

Liminal Spaces and Identities

**The Transitional and the Juxtaposition of Opposites
within the *Prologue, Bisclavret and Lanval* of Marie de
France's *Lais***

The early Gothic, the style of ecclesial architecture beginning in twelfth-century France,¹ acts as the physical manifestation of liminal space, mirroring the multiplicity of influences as well as the juxtaposition of opposites found in the *Lais* of Marie de France. The birth of this particular architecture, contemporary to the *Lais*, marked a state of transition from the horizontal halls of the Roman basilica to that of intricate spires and monumental cavernous spaces. French architects began to focus on sculpting interior space rather than sturdy utilitarian walls. Consider choir of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis built around the 1130s in France. Contemporary to the writings of Marie de France, the church is a physical manifestation of transitory space. Inside, the hazy darkness pierced with light radiating from the jewel-like glass denotes the great mystery of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into body and blood. This is a place of the ephemeral and of transformation. Abbot Suger, the visionary behind the choir's construction, brought together a host of artists he encountered throughout his extensive travels. Even though they remain anonymous, as is typical for artisans at this point in history, their various influences and techniques combine to create one of the earliest and, therefore, most influential spaces of the Gothic movement.² The Abbey Church of Saint-Denis' choir marked the beginning of architectural experimentation in France that soon extended the Gothic style to the cathedrals of Europe, characterized by richness and complexity.

The *Lais* of Marie de France draw many parallels to the choir of Saint-Denis in that both exemplify a distinctive style derived from a combination of elements as well as individual ingenuity.

¹ Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008), 514.

² Stokstad, *Art History*, 516.

Ribbed groin vaults springing from round piers, pointed arches, wall buttresses and adequate window openings –had already appeared in Romanesque buildings. The achievement ... was to combine these into a fully integrated architectural whole.³

Abbot Suger's amalgamation of pre-existing elements into one cohesive space makes this particular building project unique. Marie de France combines Latin rhetorical devices, Romance conventions and Breton oral tradition in her vernacular poetry. Her *lais* are considered by some scholars as an artfully contrived mosaic thematically connected by the overarching concern with human love.⁴ Marie de France, like Abbot Suger, took a collection of existing conceits and subject matters to construct an unprecedented style.

In this paper I will argue that Marie de France builds numerous liminal spaces throughout her *lais*, spaces defined by their incorporation of opposites as well as their exemplification of transition. Specifically, these narrative, textual and physical spaces within the Prologue as well as the *lais* of *Bisclavret* and *Lanval* reflect this poet's own questionable identity. Marie de France occupies the indefinite role of the poet-translator, acting as both a creative force and literal interpreter. Her choice of medium, the vernacular *lai*, is also a space concerned with reconciling the antithetical. The physical juxtapositions she creates in her characters as well as the tangible spaces of

³ Stokstad, *Art History*, 517.

⁴ Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

transformation reflect Marie de France's persona as a marginal figure herself within the intermingling culture of France and England.

The narrative space Marie creates foreshadows the complexity of other liminal spaces throughout the *Lais*. The Prologue situates and gives direction on how these tales are to be read as well as the pivotal role Marie plays as both translator and poet. Her authorial intrusions create a blending of voices within her tales, in that "Marie has inscribed her particular textual identity there through a set of strategies that serve to intertwine author, narrator, characters, and text."⁵ Perhaps this liminal persona results from the culture of translation contemporary to Marie de France, where the glossing of classic works in pursuit of moral and intellectual improvement pervaded popular literature. Therefore, she creates a complex narrative persona no doubt influenced by the scholarly concerns of twelfth-century Europe.

The Prologue to the *Lais* introduces the first of many liminal spaces Marie creates, that of the poet-translator:

So I thought of lays which I had heard and did not doubt, for I knew it full well, that they were composed, by those who first began them and put them into circulation, to perpetuate the memory of adventures they had heard. I have put them into verse, made poems from them and worked on them late into the night.⁶

⁵ Matilda T. Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*. (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 180.

⁶ Marie de France, *Prologue Bisclavret Lanval*, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. (New York: 2003), 42.

Immediately there exists a distance between the original Breton folktales and these lais, a space occupied by Marie herself. Her complicated syntax obscures whether she believes these tales to be true or her sources pure fiction. “[The Prologue’s] notoriously paratactic and ambiguous style raises as many questions about Marie’s literary theory as it answers”⁷ or in other words, she uses this convoluted syntax to permit her readers interpretive allowance. Her contemporary Latin scholars, whom she mentions in the Prologue as well, translated classical works recovered in the Crusades in order to “provide a gloss for the text and put the finishing touches to their meaning.”⁸ Thus, she subtly equates her work with that of classical masterpieces in that they are both written with the intention of scholarly debate. Careful construction of these independent yet cohesive tales demands “gloss” by readers in the Prologue. Some scholars believe “Marie’s literary art, sustained throughout the collection of twelve lais, joins her work to that of the philosopher poets, worthy of glossing and interpretation to locate their meaning.”⁹ Her grammatical structure in this passage, the placing of clauses or phrases one after another without words to indicate coordination or subordination,¹⁰ supports her self-drawn parallel to classical works as her writing mimics the fluidity of Latin syntax. With the same pen stroke, Marie de France declares herself both laboring poet and translating scholar as her work combines Latin rhetoric devices and transposes Breton folktales into lais. Her lais, according to this direction given to us in the Prologue, are not

⁷ Monica Brzezinski Potkay, “The Parable of the Sower and Obscurity in the Prologue to Marie de France’s Lais,” 355.

⁸ Marie de France, *Prologue*, 42.

⁹ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 158.

¹⁰ See The Oxford English Dictionary, parataxis definition.

only intended to be interpreted, but are also a melding of an original lore and a poet's creativity.

Marie continues in this transitory margin throughout the *Lais*, introducing and intruding upon the tales, ensuring their authenticity while at the same time her own artistic creativity in their portrayal. This concept of "autoritas," transferred from Latin rhetoric to these vernacular *lais* by Marie, is the assertion of the author's importance in the shaping of the work as equal or superior to the actual title of the work.¹¹ Consider her introduction to *Bisclavret*: "In my effort to compose lays, I do not wish to omit *Bisclavret*."¹² Thus, she acknowledges her own creative hand and individual purpose, establishing herself firmly as the selector of this specific tale. Yet, in her conclusion she firmly asserts that this tale is indeed true: "The adventure you have heard actually took place, do not doubt it."¹³ This "framing" continues within each story, defining each *lai* as a separate entity with an introduction and conclusion. It is as if "Marie inscribes within her very language a series of fluid boundaries between her world and that of her characters, boundaries that are, in fact, passages through the narrator's voice that allow direct communication between these two worlds."¹⁴ For example, she features herself by name as a Romantic hero or narrator would, asserting her "autoritas" within the *Lais*. However, her selective and abbreviated naming in these tales functions to support the idea of humanity as superior to "the spectacular encounter."¹⁵ Consider her dedication to, who historians claim to be, King Henry II in the Prologue. She makes it a point to name

¹¹ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 158.

¹² Burgess, and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 68.

¹³ Burgess, and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 72.

¹⁴ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 185.

¹⁵ Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*.

herself, but not the king, thus equating him with the nameless heroes in her tales.¹⁶ Her intermingling of reality and fiction through the placing of herself and her audience within the *Lais* acts as yet another narrative liminal space. Marie occupies this uncertain lacuna between creative poet and reliable translator. Her authorial intrusions are breaks in the veil between the physical reality of the poet's work and the supernatural world of the *Lais*.

There is the argument that translation during the time of Marie de France was not defined by accuracy but by creative interpretation. Marie has already alluded to this idea of "glossing" in her discussion of Latin scholars in the Prologue. While she asserts these tales' validity as authentic Breton songs, it is her interpretation and selection of stories consistent with her theme of human love that compromises an accurate translation.

Marie consciously created highly original, imaginative and diverse narrative poems from folk material, probably without and accurate understanding of the nature of that original material, and that her poems have a sophisticated internal unity, the central focus of which is the nature of human, not courtly, love.¹⁷

Therefore, it is not necessarily the pursuit of literal translation driving the work of Marie de France, but her desire to convey her theme through a collection of independent tales. Scholars assert that this concept of "glossing" is not just apparent in Marie de France's

¹⁶ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 181.

¹⁷ John Patrick Ireland, "The Narrative Unity Of The Lanval Of Marie De France," *Studies In Philology* 74.2 (1977):130.

work but is part of a larger culture of translation during the medieval period. Perhaps translation, as a transformative process, cannot be done without bias and interpretation: “all expression is translation...but that all translation is transformation.”¹⁸ Marie de France occupies this uncertain space between the authentic Breton tales and her completed *lais*. While these tales may not have been as accurately rendered as she claims, the focus of this paper is to analyze her portrayal of liminal spaces and how they reflect upon her own identity. The genre in which Marie chooses to retell these tales is as complex as her persona.

Similar to the glossing of Latin scholars, the idea of combining and reinventing manifests in the textual space of the *lai* itself. A blended medium, the *lai* is a combination of Romance, *conte* and oral tradition in which Marie de France subverts the expectations of each. The length, subject and narrative voice waiver between these distinct traditions.

The drastic variation of lines within each *lai* as well as their individual and overarching focus marks both combination and complexity in her work. The medieval Romance is typically characterized by considerable length, love interest and naming of the poet or the poet as an acting character within the story. A *conte* is a shorter tale often involving an adventure where the author is not the primary focus. Oral tradition by design was anonymous and operated under defined gender roles.¹⁹ The length of her stories varies dramatically from *Eliduc* of 1184 lines to *Chevrefoil* of only 118 lines. She chooses both the amplified verses found in romances and the brevity of the *conte*. The *Lais* may center around the theme of human love but many feature adventure and heroism

¹⁸ Robert Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 4.

¹⁹ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 160-81.

as well, again blending these two genres. The order of her tales as well as their selection supports the theory that these *lais* not only shape a larger theme but that they comment on each other.²⁰ This fluidity of organization harkens to the recitations of troubadours who would shift the order of a song's verses to dramatize the telling. Marie similarly selects and arranges these tales, placing an emphasis on the larger theme at hand.²¹

Unlike the troubadours, Marie reverses the roles of the male poet and the female addressee.

In your honour, noble king, you who are so worth and courtly virtue has taken root, did I set myself to assemble *lais*...in my heart, lord, I thought and decided that I should present them to you, if it so pleased you to accept them.²²

Marie subverts the image of the bard's supplication to the noble lady by reversing these traditionally gendered roles, perhaps foreshadowing coupling in the *lais* that follow.²³ Not only does she combine elements of the romance, *conte* and ballad in the *Lais*, she transforms them. Therefore, the *lai* Marie crafted could be considered a liminal genre.

Marie de France writes in a liminal language as well, working in the blended vernacular of Anglo-Norman and combining Latin rhetorical structures with Breton folktales. The influence of classical works, discussed in the Prologue, impacted the syntactic structure of medieval authors, like Marie. "Scholasticism emerged to

²⁰ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 171.

²¹ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 162.

²² Marie de France, *Prologue*, 42.

²³ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 188.

reconcile Christian theology with classical philosophy”²⁴ during the Medieval period, the practice of “glossing” Marie alludes to in the Prologue. Scholars would ascribe contemporary morals to Latin works just as Marie selects Latin techniques to fit her purpose. “Abreviatio,” one of the five characteristics of rhetoric derived from these Latin texts, creates a poetic distillation of the truth in that “the writer is to avoid all the devices of amplifications and is to express the narrative elements in as simple a form as possible.”²⁵ This style was difficult to accomplish in vernacular poetry; in fact, Marie de France is one of the few writers to attempt it, at least in works of this extent. By using the abreviatio style, she makes a deliberate attempt to limit her description, therefore, emphasizing what she deems are the most important aspects of the story.²⁶ Yet, her verses and rhymes are reminiscent of the Breton songs they were supposedly translated from.²⁷ She combines Latin rhetorical devices elevated by her contemporaries with common folktales. This amalgam of high and low culture as well as written and oral tradition communicated in the vernacular was rare if not unprecedented. The Anglo-Norman in which Marie wrote, was also a linguistic fusion of cultures. Therefore, the writing itself as well as the syntactic techniques Marie relies upon create an intricate weaving of opposites occupying the same space, a motif she continues throughout the *Lais*.

The physical liminality Marie de France constructs within the *lais Bisclavret* and *Lanval*, particularly the elements of the supernatural, also commingles opposites. While

²⁴ Stokstad, *Art History*, 515.

²⁵ Jan A. Nelson, "Abbreviated Style And Les Lais De Marie De France," *Romance Quarterly* 39.2 (1992).

²⁶ Nelson "Abbreviated style and Les Lais de Marie de France."

²⁷ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 188.

these magical occurrences appear as the central focus of the story,²⁸ Marie buries their sensationalism beneath her matter-of-fact style, “abreviatio,” and banal human qualities. Marie de France, instead of highlighting the spectacle of the supernatural chooses to focus on the humanity of her characters. These supernatural figures perhaps stand as literary doubles of the author in that they are both foreign and familiar.

In *Bisclavret*, the werewolf serves as the primary example of the spectacular within Marie de France’s *Lais*. The lai, a genre defined by its supernatural occurrences, is contradicted by abreviatio. In essence, she downplays the magical element within *Bisclavret*: “In days gone by one could hear tell, and it often used to happen, that many men turned into werewolves and went to live in the woods.”²⁹ What is occult in the world of the reader, therefore, is commonplace within the scope of the lai. Thus, the supernatural exists as both an extraordinary and mundane occurrence. The figure of the werewolf itself, half man and half beast, similarly speaks to this idea of the liminal. *Bisclavret* is both man and wolf, transitioning fluidly between forms.

Yet in this rigid style of poetic distillation, Marie chooses to gloss dramatic scenes of bestial transformation favoring instead the humanity of *Bisclavret*. After the deception of his wife, *Bisclavret* is resigned to live as a wolf in the forest for a year, a significant period of time, which Marie chooses to omit description. She makes a conscious effort to downplay the beast in favor of the man within. It is *Bisclavret*’s loyalty and devotion to the king that saves him from the hunt and eventually leads to his return to human form. When the king returns *Bisclavret*’s clothes to him, therefore allowing the knight to return

²⁸ Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

²⁹ Marie de France, *Bisclavret*, 68.

to his human form, the modest wolf ignores them. Marie de France, instead of detailing the knight's transformation, chooses to tell the condition of transformation instead:

When they [the clothes] were placed before him, Bisclavret took no notice of them. The man who gave advice earlier called to the king: "Lord, you are not acting properly: nothing would induce him to put on his clothing in front of you or change his animal form. You do not realize the importance of this; it is most humiliating for him. Take him into your bedchamber and bring him the clothes."³⁰

Marie de France inserts herself and her reader into this scene. It is almost as if the readers are the king, watching in anticipation for the spectacle of transformation. Marie, "the man who gave advice before," admonishes us, reminding the reader that the supernatural is not the point of the story but merely a condition overshadowed by the human embarrassment of Bisclavret. Now it is not just Marie that crosses the boundary between reality and the fictional world of the lai, but the readers as well.

However, it is important to note that Bisclavret the werewolf is not entirely the victim of this lai. In her introduction to the tale, Marie specifically states "A werewolf is a ferocious beast which, when possessed by this madness, devours men, causes great damage and dwells in vast forests."³¹ As one scholar states, "the real violence done by Bisclavret actually does not occur within the tale itself, but the reader has many clues that his life outside the parameters of the narrated portion of the story is one of violent

³⁰ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 72.

³¹ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 68.

behavior.”³² This is an example of selectivity on the part of Marie de France. Her style of *abreviatio* allows for the author to omit and abbreviate parts of the story in order to emphasize the points that matter.³³ Yet this ominous undercurrent complicates the specific moral of this tale. Her choice to gloss the man-eating tendencies of *Bisclavret* is yet another example of her deliberate decision to reduce the spectacle of the supernatural in favor of the human condition.

The subsequent *lai* of *Lanval* similarly possesses the element of the supernatural obscured by human qualities. *Lanval*, a poor knight of Arthurian times lay beside a stream in the forest taking his leisure. A lady of magical beauty and fortune beholds him and takes him as her lover placing only one condition on their affair: “I admonish, order, and beg you not to reveal this secret to anyone...you would lose me forever if this love were to become known.”³⁴ As long as she remained a secret, *Lanval* could summon her at will to his side. Once again, Marie de France omits the description of these magical summonings and for all intensive purposes this condition would be commonplace between lowly knights and married ladies. If it were not for the setting in Arthurian times and the conclusion of the *lai* where the lady whisks *Lanval* away from court and brings him to the mythical island of Avalon, this story would be a courtly romance not a Breton folktale.

Like in *Bisclavret*, Marie roots her magical characters in *Lanval* firmly in the human world. While she glosses the supernatural trysts between *Lanval* and his magical lover, she takes time and care to describe the physical trappings of the fairy’s tent:

³² David B. Leshock, “The Knight Of The Werewolf: *Bisclavret* And The Shape-Shifting Metaphor,” *Romance Quarterly* 46.3 (1999).

³³ Nelson, “Abbreviated Style And Les Lais De Marie De France.”

³⁴ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 75.

There was a golden eagle placed on the top, the value of which I cannot tell, nor the ropes or the poles which supported the walls of the tent. There is no king under the sun who could afford it...she lay on a beautiful bed—the coverlets cost as much as a castle—clad only in her shift...she had cast about her a costly mangle of white ermine covered with Alexandrian purple.³⁵

It is unusual that she temporarily abandons *abreviatio* in favor of amplification. In fact, she expounds in detail on the material wealth of this nameless lady. Marie's choice to describe this wealth serves a specific purpose. In a *lai* where people remain nameless and there exists numerous ambiguities, this long, physical, specific list of luxuries is poignant. While her limitless wealth is supernatural, the physical objects and material goods orient her in reality. Marie chooses to focus on the ropes and poles of the tent, the structural design of support holding the tent to the ground. She therefore builds this solid, tangible tent juxtaposing the lady's supernatural origins.

Another human quality with which Marie roots *Lanval* in reality is the idea of multiple conflicting identities between various social spheres. Constantly faced with different images of himself, Lanval is torn between neglected servant, treasonous sodomite and adored lover.³⁶ His shifting identity between the public sphere of the court and the private sphere of personal love communicate another juxtaposition of opposing forces. King Arthur “gave many rich gifts ...wives and lands to all, save to...

³⁵ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 74.

³⁶ Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, 48.

Lanval...Because of his valour, generosity, beauty and prowess, many were envious of him.³⁷ Lanval is both the object of envy and at the same time he is neglected. His mistress appears to be the feminine double of Lanval, somehow compensating the knight through otherworldly riches³⁸: “‘Lanval,’ she said, “fair friend, for you I came from my country...for I love you above all else”...Henceforth he could wish for nothing which he would not have³⁹ When these two worlds intersect, namely Lanval’s magical wealth and court life, there is still no reconciliation, only the perpetuation of jealousy by the Queen: “ she complained aloud...and said that Lanval had shamed...insulted and deeply humiliated her. He had boasted of a beloved who was so well-bred, noble and proud that her chambermaid...was worthier than the queen.”⁴⁰ These conflicts between the public and private worlds serve as points of contrast to the melding of narrative and textual spaces of the *Lais*. Instead of reconciling these conflicting identities, Marie removes Lanval from the earthly court and into the mystical realm of Avalon. This supernatural resolution to a realistic predicament perhaps acts as yet another of Marie’s jabs at high culture, the first being the somewhat tongue-in-cheek description of Latin scholars in the Prologue. However, Lanval’s identity dilemma and the triumph of human love act as the true focus of the lai, not the supernatural ability of his lover.

The forest in *Lanval* and *Bisclavret* is both an element of reality and the supernatural. The forest is a Green World outside the boundaries of civilized reality. It is within this determinedly ‘other’ space where Bisclavret’s transformation takes place and

³⁷ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 73.

³⁸ Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, 49.

³⁹ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 74.

⁴⁰ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 76.

Lanval first encounters his fairy lover. Lanval questions the events that transpired during his time in the meadow with his mysterious beloved:

He took his leave...and went towards the city, often looking behind him, for he was greatly disturbed, thinking of his adventure and uneasy in his heart...he could not believe it was true.⁴¹

Only when he returns to find himself wealthy does he believe in his lover's concrete existence. Lanval is a man traversing the uncertain, transformative forest, just like the king in *Bisclavret*. The forest stands as a literary symbol for the uncivilized unknown, a concept perpetuated in later works of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Perhaps to the French after the Norman Invasion, England was a form of this emblematic "forest." Marie de France plays with this concept, asserting the forest as both a physical space of supernatural transformation and discovery.

Similarly, Marie de France's own identity occupies this 'other' space because of her biographical ambiguity. As an abbess, one of her potential identities, Marie would have been aware of the growing tension between reason and the supernatural occurrences within Christianity.⁴² She would also possess the independence and agency to complete the *Lais*. As a noble woman, another potential role, she would have been immersed in the culture of courtly love and romance, a witness to scenes of

⁴¹ Marie de France, *Lanval*, 75.

⁴² Stokstad, *Art History*, 515.

tournament jousting seen in *Chaitavel* and of illicit intrigues like those in *Milun* with which an abbess would be less familiar.

Little is known about Marie de France. Our most significant clues reside in her writings and the happenings of early medieval France. This ambiguity is strange considering she was popularly read and throughout her various works commented on her own individual accomplishment:

At the close of this text, which I have written and
composed in French, I shall name myself for posterity: my
name is Marie and I come from France.⁴³

She was clearly a woman of aristocratic origin, considering her knowledge of Latin, yet her actual identity is unknown. Some scholars suggest she was the Abbess of Shaftesbury in Dorset who was the illegitimate half-sister of King Henry II, based on the discovery of an Arthurian tale translated into poetic form on the Abbess' psalter. Another suspect could be the Abbess of Reading, an abbey renowned for literary production and also where the Harley manuscript was found containing Marie de France's *Lais* and her translation of *Fables*. Yet these *lais* contained illicit trysts between lovers, adulterous affairs sometimes resulting in illegitimate children who become heroes. Certainly an abbess, the model for religious chastity, would punish these trespasses through the creation of morality tales. Marie de France, however, expresses no such reservations concerning adultery and considering her frequent authorial intrusions to comment on

⁴³ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 15.

each tale, she would have had every opportunity to do so. It is generally considered more likely that she was of the Norman nobility or the Countess of Boulogne, daughter to the king of England.⁴⁴

While this poet's identity is still under debate, political, linguistic and literary movements of her time provide a useful context to her works. The dedication of her *Lais* are considered to be for King Henry II, the French King of England from 1154-1189⁴⁵ situating her works in a poignant time in Europe's history. The Norman Invasion in the eleventh century marked a time of cultural and linguistic exchanges. French combined with the Anglo-Saxon to produce "Anglo-Norman...the language of culture in England."⁴⁶ Therefore, the political as well as the linguistic boundaries of the French and English were nebulous, leading to the existence of many "Marie de Frances." Also, the increase in works written in this blended vernacular was rapid, especially Arthurian Romances. Classical works were also translated as they were brought back from the Crusades and inspired literary scholars. Thus, we see the intermingling of cultures during the twelfth century between France and England as well as the literary world with the classical texts of the past.

Marie de France, in many ways, resembles her supernatural characters and their liminal states. She must have been a wealthy woman of some relatively high degree, considering her education. Her exposure to Breton folktales would lead the argument that she resided some time in Britain as well. Like the magical werewolf Bisclavret lives in the king's court, Marie is this alien entity at the hearthside of Breton bards. She is Lanval,

⁴⁴ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 17-9.

⁴⁵ Joseph Black, "Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Concise Edition," (N.p.: Broadview Press, 2007), 106.

⁴⁶ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 20.

traversing this foreign landscape of Breton, whisked away from court and displaced in an occupied territory. Perhaps it is the poet's narrative style, *abreviatio*, which prevents her own identification. If *abreviatio* seeks to distill the essential truth by allowing the author to select only details necessary to that truth, we can assume that the most important facet of Marie's identity she chose to communicate was her nationality: French, the culture of intellectual and political superiority.

Marie de France marks fluidity of identity through her characters as a reflection of her own uncertain standing and the melding cultures of France, England and the classical past. Her potential role as an abbess may have exposed her to the transforming ecclesial architecture and its psychological implications. Most scholars of translation were of monastic orders,⁴⁷ and had she been an abbess she would have seen and possibly participated in the translating of classics with the moralistic intention she describes. Perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, Marie writes: "Anyone wishing to guard against vice should study intently and undertake a demanding task, whereby one can ward off and rid oneself of great suffering."⁴⁸ Yet, this seems more like an act of preventative penance in contrast with these *lais* concerning earthly love and human conditions. Perhaps she is mocking the idea of translation for the salvation of the soul and favoring instead translation of Breton lore for courtly enjoyment. She adheres to the Latin rhetoric structure of *abreviatio*, yet she translates common folktales, an elevated style for a base subject matter. Marie de France individually embodies, linguistically produces and creatively juxtaposes opposites, communicating not just the complexities of translation but of twelfth-century Europe.

⁴⁷ Stanton *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2.

⁴⁸ Burgess and Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France*, 41.

Works Cited

- Black, Joseph. "Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Concise Edition." N.p.: Broadview Press, 2007.
- Bruckner, Matilda T. *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*. USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. 157-88. Web. 21 Dec. 2011.
<<http://books.google.com/books?id=8YoC8HliYQ8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Matilda+Tomaryn+Bruckner+shaping+romance&hl=en&sa=X&ei=LkjyTrGxIFYfX0QHZn6zNAg&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Matilda%20Tomaryn%20Bruck>>.
- Burgess, Glyn S., and Keith Busby. *The Lais of Marie de France*. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Ireland, Patrick John. "The Narrative Unity Of The Lanval Of Marie De France." *Studies In Philology* 74.2 (1977): 130. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.
- Leshock, David B. "The Knight Of The Werewolf: Bisclavret And The Shape-Shifting Metaphor." *Romance Quarterly* 46.3 (1999): 155. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.
- Maddox, Donald. *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*. Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 24-83. eLibrary at University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. *UMass Amherst Library Database*. Web. 21 Dec. 2011.
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/umassa/docDetail.action?docID=5007863>>.
- Nelson, Jan A. "Abbreviated Style And Les Lais De Marie De France." *Romance Quarterly* 39.2 (1992): 131. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 7 Dec. 2011.
- Potkay, Monica B. "The Parable of the Sower and Obscurity in the Prologue to Marie de France's Lais." *Christianity and Literature* 57.3 (2008): 355-78. Web.
- Stanton, Robert. *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002. Print.
- Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008. 513-51. Print.