting husband-wife-lover triangle.

Embroidery as Voice

E. Jane Burns discusses the significance of medieval clothing and textiles in Laustic and other works in her analysis of medieval fashion, Bodytalk. She demonstrates that textiles play a crucial role in narrative and that cloth can be seen as “speaking without speaking” especially in tales like “Philomena” and Laustic (Burns Bodytalk 116). She states that, “One can speak with the hands to produce weaving as one might also produce sound in music… which could substitute for meaningful speech and voice” (Bodytalk 123). Burns’ idea applies not only to the notion of Philomena’s tapestry and the wife’s embroidery as replacing meaningful speech, but also to the nightingale’s music as representing the speech and voice of the two silenced women. The signification of the nightingale with regards to the ultimate freedom of the heroines differs in each story, but in both, the nightingales become symbols of their ascendency over the oppressive and violent men in their lives. It is through the textiles that the women are united in what Burns would call “meaningful speech” (Bodytalk 123). Burns agrees that
Philomena’s tapestry is the muted woman’s outlet for speech, “Yet Philomena’s tapestry does more than make the silent woman speak, [it is] a speech given material form in fabric” (Bodytalk 131). I would apply the same idea to Laustic in that the embroidered message is her outlet to safely deliver the message of warning to her lover and to transform her situation of powerlessness into one of decisiveness.

Marie says that the wife escrit in the samite, and it is often argued whether this should be interpreted as a written message or a pictorial message. Sarah-Grace Heller briefly discusses the embroidery of Laustic in “Obscure Lands” (19). She argues for the meaning of brusder as the modern broder (to embroider), and claims that the lady of Laustic definitely was not weaving like Philomena, but embroidering the silk she sends to her lover. In a similar attempt to unravel the intricacies of Laustic, Robert Cargo analyses the potential meaning of escrire, which he argues could mean “to represent,” “show,” or “depict” (165).

I argue that the embroidery on the silk depicted, either pictorially or in writing, the event of the bird’s demise. Harf-Lancner’s translation also supports the silk bearing an embroidered message. She translates the passage describing the silk, “Dans une étoffe de soie, sur laquelle elle a brodé leur histoire en lettres d’or, elle a envelopé l’oiseau” (ll. 135-137, p. 217). The Hanning and Ferrante translation also suggests that the silk carried an embroidered message, though it is less

Image 3 Example of embroidered samite from Italy during the Middle Ages.
http://www.studyblue.com/notes/note/n/chap171819-italian-silks/deck/5911034
specific as to who had done the embroidery: “In a piece of samite, embroidered in gold and writing, she wrapped the little bird” (ll. 135-137, p. 158).

I believe that Marie intended that the wife embroidered the message. To fully incorporate the “Philomena” parallel, Marie would have the *malmariée* physically embroider the message herself, and then send it with a servant, ensuring that the message is transmitted not only through her embroidery, but also through the voice of the messenger.

Though both relay tragic events that have befallen them, the women’s messages are quite different in purpose. Philomena sends the story to her sister Procne, and her sister comes to her rescue. The wife in *Laustic* delivers her message to protect and warn her lover, as well as to alert him to the unfortunate end of their love. In so doing, the wife uses a female craft to take on the more masculine role of protector. When Procne acts as Philomena’s rescuer, and the wife sends a warning of potential danger to her neighbor, these women are assuming the role of the male hero rescuing the damsel in distress. This is one example of how Marie reverses typical gender roles. Marie uses her female characters to show that women are capable of heroic deeds, just as men are. In fact, both *Laustic* and “Philomena” highlight the more ignoble male nature through the characters of the husband and Tereus.

In *Bodytalk*, Burns explains how fictional heroines can embrace typically gendered activities to overcome and go beyond the gender roles: “It is not by denying the body, but by embracing it and remaking it that heroines in Old French fabliau and romance manage to get around the misogynous paradigms used for centuries to structure female nature” (248). Another example of gender role reversal in *Laustic* is
how the malmariée reverses norms through her penchant for needlework. Embroidery makes the wife the active storyteller, so that the neighbor then “creates the vessel” that carries the bird’s body (Cottille-Foley 160). This shows how Marie has reversed paradigmatic gender roles; in medieval literature, women typically serve as the vessel while the men are the storytellers (Cottille-Foley 160). Being the vessel is typically a passive role; pregnant women were seen as a vessel carrying the work of a man, and women were expected to take on a passive role in marriage and in the church. In Marie’s lai, it is the woman who takes control, making the decision and letting the lover take on the more passive role of carrying the nightingale’s body with him forever.

When the woman is prevented from verbally communicating with her lover, she uses embroidery, typically a female craft (Faust 23). Laustic is not Marie’s only lai in which the woman is the storyteller (See below). Faust has argued that Marie is mirrored onto the female characters who are particularly involved in authoring part of the story (18). While discussing authorship and textiles in medieval literature, Monica Wright aptly notes that cloth production in literature is a metaphor for the process in which medieval authors were engaging (65); thus Marie’s use of textiles in Laustic is in line with her lais in which women have authorship of their story, just as Marie has control of the authorship of her lais. We have seen in Guigemar that the Venus mural is significant to the wife taking control of her situation and fashioning herself as the storyteller. In another of Marie’s lais, Chaitivel, the indecisive heroine writes the story of what has become of the four unfortunate knights competing for her affection. In Laustic, when the heroine sends her message and preserves the bird in the samit brusdé, she is able to express her own
perspective of the bird’s death and convey her thoughts on the act, instead of the story being delivered through the voice of another character, or as often happens in medieval literature, through a male perspective. The wife is telling her lover what happened and what must be done, instead of his telling her what she should do. This lends more power to the wife, despite the general negative outlook on her “imprisoned” life and domineering husband. We, of course, cannot forget the master author of this collection of *lais*, Marie de France, and that, as a female author, she is able to entwine her ideology and meaning into her work.

Triangular Relationships

Triangular relationships are a standard feature throughout the courtly romance genre. In *Laustic*, the nightingale plays an integral role in the wife’s gender reversal and serves as a vessel through which transformation of triangular relationships occur. Scholars of Marie de France and other medieval authors often identify triangular relationships among people and symbolic objects. Triangular relationships are abundant throughout Marie’s œuvre. In the *lais* Marie’s triangular relationships typically consist of one female and two males. The men are often competing for the love of the female. The woman in the triangle is often unhappily married to an older, jealous man, and she seeks freedom through the love of a younger, noble knight.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) We have already seen the triangular relationship in *Guigemar* between the jealous old husband who imprisons his wife, Guigemar, and the *malmariée*. In *Lanval* we saw the hero caught in a triangle between his duty as Arthur’s vassal and his duty as the Fairy’s
Cottille-Foley argues that Marie takes typically conflicted triangles and makes them loving and harmonious (156). In *Laustic*, for example, the friction in the triangular relationship becomes less strenuous with the death of the nightingale. The triangles are typically centered on some conflict, like the unhappy marriage and budding relationship in *Guigemar*, or the estranged son in *Milun* whose father unknowingly challenges to spar. By the end of the *lais* these conflicts are always resolved.

In the beginning of *Laustic*, the husband, wife, and neighbor form the first triangular relationship. This is obviously a strained, unharmonious relationship with a suspicious husband and the lovers enjoying secret rendezvous. Cottille-Foley brilliantly demonstrates that the *lai* is full of “mirror images” with the husband and neighbor who are equally matched, husband and wife, chosen for her noble demeanor, and neighbor and wife who are deserving of each other (158). As mentioned before, the wife’s needlework and the lover’s shrine-reliquary transfer the attention away from the husband and onto the nightingale, which will be remembered always by the couple. Cottille-Foley observes that the nightingale shifts the components of the triangle, and that once the bird is killed the husband’s place in the triangle is eliminated, while Pfeffer concludes that it is the wife’s returning the phallic bird to the neighbor that allows the new triangle to take effect (Cottille-Foley 158, Pfeffer 164). What is certain is that the new triangle now consists of the wife, the neighbor, and the nightingale. The initial conflict is eliminated and the harmony is reinstated, despite the lovers’ separation (Cottille-Foley 158).

*Le Fraisne* is unique in that it is centered upon a triangle of a mother and her daughters. *Milun* also differs from the typical love triangle by featuring a triangle between a mother, son, and father. Some of Marie’s other *lais* involving a love triangle are *Yonec*, *Equitan*, *Eliduc*, and *Chievrefueil*. 

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It is perhaps a hopeful reading that harmony is reinstated with the husband eliminated from the triangle. The wife actively removed him from the picture when she chose to embroider her message and to deliver the corpse to her neighbor. From this point on in the story, the husband is never mentioned, and attention lingers on the nightingale and the knight who will carry him close forever, effectively sealing the triangle of bird-neighbor-wife. In this sense we can perhaps find some of the same optimism or justice that Philomena has at the end of her tale.

The Transformative Power of Cloth

Roberta Krueger has argued that the wife’s wrapping the bird in the embroidered cloth symbolically represents the end of the love relationship between herself and the neighbor (“The Wound, the Knot, and the Book” 72). Though this is unarguably true, Krueger explores other possible meanings of the swaddled corpse as well. “The nightingale evokes at once passionate, unconsummated love, the jealous ire of the husband, and the lady’s resourcefulness and artistry in conveying the bird and its story to her lover” (72). The period after the bird’s death, during which the wife embroidered her message, is a period of transformation. The bird, which had been just a quick cover-up for frequent midnight tête-à-têtes, has been transformed into a martyr and the emblem of the couple’s love. I suggest below how the shifted triangular relationships in Laustic serve to preserve the love the wife and neighbor shared, despite the fact that their affair must end.
Just as the wife in *Laustic* conveys and preserves meaning and transformation when she wraps the nightingale in the embroidered silk, the neighbor plays an equal role in the preservation of memory when he completes a metaphorical transubstantiation of the bird into a meaningful relic with the bejeweled *vaisselet* (vase). Clothing and textiles are meaningful and representative in many stages of life and involved in rites of passage. Similar to the nightingale’s shroud of embroidered silk, one can instantly think of christening gowns, wedding gowns, mourning clothes, or coronation robes as significant items of clothing that carry tradition and meaning. *Laustic* draws upon the idea of fabric shrouding the body of the dead. Thus, the idea of fabric or textiles and transformation is linked to nature and the stages of life.

When the heartbroken neighbor places the cocooned bird in a bejeweled reliquary, he is enabling a transformation and creating a memory. The bird’s death eliminated the husband from the picture and allowed the neighbor and wife to unite over the bird, creating a triangle that excludes the menacing husband. Similar to how the power of a saint lives on through reliquaries, the neighbor and wife’s love continues and lives on through the reliquary that they have built. I cannot agree with the statement that “… the lady’s joy is superficial, represented by the feigned delight in the nightingale’s song… and at the first threat of danger… the lovers give it up, relegating the symbol of the dead bird in an ornate coffin” (Hanning and Ferrante 16). The coffin is a clear mark of a deeper, more permanent relationship, such that the neighbor cherished the bird’s body and “tuz jurs l’a faite od lui porter” (carried it with him always, l. 156).
Conclusion

The audience is left with questions about the mal mariée’s fate and the dim outlook on her future. While Philomena in the end of her tale is liberated through her metamorphosis into a nightingale, in Laustic the execution of the nightingale seems to represent the impossibility of escape or freedom for the mal mariée. When Philomena enacts her revenge and escapes by physically transforming into a nightingale, the symbolism is evident. Birds represent freedom and independence because they have the ability to soar over the earth and fly whenever they choose. Philomena’s metamorphosis is symbolic of achieving that level of autonomy and independence. The heroine of Laustic seems to have her hopes dowsed before her eyes, as her husband slaughters the symbol representing her liberty. By killing the bird, the husband is portrayed as a captor who destroys all hope of escape. The wife was able to exploit or embrace female craft in order to overcome and transform her hopeless situation into one that she controls. The embroidery brings Laustic full circle and unites the mal mariée to Philomena. Through the weaving and embroidery, the women subvert their situations and find speech, and through the nightingale they find transformation.

Through this narrative allusion to “Philomena,” Marie de France has illustrated how one woman was able to subvert the stereotypical female gender role of submission and silence. I argue that the neighbor’s keeping the bird forever by his side is love triumphing despite the constraints against the lovers. I find that there is hope in Laustic, though it may seem minimal. One must take into account how short the story is and how little background information is provided to the audience. We know that at the
beginning of the story the husband and the neighbor are equals, both having helped improve their country in deed and reputation (ll. 7-12). Marie also makes clear that the neighbor is deserving of the lady’s love, and that she deserves his in return. Thus the affair commences. But we do not know if the lady was unhappy before, or if she will ever be happy again after the affair ends. She appears devastated at the death of the bird and, therefore, at the end of her relationship. Hanning and Ferrante have discussed how the wife’s love was superficial and how the couple quickly gave up their love, instead of fighting to stay together (16). Though this is a cogent point, I find this summarization of the love the couple shared too facile. The preservation of the bird in a quasi-religious ceremony and manner attests to the fact that the wife and neighbor’s love was more than just superficial; their love was, in fact, so profound that it was commemorated and preserved in the same fashion as a saint’s relics. Even the wife’s quick willingness to sacrifice her greatest pleasure in order to save her lover from death shows a Christ-like sacrifice and love.

At the beginning of the lai, the husband and neighbor are described as mirror images of each other, equal in every way. Even Marie’s choice of words mark their binary relation to each other:

Dui chevalier ilec maneient
 e dous forz maisuns i aveient.
Pur la bunté des dous baruns
 Fu de la vilebons li nuns
(II. 9-12).

(Two knights lived there in two grand houses. Because of the generosity of the two barons, the city was prosperous. [Italics added])
Marie emphasizes their equality in pairs with *dui, dous*, and *dous*. While one knight is married to a noble woman, the other knight is worthy of her love, entangling the men in a messy triangle. Because the two knightly neighbors are mirror images, the audience has to believe that the husband is also worthy of his wife’s love, until he reveals his unworthiness when he snaps the bird’s neck. In line 116 Marie indicates that the husband acts villainously: “de ceo fist il que trop vileins” (in this he acted like a brute, l. 116). She later points out that the neighbor acted nobly, not at all like a *vilan*: “mes ne fu pas vileins ne lenz” (he did not act at all ignobly, l. 145). The sudden inequality between the neighbors, exemplified by their respective treatment of the bird, plays into the shifting triangle and the expulsion of the husband from the love equation. He is now unworthy of his wife, and it is hopeless for him to regain her love.

What is evident in *Laustic* is how the *malmariée* exploited her position as a woman and, like Philomena, used female crafts to find her voice and to relay her story. The nightingale similarly enables a transformation to occur in the plot, eliminating the husband from the picture in favor of the wife and neighbor’s love. Both the nightingale and the textile in *Laustic* are links to Ovid’s “Philomena” in that the bird represents liberation from a violent situation, and the textiles are a means of conveying messages and speaking when the heroines are unable to use their voices. The transformation that occurs in “Philomena,” when the heroine becomes a nightingale, can be likened to the transformation of the bird into a relic and as symbol of the defeat of the violent husband when he castrates himself. The lover gets his penis symbolically returned to him when the wife sends him the
delicately cocooned bird; the husband, on the other hand, is left emasculated and without a wife to warm his bed.
CONCLUSION
TEXTILES, FEMINISIM, SUBVERSION, AND CONFORMISM

Marie de France, towards the close of the twelfth century, wrote *lais* that create space for female equality and liberation from male dominated society. Although her methods of illustrating female subversion vary from *lai* to *lai*, I have illustrated that in *Guigemar, Lanval*, and *Laustic*, Marie uses sartorial style, accessories, and needlework to evoke female empowerment. Though this research focuses solely on clothing and textiles in the *lais*, there are several other examples throughout her œuvre that show her feminist predilection through other objects, symbols, and situations.  

Though I do not compare Marie’s use of style to other contemporaneous works, Heller has proven that fashion was on the rise and a signifier of power (*Fashion in Medieval France*, passim). Though Marie does not directly address fashion in her *lais*, her preoccupation with textiles is evidence of the importance of clothing and fabric at the time. It should also be acknowledged that sumptuary laws of the mid and late twelfth century are evidence of the importance of clothing and the upper class’s desire to control the consumption of clothing and other goods (“Anxiety,” passim). It is therefore easy to imagine that textiles and fashion would naturally make their way into literature.

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18 Birds, for example, are one recurring symbol that represent liberation and true love for female heroines in *Laustic, Yonec, and Milun*. 
One *lai* that has not been acknowledged in this analysis is *Bisclavret*, a story of a loyal husband with the unfortunate condition of lycanthropy. He is cheated and entrapped by his duplicitous wife when she steals his clothes, locking him in his wolf form. In *Bisclavret* Marie deconstructs the prevalent notions of nudity and savagery and presents an honorable man, who happens to have a dishonorable wife; he is trapped in a dishonorable body. The reason this *lai* has been omitted from this study is that the clothing in it pertains to the male body or more generally to the ideology of naked bodies in the Middle Ages as sinful; *Bisclavret* is therefore unsuited to an analysis of female fashion, textiles, and empowerment.

Many argue as to how much Marie actively chose to empower women and to what point modern readers are applying modern ideology to her centuries-old work. When labeling Marie’s *lais* as “feminist,” one must be careful in applying modern ideas to a century that did not have women’s studies. Instead, Marie’s writing is to be interpreted by each reader differently, though it is widely observed that Marie was a pioneer for women’s interests and voices. Her work follows the template of the romance genre, centered upon true love, epic adventure, and myth. It seems natural that a female author would write about women, for women, that her heroines would be models and inspirations for a largely female audience, and that these women would favor stories of secret love affairs, female action, and freedom from jealous old men.

Thus it should be no surprise that Marie would use her writing to express her own ideas and opinions, while at the same time conforming to popular literary genres of her time. While she herself conformed to the rules and regulations of her world, Marie also created heroines who manipulate the situations forced upon them so as to find joy, true
love, and happiness, regardless of their personal lack of mobility and freedom. This is one of the beauties of her works -- she is completely conformist, yet at the same time totally subversive. Perhaps this is her message and moral to female readers.

We have seen how, in Guigemar, fashion accessories and undergarments become symbolic objects of meaning that give the malmariée control in her relationship with the eponymous hero and lead to her freedom from captivity. The couple’s exchange of knot and belt represent the knowledge of love that the wife has instilled in Guigemar, and reinforces the importance of women as authors of their destiny.

The analysis of Lanval argues that the Fairy Queen is an otherworldly and stylish woman who uses both masculinity and femininity to represent her power and superiority. The Fairy’s erotic fashion, which highlights her feminine features, supports her superiority over Arthur and Guinevere, because it is beyond their means to possess. The Fairy enacts gender role reversals by taking on the dominant roles of loving Lanval from afar, coming to his rescue at Arthur’s court, and riding away to Avalon with Lanval behind her.

In Laustic I have shown how Marie used textiles to parallel Ovid’s “Philomena” and to save a lover from danger. By using the female crafts of needlework and embroidery, the wife takes control of her situation and is able to partake in the preservation of the nightingale with her lover. Through her embroidered message she is subversive and liberates herself from her husband’s control.

The lais Guigemar, Lanval, and Laustic are examples of how Marie de France uses textiles to empower her female characters, to gain them entry into male space, and allow them to act upon their own wills. Though the action derives from the female
characters’ own intent, the fabric and fashion serve as a means in which the women can gain ground and overcome their situations, giving them more authority and independence. Marie does not limit female empowerment to these three *lais* and their associated textiles; instead, her œuvre is full of situations that lend influence and independence to women. The three *lais* considered in these pages show that Marie was dedicated and concerned with love, relationships, and equality among partners. She provides a refreshing female perspective and voice to the courtly love genre, which largely created by male authors.

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19 Most often Marie depicts freedom of choice for women as positive and liberating, though in *Chativiel* Marie warns against indecision when a young woman has to make a choice between four, equally noble and worthy lovers, and is unable to decide between them.
REFERENCES


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