
INTRODUCTION

An introduction of this sort usually starts with certain basic facts. When and where the author was born. What the principal biographical details are which might be relevant to his or her literary output. What exactly the author wrote and under what circumstances. What the relationship is between the material being presented and that of earlier authors or of writers contemporary with the author, on whom or by whom influence could have been exerted, in respect of genre, theme or textual details. Sadly, in the case of Marie de France none of this information can be given with certainty. We can assert with conviction that at least one poet by the name of Marie was writing in the second half of the twelfth century, but it is equally certain that the author who composed the lays contained in this volume was not called Marie de France. This appellation is first attested in the *Recueil de l'origine de la langue et poesie françoise* by Claude Fauchet (Paris, 1581, Book II, item 84). It has been used ever since as a convenient and attractive name for our author.

One must begin by examining the textual evidence. The tales which are translated in the present volume are found in a thirteenth-century manuscript in the British Library (Harley 978). These twelve short poems in Old French are included among a number of other items principally in Latin (there is, however, in the manuscript, a collection of fables in Old French). The twelve poems, which are preceded by a fifty-six-line Prologue, are in order: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc*. The text of the Harley manuscript (MS H) and the order in which the poems appear form the basis of most editions and several translations, including that found in the present volume. The poems were certainly not composed in this order, and some translators (for example E. Mason and H. F. Williams) prefer to select their own order. The

tales are also found in four other manuscripts, only one of which (MS S, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouv. acq. fr. 1104) can be regarded as offering a substantial collection. Here the order is different and not all the poems are complete: *Guigemar*, *Lanval*, *Yonec*, *Chevrefoil*, *Deus Amanz* (vv. 1-159), *Bisclavret* (from v. 233), *Milun*, *Le Fresne*, *Equitan*. Another Paris manuscript (MS P, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 2168) contains *Yonec* (from v. 396), *Guigemar* and *Lanval*. Two further manuscripts, MS C (British Library, Cott. Vesp. B XIV) and MS Q (Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 24432), contain *Lanval* and *Yonec* respectively. Thus only *Guigemar*, *Lanval* and *Yonec* occur in more than two manuscripts and *Laüstic*, *Chaitivel* and *Eliduc* are found just once. The Prologue, which prefaces the Harley collection, is absent from the other French manuscripts.

These short stories, varying in length from 118 lines (*Chevrefoil*) to 1,184 lines (*Eliduc*), with an average length of 477 lines, are traditionally called lays. The Prologue speaks of *lais* which the author had heard recited: '*Des lais pensai k'oï aveie*' ('I thought of the lays which I had heard', v. 33); '*Plusurs en ai oï conter*' ('I have heard a number of them told', v. 39). The creative process behind these twelve short compositions seems to be envisaged as follows. An *aventure* occurs in the life of one or more individuals, a special event or period, unexpected but often apparently preordained. The *aventure* was recounted and became known. It was heard by the Bretons who composed a lay about it – a short lyrical composition sung to the accompaniment of an instrument such as a harp or rote (see *Guigemar*, vv. 883-6). The author in turn relates (the verbs are *dire* and *conter*) the *aventure*, the *lai*, the *aventure* of the *lai* or the truth of the *lai*. It has been argued on the basis of expressions such as '*conter les contes*' (*Guigemar*, vv. 19-21) and '*dire le conte*' (*Eliduc*, vv. 1-3) that these new compositions should be entitled *contes* ('tales'). But the verb *conter* and the concept of the *conte* seem to relate to the entire process by which the *aventure* is rescued from oblivion and transformed into a Breton lay or a short story in French. The new poems can equally well be regarded as lays: '*Quant de laïs faire m'entremet*' ('When I undertake to compose lays', *Bisclavret*, v. 1); '*Puis que des laïs ai comencé*' ('Now that I have begun to compose lays', *Yonec*, v. 1).

Who is this author who sprinkles the prologues and epilogues so liberally with verbs in the first person and even intervenes on

occasion to make comments within the tales? The sole indication concerning an author for the collection of poems in the Harley manuscript occurs at the beginning of what is normally regarded as the prologue to *Guigemar*:

*Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie,
Ki en sun tens pas ne s'oblie. [3-4]*

'Hear, lords, the words of Marie who in her time does not neglect her obligations.' Marie is anxious to make herself known to her audience and to stress that she does not intend to squander her talents. The somewhat obscure phrase '*en sun tens*' ('in her time') may mean little more than 'now' ('now that she has the opportunity, in her turn'), but there is probably an element of continuity envisaged, a link between the twelfth-century author and the ancient writers mentioned in the Prologue (the *philosophe*, v. 17, or the Bretons who first composed and disseminated the lays). Armed with excellent material ('He who treats of good material', *Guigemar*, v. 1) and endowed with the gift of knowledge and eloquence ('He to whom God has given knowledge and eloquence of speech', Prologue, vv. 1-2), Marie is determined not to be bullied into abandoning her work because of malicious gossip and aggressive behaviour (see *Guigemar*, vv. 5-18). We do not know at precisely what moment in her career Marie wrote the prologue to *Guigemar*, but it is clear that, when she did, her work was sufficiently well known for it to have aroused jealousy and perhaps for it to have been the object of plagiarism. It has been suggested that Marie was cross that her lay of *Lanval* had been used by the author of *Graelent*.^{*} Whatever the background to Marie's remarks, we have the strong impression of dealing with an author proud of her reputation (*pris*) and of her literary talents.

The fact that only *Guigemar* of the twelve lays contains an allusion to an author provides at least some justification for the view that the twelve stories were not necessarily written by the same author. The vagaries of scribal practice and the uncertainty of manuscript transmission even make possible the extreme view that the name Marie was added by a scribe (the Harley manuscript

^{*} Julian Harris, *Marie de France: the Lays Guigemar, Lanval and a Fragment of Yonec, with a Study of the Life and Work of the Author* (New York: Columbia University, 1930), p. 9.

seems to date from between fifty and eighty years after the composition of the lays) and that our author might even have been a man. The indisputably awkward link between the general Prologue and the curious two-part prologue to *Guigemar* (followed by the lengthy prologue to *Equitan*) certainly raises important questions concerning the authorship of the twelve lays, the order of composition and the nature of the collection.

However, over the years (the *Lais* were first published in 1819) most readers will have felt that they were reading a group of stories by one author. Few will have been convinced that the poems were written in the order found in Harley and likewise few will have attributed an equal degree of literary merit to each of the tales. *Equitan* lacks the subtlety of *Guigemar* or *Lanval*. *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil* have a poetic intensity missing from *Chaitivel*. The question of whether the twelve poems were written by a woman is more delicate. One can point to such details as the author's evident interest in the welfare of infants (*Le Fresne* and *Milun*) and to the central role played in the structure of the tales by the sexual frustration of young women who had been married off to older men because of their child-rearing capabilities (see *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun* and *Chevrefoil*). It would come as no surprise if we were to learn one day that the author of the *Lais* had known such unhappiness and that she had experienced loneliness in a foreign country (see *Lanval*, vv. 35-8). In general the heroines of the lays are likeable and resourceful creatures. In spite of the risks they are forced to run, they contrive to see their lovers at regular intervals. In *Laüstic* it is the lady who gives a new direction to the story by calling upon the nightingale to act as an excuse for her nocturnal rendez-vous, and it is she who hits on the idea of sending the corpse to her lover. In *Milun* the young girl masterminds the plan whereby her baby is spirited away to her sister in Northumbria, and it is the young man's beloved in the *Deus Amanz* who proposes that he should make the trip to Salerno in search of a strength-giving potion. None of these factors is conclusive as a sign of the femininity of the author. But one wonders whether a male author would have written the words we find in the prologue to *Guigemar*: 'But when there is in a country a man or a woman of great reputation, those who are jealous of his or her talents (*sun bien*) often say spiteful things' (vv. 7-10).

If we are still tempted to say that a single reference to an author called Marie, in not far off 6,000 lines of text, is insufficient evidence of authorship or even of her existence, we can take heart from the remarks of a contemporary of Marie, Denis Piramus, who wrote, around 1180, a didactic poem entitled *The Life of St Edmund the King*.^{*} In his lengthy prologue Denis tells us that his poem was written as a mark of repentance for a youth devoted to folly and sin. He had had ample experience of court life and with his courtly cronies composed a variety of love songs. Now his energies were to be turned towards an edifying work which would have the advantage of being true. As such it would contrast markedly with the poems of some of his contemporaries. He cites the author of the long romance *Partonopeu de Blois*, whose skill he praises and to whose popularity in aristocratic courts he attests. But his work, says Denis, is nothing more than 'fable', 'menceonge' or 'sounge', a pack of lies, fictitious nonsense. He goes on to quote the case of Dame Marie, who composed '*les vers de lais, Ke ne sunt pas del tut verais*' ('lays in verse which are not at all true', vv. 37-8). Marie's poetry has caused great praise to be heaped on her and it is much appreciated by counts and barons and knights who love to have her writings read out again and again. Moreover, it is not only the male members of the court who take pleasure in the lays. Denis adds that 'the lays are accustomed to please the ladies: they listen to them joyfully and willingly, for they are just what they desire'.

One could scarcely ask for clearer confirmation on a number of key issues. There was a lady by the name of Marie who wrote lays. These lays were immensely popular with men and women in aristocratic circles. Evidently Marie's work caught the imagination of her age, in the sense both of reflecting its ideals and of satisfying its desire for entertainment. As Denis Piramus is associated only with England, we can assume that Marie was known in English courts. She is known to Denis by name, whereas he mentions merely 'the man who composed *Partonopeu*'. We can see too that her poems were regarded by her contemporaries as *lais* (v. 37, v. 46). But, if Denis Piramus's evidence confirms that Marie's lays were circulating in British courts, probably during the 1170s and

^{*} Denis Piramus, *La Vie saint Edmund le Rei, poème anglo-normand du XII^e siècle*, ed. H. Kjellman (Göteborg: Wettergren and Kerber, 1935; reprint Geneva: Slatkine, 1974).

1180s, we cannot thereby be certain that she wrote all the poems in the Harley collection. On this point it would be wise to look carefully at her prologues.

Five of the prologues indicate that the lay in question is not an isolated composition: *Guigemar*, vv. 19-21, 'I shall tell you very briefly the tales which I know to be true, from which the Bretons composed the lays'; *Bisclavret*, v. 1, 'When I undertake to compose lays'; *Lanval*, vv. 1-2, 'I shall tell you the story of another lay, as it happened'; *Yonec*, v. 1, vv. 3-4, 'Now that I have begun the lays . . . I shall relate in rhyme the stories I know concerning them'; *Milun*, vv. 1-2, 'Anyone who intends to tell a new (or different) story must begin in a new (or different) way'. To this one can add the prologue to *Equitan*, which uses the expression '*fere les lais*' ('to compose the lays', v. 7) and which is clearly meant to introduce a number of poems, and the general Prologue, which speaks of the lays which Marie had heard. The general Prologue has at least three aims. It is autobiographical in that it relates the reason why Marie selected the lays, how and why they came to be written, and the means by which they had come to her attention. It is also literary and exegetical. The Prologue opens with stress on the responsibility of the gifted, a discussion of the working habits of some of Marie's predecessors and of the process of assimilation and interpretation, and with a comment on the value of study and of undertaking a demanding project.

The final fourteen lines of the Prologue represent a third aim, a dedication, in direct speech, to a 'noble king'. Of the two possible candidates, Henry II and his son Henri au Cort Mantel, the former is the more likely. The Young King, crowned in 1170, may perhaps have merited the epithets *pruz* ('worthy') and *curteis* ('courtly') more than his father, but Henry II was a cultured man and he is known to have had contact with contemporary poets such as Wace and Benoît de Sainte-Maure. Henry II was always the true king and he never invested any real authority in his sons. Hence their revolt in 1173. But, whichever king Marie had in mind, it was for the English court and for the Plantagenets that she 'undertook to assemble the lays' ('*M'entremis des lais assembler*', Prologue, v. 47). The verb *assembler* can be seen as designating the process by which each lay is put together from its constituent parts, the bringing together of the various lays in the collection

now being offered to the noble king, and the careful constitution of a unified, well-balanced group of stories. The end-product is the result of a strong sense of responsibility, literary ambitions, and a good deal of burning of the midnight candle: '*Souventes fiez en ai veillié*' ('I have often stayed awake at night working on them', Prologue, v. 42).

In what order were the lays composed? This is a question to which there can be no definitive answer. Some readers have felt that *Guigemar*, the first lay in the collection, was the first one to have been composed by Marie. It has been argued that *Equitan* and *Chaitivel* were Marie's last lays, written after she had become acquainted with the Provençal code of love. Given the precise date of the *Roman de Brut* of Wace (1155) and accepting the tentative date of the *Roman de Thèbes* as 1150-55 and the *Roman d'Eneas* as 1160-65, it is possible to envisage some lays, such as the *Deus Amanz* and *Lanval*, as having been composed under the influence of the *Brut* and the *Thèbes*, and others, such as *Guigemar*, *Eliduc* and *Milun*, as having been influenced by these two texts, but also by the *Eneas*. Other lays, such as *Bisclavret*, *Laüstic* and *Le Fresne*, do not appear to show any specific borrowings from the three texts and could perhaps have been composed in the early 1150s. Another promising line of inquiry is the question of the geographical references in the poems. *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, the *Deus Amanz*, *Laüstic* and *Chaitivel* are or appear to be set fundamentally in Brittany or Normandy. There are no sea journeys in these lays and, apart from the young man's visit to Salerno in the *Deus Amanz*, not much movement. These lays could well have been written in France.

Guigemar and Eliduc begin their adventures in Brittany and then leave Brittany by sea. Eliduc sails to Devon. We are not told where Guigemar lands, but Marie could have had in mind for him a destination in South Wales or south-west England. Milun, born in South Wales, is a keen traveller. At the outset of the text he is known in Ireland, Norway, Gotland, England and Scotland. His beloved is married off to a local baron while he is away in search of *pris* ('fame') as a mercenary. In the closing stages of the text he travels to Normandy and Brittany in pursuit of tournaments, and his son, on deciding that he must seek greater *pris* than his father, travels from his home in Northumbria to Southampton, where he

catches a boat for Barfleur, near Cherbourg, a common route from England to France. He too heads for the tournaments of Brittany. The town of Caerleon in Gwent is mentioned in *Milun* and this town reappears in *Yonec*, which also mentions Caerwent, a few miles away. *Lanval* is set in Carlisle, *Eliduc* contains references to Totnes and Exeter, and *Chevrefoil*, set in Cornwall, mentions Tintagel. Like *Milun*, *Tristram* was born in South Wales. Thus everything suggests that when writing the lays in this group Marie herself had travelled. She had perhaps settled in Britain, having left France as a result of marriage or in the furtherance of her professional career. Adding the criterion of literary merit, one can argue that *Equitan*, *Chaitivel* and *Bisclavret*, despite being interesting stories and illustrating several themes common to the entire collection, are less well written than the other lays and may have been composed before them. The prologue to *Equitan* could well have been intended originally as the introduction to the new genre and the new undertaking on which Marie was embarking. The Harley collection, which was not necessarily the first collection to be established by Marie, was probably prepared after she had lived in Britain for a few years. It must have been presented to the Plantagenet court no later than the 1180s. Henry II died in 1189, the Young King in 1183. There is no discernible influence in the *Lais* from Chrétien de Troyes, which might suggest that the collection was offered as early as the 1160s, before the murder of Becket and the deterioration in Henry's domestic life. In arranging her lays Marie may have deliberately placed a longer lay, containing a positive illustration of the power of love and the importance of fidelity, before a shorter composition depicting the painful, tragic consequences of love and foolish or vicious behaviour. In the case of *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc* this process was reversed in order to provide a fitting conclusion for the collection. Marie may also have had mathematical considerations in mind, to ensure that a pair of lays could be recited at one sitting.

None of this conflicts with perhaps our most precious piece of information concerning our author. The Harley manuscript, as has been mentioned, contains a collection of fables. In all, these fables occur in no less than twenty-three manuscripts. At the beginning of the Epilogue the author writes:

*Al finement de cest escrit,
Qu'en Romanz ai traitié e dit,
Me numerai pur remembrance:
Marie ai num, si sui de France.* [1-4]

'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.' The expression '*pur remembrance*' ('for posterity') is one we encounter in the Prologue to the *Lais* (v. 35), in the prologue to *Equitan* (v. 7) and in the epilogue to *Bisclavret* (v. 318). Marie adds, in the Epilogue to the *Fables*, 'The writer who forgets himself is a poor workman' ('*Cil uevre mal ki sei ublie*', v. 8), using the verb *sei oblier*, which is also associated with her naming of herself in the prologue to *Guigemar*. Thus the belief that the author of the *Fables* and the author of the *Lais* are one and the same person is one which almost all readers have been willing to embrace. The morals of the fables, although more practical than any lessons to be drawn from the lays, do not conflict with the overall vision of the world depicted therein.

The collection of fables was translated from English: '*M'entremis de cest livre faire / E de l'Engleis en Romanz traire*' ('I undertook to write this book and to translate the English into French', Epilogue, vv. 11-12). One notes the use of the verb *entremetre* ('to undertake, begin'), which is also found in the Prologue to the *Lais* (vv. 32, 47). The translation of the fables from English could have been started or even completed before the Harley collection was finalized and one can assume that the task was executed in England. Marie tells us that the *Fables* were commissioned by a certain Count William, so a further assumption is that Marie was sufficiently well known as a poet to warrant his faith in her abilities. Marie's Count is the most valiant man in the kingdom (Epilogue, v. 10), the flower of chivalry, learning and courtliness (Prologue, vv. 31-2), and a man with an eye for the potential of a literary form seemingly unknown in French. The question of which Count William Marie was alluding to has exercised the minds of many a scholar. During the second part of the twelfth century Count Williams were not in short supply. Tempting identifications have been made. If the *Fables* were composed during the reign of Henry II, William of Mandeville is a distinct possibility. Earl of Essex

from 1167 to 1175, he was on excellent terms with the king. Sydney Painter has pointed out that in the Pipe Rolls for 1167-75, which indicate debts to the king, William of Mandeville was the only nobleman to be designated as Earl William, and in the *Bible* of Guiot de Provins (v. 388) he is listed as a literary patron.* He died in 1189. But also plausible for the early period is William of Gloucester (d. 1183), a boyhood friend of Henry II. This William was the son of Robert of Gloucester, illegitimate son of Henry II's grandfather, Henry I. Robert was a scholar himself and a protector of writers such as William of Malmesbury and Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom he inspired to write the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Henry II was educated in his house, and on his death in 1147 his son inherited his extensive lands and his great library. William of Gloucester was an influential knight who supported Henry against the rebellious barons.

For the period after the death of Henry II in 1189 a good candidate is William Longsword (born c. 1150), illegitimate son of Henry II and Rosamond Clifford. He became Earl of Salisbury in 1196 and the epitaph on his tomb, *flos comitum Willelmus* ('William, flower of counts'), recalls Marie's '*Ki flurs est de chevalerie*' ('Who is the flower of chivalry', Prologue, v. 31). An even better contender perhaps is William Marshal, preceptor of the Young King and Regent of England from 1216 to 1219. William Marshal acquired the Earldom of Striguil and Pembroke in 1189 and his military skills and chivalric reputation were second to none. The lays of *Guigemar*, *Milun* and *Eliduc* portray knights whose ideals were actually realized by William, who single-handedly raised the standards of British knighthood. R. W. Southern points out that British knights 'were looked on as easy game by the tougher knights of France until the professionalism of William Marshal gave them a reputation for military competence'.†

Until the later eighteenth century Marie de France was regarded simply as the author of the *Fables*. Moreover, she was considered as a thirteenth-century writer and the allusion to Count William was envisaged as applying to a French count such as Guillaume de

* *Les Œuvres de Guiot de Provins, poète lyrique et satirique*, ed. J. Orr (Manchester: Imprimerie de l'Université, 1915), p. 21.

† R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), p. 143.

Dampierre (d. 1251), Count of Flanders. For most early scholars the 'noble king' was Henry III of France. It was only in the last decades of the nineteenth century, thanks principally to the work of Karl Warnke, who edited the *Lais* (1885) and the *Fables* (1898), that Marie was placed firmly in the second half of the twelfth century. Warnke thought that Marie's language differed little from that of Wace, and if this view is allied to Ernest Hoepffner's conviction that she was considerably influenced by the *Roman de Brut* an early date is likely both for the *Lais* and the *Fables*. There is no reason to rule out the possibility that the *Fables* were begun before the composition of the later lays. The *Fables* could well have been dedicated to William of Mandeville or William of Gloucester, both friends of Henry II, perhaps in the 1170s. An earlier date than many scholars have assumed is also possible for the third work to be attributed commonly to Marie de France, the *Espurgatoire seint Patriz*. This 2,300-line account of the knight Owein's descent into the Otherworld via a cavern on Station Island in Lough Derg (County Donegal) is based on the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, written confusingly by a monk H. (either Henry or Hugh) of Sawtry (Saltry) and dedicated, even more confusingly, to abbot H. de Sartis. Abbot H. has often been identified as Henry, abbot of Old Wardon in Bedfordshire during the few years preceding 1215, which would be the approximate date of the *Tractatus*. But it is far more likely that the text was dedicated to Hugh, abbot from 1173 to 1185/6. Thus the *Tractatus* would have been written during this period, and the version by Marie ('*Jo, Marie, ai mis, en memoire, / Le livre de l'Espurgatoire*', 'I, Marie, have recorded for posterity the book dealing with the Purgatory', vv. 2297-8, ed. Warnke) could have been composed around 1180, certainly no later than the early 1190s.

Who was this versatile author, the first woman of her times to have written successfully in the vernacular? She was definitely not Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and patroness of Chrétien de Troyes, as Winkler suggested. A tempting, but by no means fully convincing, identification is with Marie, abbess of Shaftesbury in Dorset, illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet and half-sister to Henry II. A fragment of an Anglo-Norman version of the *Espurgatoire* legend has been found on the cover of a twelfth-century psalter belonging to the abbey at

Shaftesbury (but not Marie de France's version). One of the benefactors of the abbey was William Longsword, who gave lands to it and lent his name as a witness to a confirmation charter dating from 1198. Mary is attested as abbess in 1181 and still in 1215. The founder of the abbey was King Alfred, to whom Marie de France attributes the translation into English of the Latin collection of fables forming the basis of her own work (*Fables*, Epilogue, vv. 16-17).

A claim has been made, albeit somewhat thin, for Mary, abbess of Reading. This abbey was well known as a centre of literary activity and had in its possession the Harley manuscript containing, as we have seen, both the *Fables* and the *Lais*. There is no clear-cut reason why either work could not have been written by an abbess or a nun, and there is some slight evidence of experience of monastic life in *Le Fresne*, *Yonec* and *Eliduc*. But the prominence of the motif of adultery in the *Lais* (see also fables 44 and 45), Marie's attitude towards the dissolution of marriage in *Le Fresne* and *Eliduc*, and her evident interest in the chivalric life suggest that these love poems were not written by someone steeped in ecclesiastical ideology. Tournaments were forbidden by the Church and a Christian burial was denied to those killed in them, but Marie was obviously a keen spectator at such events and the three fallen knights in *Chaitivel* are buried with great honour.

Marie de France was certainly an educated lady of good family, who knew Latin well enough to have contemplated translating a Latin work into French (*Lais*, Prologue, vv. 28-32) and to have done so in the case of the *Espurgatoire*. She was obviously a good linguist and acquired a sound knowledge of English before translating the fables. She was also fully conversant with the life and aspirations of the nobility of her time. Her education could well have been obtained in a convent and her knowledge of court life from her upbringing and personal experiences in England. Was she Marie, the eighth child of Waleran de Meulan (also called Waleran de Beaumont), a member of one of the greatest of the Norman houses? Waleran's fief was in the French Vexin, which would tally with Marie's statement that she comes from France and explain her evident local knowledge of the town of Pitres in the Norman Vexin (see the *Deus Amanz*, vv. 11-20). Marie de Meulan married Hugh Talbot, baron of Cleuville, owner of lands

in Herefordshire and Buckinghamshire, as well as in Normandy, and a member of a family prominent in several English counties including Devonshire, Gloucestershire and Kent. Marie's father is an interesting figure – a loyal and courageous soldier, but also a well-educated man who may have written Latin verse. Moreover, several of the manuscripts of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth are dedicated to him. It is tempting to think that his daughter may have known William of Gloucester, a possible Count William, as his father was also one of Geoffrey's dedicatees. Marie de Meulan may, however, have been too young to be Marie de France, as her birth seems to date from the 1140s, perhaps as late as 1150.

The most recent identification has been as Marie, countess of Boulogne after 1154, daughter of Stephen of Blois (King of England, 1135-54) and of Matilda of Boulogne. Educated in a convent, Marie de Boulogne became abbess of Romsey in Hampshire, but was removed from her convent by Henry II, who wanted to keep Boulogne in his sway. She was married off to Matthew of Flanders and thus became the sister-in-law of Hervé II, son of Guiomar of Léon (see *Guigemar*, vv. 27-37). Eventually, at some time between 1168 and 1180, Marie de Boulogne returned to a convent, perhaps that of Sainte Austreberthe at Montreuil-sur-Mer in her own county. Her Count William could have been William of Mandeville, a crusade companion of Philip of Flanders, her husband's brother. The 'noble king' would probably have been the Young King, as Philip and Matthew, originally supporters of Henry II, changed sides in 1173. Marie herself may have already been a supporter of the Young King, as in 1168 she sent Louis clandestine information about the secret negotiations between Henry and the Emperor Frederick.

But in spite of these intriguing efforts at determining her identity, Dame Marie remains something of a mystery. By far the most impressive piece of documentation we have, of course, is the text of the poems themselves. Here we have our principal guide to Marie's world and to her way of thinking. First, however, the poems in the present volume need to be situated in the wider context of twelfth-century French literature.

The second half of the twelfth century was in France a period of

intense literary activity. *Chansons de geste* (long epic poems about heroes such as Charlemagne and Roland), romances of antiquity (Greek and Roman subject-matter), Arthurian romances, notably those by Chrétien de Troyes, love-lyrics of the *troubadours* in the South and the *trouvères* in the North, drama, both religious and secular, chronicles, saints' lives, a vast body of religious and didactic works – all of these were produced in a vernacular on a scale unknown before in Western Europe. Only the Old Germanic and Celtic peoples produced any literature of note before this date. Old French is the germinal literature in the Europe of the period, and the literary traffic is practically one-way, from France to England, Germany, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, the Iberian peninsula and Italy. This situation remains essentially unchanged until the rise of Italian literature in the age of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. In fields other than literature, too, the period is one of outstanding innovation and creativity, and one thinks in particular of theology (St Bernard) and of philosophy (Abelard, Bernard Sylvester, Alan of Lille). The building of some of the great cathedrals and the founding of some of the great universities also rank amongst the major achievements of the twelfth century.

As a result of the Norman invasion, political, cultural and personal interchange between the continent and England increased enormously, and the insular dialect of French known as Anglo-Norman became the language of culture in England. Not only were continental works copied by Anglo-Norman scribes, but much literature was also produced by English authors writing originally in Anglo-Norman. It hardly needs pointing out again that the context of Marie's work is at least partly an English one, for whoever she was exactly, she was certainly a woman of French descent and upbringing living and working in England. Her personal circumstances as a Frenchwoman in England and her almost certainly religious education would have exposed her to a wide variety of formative influences. Her evident knowledge of Old French and Anglo-Norman literature is supplemented by the interest she seems to have taken in the orally circulating tales of her day which she frequently claims as the source of the *Lais*.

The aim of the rest of this introduction is to look at Marie's *Lais* in relation to the literature of the period in general and to show what features the *Lais* share with other kinds of works and to

suggest what aspects of her poems are characteristic of the *lai* in particular. Although comparison of the *lai* with epic, chronicle, drama, hagiography and religious literature in general is not without point, the most fruitful directions for investigation would seem to be comparison with other narrative genres of love and chivalry, and the lyric, all of which share some features of subject-matter and form with the *lai*.

Although Latin literature still predominates at the end of the twelfth century, as indeed it does throughout the Middle Ages, the use of the vernacular for such genres as the saint's life is a new and significant departure, implying as it does the desire to bring literature and learning within the reach of those with no knowledge of Latin: the *Vie de saint Alexis*, the *Voyage de saint Brendan*, and the *Vie de saint Thomas Becket* (by Guernes de Pont-Saint-Maxence) may be cited as examples. Other kinds of religious literature, such as sermons and similar didactic works, also began to flourish at more or less this time. Much of this literature is derived directly or indirectly from the Bible. Scientific literature appeared in the vernacular, too: bestiaries, lapidaries, lunaries, encyclopedic treatises, and so on. All of these works, then, available earlier only in Latin, began to be translated into, or composed directly in, the vernacular, both on the Continent and in Norman Britain. Other forms of vernacular literature, such as the *chanson de geste*, were written directly into Old French, and had never existed in large quantities, if at all, in Latin. The *chanson de geste* is the first of all the original Old French genres to flourish, and some believe that its popularity was waning when Marie wrote. This is difficult to prove, but *chansons de geste* were being copied and revised (if not composed) in Marie's day and considerably later. The love-lyric first blossoms in Provence in Provençal in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and migrates north with much of southern culture in the middle of the twelfth century. Marie is therefore working at a time when this sort of lyric is at the height of its popularity. The second half of the twelfth century also witnesses the all-important development of the romance, starting with the so-called romances of antiquity, the *Roman d'Eneas*, the *Roman de Thèbes*, and the *Roman de Troie*, Old French adaptations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Statius's *Thebaid* and a Late Latin Troy narrative respectively. What is important to note here is that these texts graft a layer of courtly veneer on to

the originals, particularly visible in the development of the love interest. This is either greatly expanded from hints in the original or often added afresh. Although it is impossible to name all other romances of this period, special mention ought to be made of the *Tristan* texts, the romances of Hue de Rotelande, and those of Chrétien de Troyes. These are all fully-fledged romances (unfortunately the Old French *Tristan* romances of Béroul and Thomas are both fragmentary) that count as classic models of the genre when compared with the transitional romances of antiquity. This is the vernacular context of the *Lais* of Marie de France.

In addition to the translation of the *Espurgatoire* there is further evidence of Marie's knowledge of Latin in her statement in the Prologue to the *Lais* that she had considered translating a Latin text before deciding to base her work on Breton tales. Nor is there any reason to doubt her claim in the *Fables* that she translated them from the English; her use of the occasional English word in the *Lais* also confirms this. Moreover she is well aware of the Greek fable tradition of Aesop and that of the Latin grammarians. A number of passages in the *Lais* in particular show the influence of Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* and *Metamorphoses*, two of the most widely read Latin texts of the Middle Ages. Classical literature in the Middle Ages, as we have already mentioned, was also known from vernacular translations and adaptations, and one text in particular can be shown to have influenced Marie in the *Lais*, namely the *Roman d'Eneas*, one of the romances of antiquity. The influence is especially apparent in the way in which Marie describes the growth of love and analyses the feelings of the characters, and although one cannot point to specific passages in the *Eneas* which have left their mark on Marie, she is clearly working in the same tradition in this respect. A case can also be made for her knowledge of the other two major romances of antiquity, the *Roman de Thèbes* and the *Roman de Troie*, although this is less convincing than the case of the *Eneas*.

With respect to her knowledge of other vernacular literature, it is equally difficult to show particular borrowings, but there are a number of works of which few scholars would now doubt the influence on Marie. While the *lai* as a genre has little to do with the chronicle, it is almost certain that Marie took a number of geographical names from the tradition of the *Bruts*, those British pseudo-

histories of which the first is the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1135). Marie seems to have known Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* and especially Wace's *Brut* (c. 1155), which she uses to create an archaic ambiance for the setting of the *Lais*. The *Chevrefoil* reveals not only a knowledge of the episode related in it, but also of the tradition of the Tristan legend in general, which existed in a number of variant, sometimes conflicting versions in the period Marie was writing the *Lais*. While the usefulness of source-hunting can be called into question, it is important for an understanding of Marie's work to realize that she was immersed in the classical and vernacular literature circulating during her lifetime, and that she is part of the mainstream of medieval culture, not a quaint oddity, however unique her work may be.

If the *Lais* and their author lie fairly and squarely in the mainstream of Old French vernacular literary production, what is the precise relationship of the *Lais* to other literary genres being produced at the time? With respect to the *chanson de geste*, the Old French heroic epic, it may be said that the contrast with the *lai* is almost total, in form, intention and spirit: the *chansons de geste*, written in assonating *laisses*, are intended to inspire the listener with pride and admiration for the deeds of the hero, and are imbued with a militant crusading spirit. One of the few points of contact between Marie's *Lais* and the epic is the express conviction that God is on the side of the virtuous characters and that he will punish the wicked. In so far as chronicle literature of the time shares some of these epic features, it stands in a similar relation to the *lai*, but is frequently cast in the same medium, that is to say the octosyllabic rhyming couplet. This last feature also links the *lai* to much didactic literature and the saint's life. To what extent the *lai* can be compared to these last two genres in respect of moral intention is difficult to say, given the fact that most medieval literature can be shown to contain some kind of lesson, explicit or implicit. Of the *lai* and the saint's life it might also be said that they both frequently revolve around a crisis in the life of the central figures, although the time-span of the actions of a saint's life is nearly always greater than that of the *lai*. In hagiography, divine intervention can play a similar role to the supernatural of the *lai*. By and large, however, it is the contrast between these

genres and the *lai* that strikes the modern reader of medieval literature. The medieval conception of genres may not have led the listener of the time to see such differences, although he would almost certainly have been aware that he was dealing with various sorts of literature.

One basic distinction that can be made between the *lai* and the other Old French genres discussed so far which may well be at the root of the differences is that scholars generally regard the *lais* as belonging to what is known as 'courtly' literature and the epic and religious-didactic literature not. Now while generalizations such as this are quite properly open to modification and refinement, it can serve to explain why the *lais* resemble certain kinds of poem and not others. The term 'courtly' and its equivalents in other languages ('*courtois*', '*höfisch*', etc.), when used to describe certain sorts of literature, is a complex one and often misunderstood. Too loose and frequent use of the word by scholars is at least partly to blame. Basically, 'courtly' can have several meanings: a literal one of 'associated with a court' or extended ones of 'possessing characteristics of a type of literature intended for audiences at court' or 'showing characters whose actions are governed by a code of behaviour called "courtesy"'. The problem is further compounded by slack and indiscriminate use of the term 'courtly love' and the associations given it by C. S. Lewis. Yet, despite these problems, it is precisely the love-element that links the *lai* as a courtly genre to other forms of courtly literature such as the love-lyric and the romance.

We have already said that by the time Marie was writing the *Lais* there was already a well-established tradition of the love-lyric in France, especially in Provence. As a result of political developments and particularly as a result of the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry II in 1152, the culture of the southern courts moved northwards. The kind of 'courtly love' which characterizes the Provençal lyric is found again in the north, in lyric and narrative verse, albeit in a slightly different form. The love is always between persons of an exalted social status, often adulterous (a young wife closely guarded by a jealous old husband), nearly always problematic in some way or another, always profound and always refined. Despite having a cerebral appearance due to an extreme formalism, the love is not platonic, the physical union

being discreetly alluded to as the ultimate goal for the sake of effect rather than out of prudishness. The *lai* resembles the lyric in that the love depicted is of an extreme intensity; the time-span of the *lai* is short, and although not quite as short as the moment of lyric passion, the effect of heightening the emotion is comparable. The longer the text and the longer the time-span covered by the events, the less concentrated the emotions depicted are likely to be.

To say that the audience of the *Lais* would have recognized the spring-time opening of *Yonec* or the jealous old husband motif of *Guigemar* as lyric elements is probably less accurate than saying that such features formed part of a stock of themes and motifs that a medieval poet had at his disposition and upon which he could draw when appropriate. It is important to point out here that the use of familiar material was not regarded in any way as second-rate or plagiaristic in the Middle Ages, rather that it conferred authority on the work, which was thereby sanctioned by it. This is true for both the basic material of many medieval works (in this case the Breton stories Marie claims she used) and the more incidental themes and motifs and stylistic devices such as those mentioned above. This is a fundamental concept which often proves to be a stumbling-block for the modern reader of medieval literature, accustomed as he is to the esteem in which originality is held. The medieval idea of literary creation was really one of re-creation in which existing material was reworked and elaborated on until something new was produced. Needless to say, poor poets are capable of producing poor poetry at any period. Having said all this, it must be admitted that the modern reader is less likely to react unfavourably to Marie's *Lais* than other medieval works of less immediate access.

Although most medieval vernacular verse was intended for recitation aloud rather than quiet reading, the *lai* has a particular connection with the lyric in so far as it is traditionally associated with a musical performance. Marie's *Lais*, however, are not apparently intended to be sung, and represent a more literary stage in the development of the genre. Nevertheless the musical history and lyric intensity of the *lai* must have been recognized by medieval audiences. That the musical connection was never forgotten is shown by the development of the so-called *lai lyrique* in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These are often incorporated at particularly emotional moments in the Arthurian prose romances, often composed and sung by the characters within the romances themselves, to the accompaniment of a harp. Tristan is particularly well-known as a musician and author of *lais*, as witness Marie's own *Chevrefoil*.

If comparison between the *lai* and the lyric suggests itself because of brevity, intensity and a common concern with love as a subject-matter, the narrative nature of the *lai* sets it apart and invites comparison with other narrative genres, in particular the romance. Scholars have pointed out that the *lai* in some ways represents a transitional genre between the earlier Provençal love-lyrics, which provided later poets with a storehouse of themes and motifs, and the romance, which develops and transforms these themes and motifs at length. The *lai* is not the lyric expression of the poet-lover, desperate before his pitiless lady, nor the adventure-filled biography of the romance hero. The *lai*, as it were, takes its cue from the lyric in terms of the nature of the problem presented, and seems to illustrate this by concentrating on one particularly critical event or brief sequence of events in the life of the protagonists.

With the possible exception of *Eliduc*, it is an over-simplification to say that the *lai* treats briefly the matter of romance, as it is almost impossible to compress the narrative events of a full-length romance into the average *lai*. It is fairer to say that some *lais* relate an incident which it is possible to imagine being woven into a romance narrative, and by the same token there are episodes in romances which could be plucked out of context and stand on their own as *lais*. The first part of Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*, for example, could function as an independent poem, although its integration into the romance as a whole gives it quite a different significance. In Marie's collection, *Chevrefoil* is again the obvious example of an episode that might form part of a longer Tristan narrative: some Tristan poems in fact *do* recount a similar event. Other *lais*, like *Lanval* and *Guigemar*, may be seen as concentrating on the initial and final events of a potentially longer narrative, which might have been fleshed out with many adventures and episodes into a romance. Another way of viewing the same phenomenon might be to say that the *lai* concentrates almost uniquely on the crisis which is at the same time the crux and core

of the narrative. The *lai*, in fact, generally starts from a position of lack and crisis which is resolved into a period of happiness; the happiness is then confronted with a test which leads either to a satisfactory or an unsatisfactory resolution. The events of the *lai* are usually, as mentioned above, the decisive moments in the lives of the protagonists, and may lead to their living happily ever after or dying a tragic death.

Love as presented in the *Lais* seems a more spontaneous phenomenon than the love we frequently find in the romances, but this may be due again to the fundamental brevity of the genre, which precludes the kind of learned and rhetorical analysis of the sentiments that is characteristic of a good many courtly romances. The lovers in Marie's *Lais* are nearly always on their own and pitted against forces of evil in various forms: a jealous husband, an envious society and so on. It is in fact by virtue of their loving that the protagonists are set apart from the rest of society and privileged. Marie concentrates on the individuality of her characters and is not very concerned with their integration into society. If society does not appreciate the lovers, then the lovers die or abandon society, and society is the poorer for it. This stands in considerable contrast to the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, where one of the main concerns of the author is the (re-)integration of the lovers into society, in the (re-)establishing of a balance between love and chivalry and the reciprocal duties of individual and society.

With respect to the *idée reçue* of courtly love, characterized by the servant-mistress relationship of the lover and his lady, where the lady is worshipped, and which is often adulterous, the *Lais* illustrate the dangers inherent in generalizing. Some poems do have a timorous lover standing in fear of his lady, but the majority do not; some of Marie's relationships are adulterous, but others are not. In retrospect, it seems difficult to conceive why the ideas propounded by Gaston Paris and C. S. Lewis ever gained such general acceptance, unless it be that most readers of medieval literature read nothing but the stories of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Iseult. Classic as these stories may be, and their protagonists bywords for models of lovers, they are not in all respects typical of the kind of love-relationships portrayed in medieval literature. Love in medieval literature, as in any other

period (indeed, in life itself), is too complex to be reduced to a single model which will not admit of variation. This is not to say that love in medieval literature, and in Marie's *Lais*, does not have characteristics specific to period or genre.

If we take the *Lais* as a whole work, compared with other works of medieval literature, the characteristic of Marie's view of love seems to be an almost inevitable association with suffering. Again, this is not to say that this is not typical of other sorts of literature, but given the brevity of the genre, the attention given to it by Marie leaves a stronger impression than it might have done in a longer and more diffuse treatment of similar material. If we now look at the *Lais* in more detail, we can see more clearly how their subject-matter is related to the early medieval view of love as a whole and how they reflect its many facets.

Lanval presents a problem of love-casuistry: the hero transgresses his lady's command not to reveal their love to anyone, but does so in order to preserve his life in the face of Guinevere's accusation. Is he guilty or not? and if so, of what? Such are the questions Marie seems to pose without providing explicit answers. The implied answer is that while Lanval should not have boasted of his love in the way he did, his lady retracts her over-rigorous condemnation of him by appearing at the trial to vindicate him. *Yonec* shows the classic situation of the *mal mariée* condemned to live without love. The plight of the lady is sufficient for Marie to justify her adultery with the hawk-knight. As in *Lanval*, it is a transgressed vow that causes the crisis: the lady forgets her lover's command to be discreet and moderate, for she calls upon him whenever she wishes and her radiant face reveals her secret. The idea of moderation (Old French *mesure*) is central to much of medieval literature and when present is the feature that keeps all other aspects of courtly and chivalric behaviour in equilibrium. The *dénouement* of that *lai*, like that of *Lanval*, leaves us in no doubt as to where Marie's sympathies lie.

Love also leads to the death of the lovers in three more *lais*. The choice of a Tristanian subject in *Chevrefoil* and the explicit statement at the beginning of the poem make the symbol of the intertwining plants one of the inevitable union of the lovers in death. The *Deus Amanz* shows again that lack of *mesure*, as in *Yonec*, leads to tragedy, but this time Marie gives another slant to the problem: the girl does her utmost to persuade her young beloved

to drink his potion and one must ask oneself why he refuses to do so. Not simply out of love, but also out of vanity, out of a desire to be the first to be able to meet the father's requirements. The love in the *Deus Amanz* is tragic because, unlike in *Chevrefoil*, its mortal nature is not inevitable. The *mal mariée* also appears in another *lai*, *Laüstic*, where love leads to death. This time, however, the death is not that of either of the lovers, but that of the nightingale, symbol of the love. Yet the death of the nightingale does not symbolize the end of the love, only of the idyll, for the lady sends the heart of the bird to her lover precisely as a symbol of their eternal attachment.

Yonec, *Chevrefoil* and *Laüstic* all show extra-marital love, all incorporate the usual situation of the unmarried lover and the unhappily married lady, and in none of the three does Marie give an indication of disapproving of this state of affairs. In *Eliduc*, the situation is different and more delicate: here, an apparently happily married husband falls in love with another woman, and here, also, it is the woman who takes the unusual step of first declaring her love to the man. Marie has reversed the standard 'courtly love' situation and put quite a new perspective on the problems of extra-marital love, for Eliduc, however much he loves the king's daughter, does not forget the vows of fidelity he made to his wife. It is the revelation of his married state by the sailor that precipitates, but does not cause, the crisis, quickly solved by Guildeluc's readiness to take the veil and thus enables Eliduc and Guilliadun to enjoy their love with the blessing of society and God. Guildeluc's action is comparable to that of Fresne in *Le Fresne*, where the heroine even goes so far as to attend to the preparations of her beloved's wedding-night; in this case, her virtue is rewarded when her identity is revealed, and her social status and marriageability thereby established.

The theme of the *mal mariée* reappears in *Guigemar*, this time in combination with another motif found elsewhere in medieval literature, that of the man who spurns love and is then taken unawares by it. This time Marie shows that love, even adulterous love, if loyal and deep, need not necessarily lead to the death of the lovers. Inevitably, however, the love does lead to suffering before the lovers' single-minded fidelity leads to triumph and union. In a sense, *Guigemar* is one of Marie's more chivalric *lais*, as the love it portrays is associated with the trappings of romance

such as abduction, tournament and single-combat. *Milun*, too, shows the rewards that devotion brings, for the twenty-year correspondence and only occasional meeting is crowned by the young man's discovery of *Milun* and subsequent union of his parents. This *lai* contains a number of themes and motifs met elsewhere: the woman falling in love with the man on the basis of his reputation alone, and the combat between father and son.

Bisclavret and *Equitan* have been linked in the past as the two *lais* of Marie which seem to condemn the idea of courtly love and adultery, but this is on closer inspection not so. They are linked, however, by a certain savagery in the *dénouement* and their condemnation of disloyalty. In *Bisclavret* the woman is punished for disloyalty to her husband and for robbing him of what human aspects he retains, thereby despoiling him of his reason; there is no question of the lady loving her neighbour, and Marie explicitly tells us that she does not. The two adulterers in *Equitan* do love each other, but again their savage end is not to be seen necessarily as a condemnation of adultery. Even though the king is aware of the immorality of loving his seneschal's wife, Marie does not insist on this. It is rather their communal plan to dispose of the lady's husband that is culpable in the eyes of the poetess.

Chaitivel is the one *lai* that really seems to belong to the casuistical tradition of Andreas Capellanus and the courts of love, for it presents us with a *quaestio amoris*: who is to be pitied most – the lady who has effectively lost all her four lovers in one day, or the one survivor who can see his lady but not enjoy her favours because of his infirmity? Once more, the association of love with suffering is evident, and once more the guilty party is punished, the lady being condemned to lose all her lovers because of her vanity in refusing to choose one of them. Her selfishness is also evident in the title she wants to give to the *lai* that she writes about her own misfortunes, *The Four Sorrows*; the unfortunate survivor realizes this and suggests in his turn that it should rather be called after him, *The Wretched One*.

Does an overall view of love emerge from this consideration of the *Lais*? This is hardly possible, since Marie seems to delight in telling us that each particular situation calls for the appropriate action and that, from a moral point of view, each case requires a separate evaluation. One needs to look no further for illustration

than the approval or condemnation of adultery in the various *Lais*. As Emanuel Mickel has said: 'The suffering from what is often called love is present in every *lai*, but the means of overcoming this suffering is beautifully and subtly illustrated.'* Mickel has also aptly remarked that the truly important consideration for Marie always seems to be the quality of the love: in *Equitan*, *Bisclavret* and *Chaitivel*, cupidity leading to crime and disaster; in *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil*, love of unfulfilment; in *Guigemar* and *Lanval*, love which overcomes obstacles; in the *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec* and *Milun*, the point is that the real significance of the union is fruition; finally, the charitable devotion of the heroines in *Eliduc* and *Le Fresne* shows that there is a more spiritual side to earthly love.

We have already touched on the relative brevity of the *lai* compared to the romance and seen how Marie chooses to relate brief but crucial moments from the lives of the protagonists, but it may be worthwhile looking at the narrative structure of the *Lais* in a little more detail. As we have already suggested, the length of the *Lais* tends to determine the kinds of adventures described and to some extent the structure of the poems. It is possible to make a distinction between the shorter *lais* (less than 500 lines: *Equitan*, *Bisclavret*, the *Deus Amanz*, *Laüstic*, *Chaitivel* and *Chevrefoil*), where it is the *dénouement* that is important, the medium-length ones (*Le Fresne*, *Lanval*, *Yonec* and *Milun*), where a situation of stability is quickly reached but temporarily endangered, and the longer ones (*Guigemar* and *Eliduc*), where the narrative has two distinct temporal movements. Although it is in some ways easy to see how the shorter *lais* could be expanded by stressing events that Marie merely mentions or leaves implicit, her narrative art is essentially one of economy. Only information that is necessary for an understanding of the story is included, and long periods of time are frequently passed over in silence. Here again, comparison with the romance is enlightening, for this is a genre which often takes as its subject the whole life of a hero or a detailed analysis of a particular period in his life.

The question of relationship to the romance can also be investigated via the use of the concept of adventure in the two genres. It is quite clear, given the frequent use of the word *aventure*

* Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr, *Marie de France* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p. 121.

in the *Lais*, that it is a key term for our understanding of the nature of narrative in the genre. The idea of *aventure* can perhaps best be looked at by means of its etymology. The word is derived from the Latin *advenire*, 'to happen' (literally, 'to come to'), and in Marie's *Lais*, as elsewhere, adventures are things which happen to people with no warning and which cannot be sought. There is a lack of awareness about the heroes of the *Lais* when compared with those of the romance, who actually seek adventures or go on quests. Marie's characters are usually shaken to the core (not necessarily in a negative way) by the adventures that overtake them and them alone, whereas the heroes of romance take adventures in their stride. The adventures in the *Lais* are events which usually bring about a fundamental change in the lives of the protagonists, whereas in romance they often serve to bring out potential or confirm and strengthen something already present. It has been mentioned in another connection that Marie is not concerned with showing her characters integrated into society, and, if anything, happiness seems possible only outside the normal world. It has also been pointed out in this respect that the adventures in the *Lais* never have beneficial effects on society and relate only to the individuals concerned, whereas adventures in romance often lead to the liberation of captives or ridding a land of evil customs. In the *Lais*, then, the adventures form the basis of the narrative structure, but the nature of the adventure is different from that in romance.

Marie is quite clearly aware of the kind of techniques romance writers had at their disposal, and in terms of pure narrative structure that is evident from, say, *Eliduc*. Most romance writers will use a tournament or feast or even the first appearance of a character as a means of expanding their narratives with long descriptions, but Marie uses only as much description as is necessary for the comprehension of the story. Occasionally she will give a longer description, such as that of the tent in *Lanval* or of the ship in *Guigemar*, but these are generally in order to stress a particularly important point. The effect of these descriptions in romance is usually to create a statelier tempo for the narrative; the lack of them in the *Lais* has the effect of reinforcing the timelessness also suggested by other means.

Something similar may be said about Marie's characterization.

While it is often fruitless to look for great psychological depth in characters from medieval literature in general – the equation of depths of characterization with great literature is a relatively modern one – it is even more fruitless in such a short genre as the *lai*. Marie does not give us penetrating insight into the minds of her characters. She does, however, use the popular romance devices of interior monologue or meditation and dialogue in a moderate way, though to nothing like the extent that Chrétien de Troyes does. Most of what we know about her characters we learn from their actions. While some of the central characters are drawn with a certain degree of refinement, Marie's protagonists are by and large types common to medieval literature: noble knights and ladies, some of them *mal mariées*, jealous old husbands, devoted wives, etc. The virtues and vices they possess are the stock ones of medieval characters: *mesure* or *démésure*, charity or cupidity, fidelity or infidelity, jealousy or acceptance, generosity or greed, etc. As has been noted the general impression received from the *Lais* is that the women characters are more forceful than the men.

Another element that links the *lai* to the romance is the supernatural. It is debatable to what extent this can be considered a generic question, however, as not all of the *Lais* or all romances contain marvels of this kind. Nevertheless, enough of Marie's *Lais* contain supernatural elements for the reader to be struck by their presence, and a word of comment may be in order. Three *lais*, *Guigemar*, *Lanval* and *Yonec*, have the main protagonist come into contact with the Otherworld, and in *Guigemar* and *Lanval* the hero is actually taken there. Yet the Otherworld is not necessarily a place where things happen that are inexplicable in terms of the laws of physics, but rather an ideal world where the hero achieves what he would wish to achieve in the ordinary world. There is nothing particularly supernatural about Lanval's fairy-mistress or especially Guigemar's *mal mariée*. The ship in *Guigemar* could equally well have been manned by sailors, and the swan in *Milun* is not necessarily supernatural and could for all practical purposes be replaced by a human messenger. The potion in the *Deus Amanz* is also a borderline case, and is certainly not the kind of love-potion drunk by Tristan and Iseult. Indeed, Marie specifically says where it came from and how the hero acquired it. *Bisclavret* is in a sense typical here: the lady's wicked behaviour is brought

about by a supernatural phenomenon, but that phenomenon is in itself not stressed by Marie, whose interests lie in the injustice done a man by his wife. Irrespective, however, of whether the particular *lai* contains supernatural elements or not, it is incontestable that the world of the *lai* is a fairy-tale world where the unexpected can happen at any time without rational explanation. The fact that Marie often chose folktale material for her *lais* is partly responsible for this, but even where there is no visible popular source, the atmosphere is similar to that of the fairy-tale. This also to some extent accounts for the individuality of the *Lais* as the poetic reality of the fairy-tale is a private not a public one. Lest the irreality of the *Lais* be overstressed, it should be pointed out that there is also more than the odd point of contact with medieval reality: not only are geographical names used, but the characters are medieval people, not the vague characters of the fairy-tale; none of the protagonists is immortal (except perhaps Lanval and his lady), and the harsh reality of death is often present; in *Bisclavret* and particularly in *Lanval* we are also aware of contact with the real legal system in operation at the time.

It is fair to assume that despite some differences between the *lai* and the romance, they were originally intended for the same kind of aristocratic audience. Such a twelfth-century audience we know had a passionate interest in the theory (and practice) of a refined kind of love such as Marie treats in the *Lais*. In some ways they would have seen their own world mirrored in Marie's fictional one: after all, they were of exalted rank, lived in castles, rode horses in forests, participated in tournaments and had love-affairs. Here again, the fairy-tale element may be visible if we are to regard the *Lais* at least partly as wish-fulfilment for a particular social class.

Also instructive is the relationship of the *lai* to the *fabliau*. *Fabliau* is the name given to a variety of short comic verse tale, in length and form comparable to the *lai*, whose period of composition coincides at least partly with that of the *lai*. Here is not the place for a full description of the *fabliau*, but suffice it to say that it could hardly be further removed from the *lai* in terms of spirit and content. Where the *lai* treats in a courtly style the lofty story of knights and ladies, the *fabliau* relates in often obscene language such subjects as the adulterous love of the merchant's wife and the

parish priest, or gross practical jokes played by one character of dubious morals on another. Yet despite this fundamental distinction between the two genres, it is possible to argue that the *fabliau* is in some respects a parody of courtly literature and therefore by definition intended for the same audience.

Indeed, some poems which closely resemble *fabliaux* are actually called *lais* in the manuscripts (the title *Le Lai du Lecheor* will give an indication of the subject-matter), and this brings us on to the development of the *lai* after Marie de France. Of the anonymous *lais* written during Marie's period of activity, it may be said that most of them conform more or less to the pattern we have tried to sketch above, but one twelfth-century poem, *Le Lai du Cor*, describes a chastity-test of the ladies at Arthur's court. It is close to the *fabliau* by virtue of its subject-matter, and to the *lai* thanks to its Arthurian setting and the style in which it is written. These last features and its relative brevity may have led its author to call it a *lai* in the knowledge that it did not actually conform to the specific requirements of the genre. Such poems as this (*Lecheor* and *Ignauré* are others) may have been composed as parodies of the *lai* proper and may owe their denomination to the parodic intent. Other poems, such as Jean Renart's *Le Lai de l'Ombre* or the anonymous *Lai de l'Oiselet*, are clearly not meant as parodies of this kind and are yet still called *lais*. The simplest and most plausible explanation of this is that medieval literary terminology is at best rather flexible, and that whereas the word *lai* may have had the specific meaning of the Marie-type Breton *lai* in the twelfth century, its semantic field became enlarged in the thirteenth to cover other sorts of short courtly verse narrative. Recent genre criticism also suggests that, rather than seek to make strict definitions of genres, we may better view medieval vernacular literature as a system of interdependent types each with characteristic features. Some of these features, but not all, are interchangeable and may be found in works of a basically different kind. This is one way of looking at texts such as the *Lai du Lecheor*, or even Marie's *Equitan*, which has been said to resemble a *fabliau*.

Finally, a word should be said about the influence of the *Lais* outside French-language areas. It has been seen that in France other authors wrote *lais*, some in imitation of Marie. Abroad, the *Lais* seem to have enjoyed particular popularity in Scandinavia

and England. An Old Norse translation of Marie's *Lais* and some anonymous ones was prepared towards the beginning of the thirteenth century by a certain Brother Robert for King Haakon I of Norway, the collection being generally referred to as the *Strengleikar*. The *Strengleikar* belong to a large body of Old Norse versions of Old French works produced during the same period for a monarch with a pronounced taste for French culture. While some of the adaptations of the longer French romances, such as those of Chrétien de Troyes, are reworked to a certain extent to cater for the tastes of a Scandinavian audience, the *Strengleikar* are quite faithful prose translations of the *Lais*. In England, a number of versions of *Lanval* have survived, the earliest dating from the middle of the fourteenth century, and a fragment of a version of *Le Fresne*. In addition, a number of original Middle English poems have been considered as *lais* and may have been written as a result of the popularity of the genre in French. The best known of these is Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*. The adaptations of *Lanval* form an interesting example of the different transformations an Old French poem can undergo at the hands of various poets with different intentions and different audiences in mind.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Until recently, the *Lais* of Marie de France could really be read in English only from Eugene Mason's translation, first published in 1911 and reprinted in 1954 and 1976. Mason's version is interesting as a piece of period prose, but is frequently little more than a paraphrase of passages he seems not to have properly understood. In 1978 there appeared a blank-verse translation by Joan Ferrante and Robert Hanning which, although infinitely superior to Mason's, lacks the kind of literal accuracy that, short of a poetic miracle, can alone convey the content of the original as precisely as possible.

Our aim has been to provide a plain English prose translation of Marie's *Lais* which renders them as closely as the semantic differences between Old French and Modern English will allow. We hope that both the general public and students of literature with no Old French will be able to read this translation with profit and pleasure (to use a medieval idea) in the knowledge that it is not too much a deformation of the original. Stylistically our final version differs in one major respect from our own earlier efforts and from Marie: we have renounced trying to reproduce Marie's rather short staccato phrases, often no more than a line long, and have given a little more 'flow' to the translation in order to make the *Lais* somewhat easier reading. We have, however, avoided adding to the sense, and have included 'ands', 'buts', etc., only where the context allowed. Those who know Modern French, or whose Old French is rusty, will be able to get an idea of the relationship between Marie's language and the modern idiom by looking at the texts of *Lanval*, *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil* (in G. S. Burgess's edition) printed as an appendix.

We have not loaded our translation with explanatory or interpretative notes. With a few exceptions, anything that calls for comment is explained in the Index of Proper Names at the back. Moreover, many of the issues that are likely to be unfamiliar to the

non-specialist are dealt with at some length in the Introduction. In cases of ambiguity in the Old French, we have simply opted for a particular meaning as being the most convincing in our view without commenting.

The *Lais* have been edited many times, but the standard editions are those of Karl Warnke (3rd edn, 1925), Alfred Ewert (1944 and reprints) and Jean Rychner (1966). As Ewert's edition of manuscript H is excellent and readily available in English-speaking countries, we have based our translation on it, although we have sometimes departed from his punctuation. To help the reader follow the poems in the Old French, line references to this edition have been provided at regular intervals.

Our translation of Marie's *Lais* appears in the wake of a revival of interest in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the vast quantity of fantasy literature using medieval subject-matter or settings, and the phenomenal success of such novels as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, as well as by general manifestations of medieval culture in library and museum exhibitions. We welcome this interest and hope that the present volume will help to dispense with the myth, still current in some circles, that medieval literature, pure and unadulterated, is inaccessible and irrelevant to the modern reader. As regards the *Lais* of Marie de France, nothing could be further from the truth.

We would like to thank Gill Gaughan and José Lanfers for having read some of the *Lais* in various stages of completion. The late Mrs Betty Radice, former editor of the Penguin Classics series, made helpful comments and gave us much encouragement. For any remaining imperfections we are alone responsible.

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*The Lais of
Marie de France*

TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby

*Second Edition with two further lais
in the original Old French*

PENGUIN BOOKS