

# **The Lais of Marie de France Study Guide**

**The Lais of Marie de France by Marie de France**

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# Guigemar

## Guigemar Summary

Guigemar is a great knight with but one flaw. He shows no interest in romance. While hunting near his home, Guigemar shoots a white deer with an arrow, but the arrow bounces back, striking him in the thigh. The deer speaks to Guigemar, telling him that his wound will never heal unless it is treated by a woman for whom he has suffered greatly in love and who has suffered for his love. Guigemar rides away to the sea where he discovers a beautiful ebony ship with silken sails. He boards the ship and finds it is empty except for a large luxurious bed. He sleeps.

The ship carries him to an ancient city ruled by an old lord with a beautiful young wife he keeps locked away. The lady and her servant find the strange ship carrying Guigemar, who awakes and tells them his tale. They help him back to the lady's chambers, where they bandage his wound and hide him behind a curtain. Soon Guigemar falls in love with the lady. She returns his feelings, and he stays with her, hidden away.

Fearing they will be discovered, the lady ties an intricate knot in the tail of his shirt and has him promise that he will love no woman unless she can untie it. Guigemar ties a girdle around her, making her promise she will love no man unless he can untie it. They are discovered by her husband, who sets Guigemar adrift in the same ship that first carried him. The ship returns him home. Guigemar continues his life as a valiant knight. Many women try to untie the knot in his shirt, but cannot.

Meanwhile, the lady resolves to kill herself by jumping into the sea. She finds her door unlocked and goes to the rock where Guigemar was set adrift. The mystical ship is there and takes her to a castle owned by a lord named Meriaduc. Meriaduc loves her, but she explains about the girdle and the promise she has made. Meriaduc has heard of Guigemar's shirt and realizes this is the lady who tied the knot in it. He conspires to have them meet by asking Guigemar to come help him fight an enemy.

Guigemar, along with several of his followers, comes to help Meriaduc. When he sees the lady, he first cannot believe it is her, but when she unties the knot in his shirt he is certain. He offers to serve Meriaduc for three years if he will let him have the lady.

Meriaduc wants the lady for himself and dares Guigemar to take her. Guigemar and his followers immediately ride to Meriaduc's enemy and offer to help him. They capture Meriaduc's castle and kill the lord. Guigemar takes his lady away to be his wife.

## Guigemar Analysis

The talking deer, mysterious ship, and charmed lovers' knots in this story make it one of the more supernatural tales among Marie's *lais*. It is unusual among her stories in that the fate of the lovers seems pre-ordained. Guigemar's fate is prophesied by the talking



deer, and their destinies are helped along by the course of the mysterious ship. The theme of a beautiful woman being kept locked away by a jealous, older husband is one that repeats throughout the *lais*, and is usually, as is suggested here, a situation that makes adultery an acceptable and even noble act when it is done out of pure love.



# Equitan

## Equitan Summary

Equitan is a popular king. His seneschal, or governor, has very beautiful wife who Equitan falls in love with on sight. He is so affected he cannot sleep, and falls ill. To comfort the king, the seneschal sends his wife to speak to him. Equitan uses the opportunity to tell her of his love and to ask for hers.

She is reluctant. She tells the king that they cannot have a true love between them because they are not equals. She fears that after a while he will find another woman. He promises he will never take another and tells her that in love she is the master and he her subject. With this, she agrees and they exchange rings.

They meet often in secret. Meanwhile, the king's advisers are eager for him to find a noble woman to marry, and are dismayed when he tells them he has no intention of marrying. His lover is still worried, however. He promises again that he will not marry another and suggests that if her husband were dead, he would be free to marry her.

She schemes to murder her husband. She tells the king to come to the seneschal's castle to hunt and on the third day suggest to the seneschal that they each take a bath. She will fill her husband's bath with scalding water that will kill him, making it look like an accident. The king agrees, and goes to the seneschal's castle to hunt. On the third day, he suggests a bath, and two tubs are filled at the foot of the king's bed. While the seneschal is out of the room, his wife comes in and she and the king begin to make love on the bed. The seneschal returns and finds them there. The king, in haste to hide himself, jumps into the scalding bath and dies. Understanding what has happened, the seneschal drowns his wife. Marie closes with the moral that evil schemes sometimes backfire on the evildoers.

## Equitan Analysis

The character of the seneschal's wife responds very practically to the advances of the king by remarking that because he is king, he will feel free to leave her at any time. The king promises that in their relationship she will be the lord over him. This reversal of roles leads to their disastrous deaths, however. It is interesting that in many of the lays, adultery is not condemned when it takes place between people of equal stature, or if it is initiated by the person of lower status. When a person of higher status makes an advance toward one lower, as in this story and also in Lanval, the results are often adverse.



# Le Fresne

## Le Fresne Summary

Two good knights are neighbors. One's wife becomes pregnant and gives birth to twin boys. The other's wife, who is deceitful and cruel, spreads the rumor that having twins is the result of having had sex with two different men. Believing this, the husband of the woman with the twins becomes jealous and locks her away unjustly.

But the deceitful wife gives birth to twin girls later that year. Not wishing to be judged by her own false words, she conspires to have a servant leave one of the girls at a church. She wraps the baby in a fine cloth and ties a large golden ring to its arm. The servant leaves the infant in an ash tree near a large abbey. The child is raised by the abbess and is named Le Fresne.

As Le Fresne grows into womanhood, her beauty becomes well known. A lord named Gurun falls in love with her and convinces her to come away with him. She takes her ring and fine cloth, which she has kept.

Le Fresne goes to live at Gurun's castle with him, but they do not marry. She is highly esteemed by all, but the lord's knights still pressure him to marry a woman of noble birth, believing Les Fresnes to be only a lowly orphan. Gurun finally consents, and his knights present a noble maiden named La Codre. Gurun agrees to marry her. Le Fresne continues to serve Gurun faithfully. La Codre's mother knows about Gurun's lover, but does not know she is her lost daughter. She intends to have Le Fresne married off to someone else to get her out of Gurun's household.

The wedding day is a rich celebration. In honor of the marriage, Le Fresne prepares the wedding bed with the fine cloth she was given as an infant. After the wedding, La Codre's mother brings her into the bed chamber. She recognizes the fine cloth on the bed and insists on knowing where it came from. She questions Le Fresne, who also shows her the ring, and realizes she is her lost daughter. She is overcome by joy, and faints.

She calls her husband and confesses her crime. He forgives her and is pleased to find his daughter again, but dismayed that Gurun has now married La Codre when it is Le Fresne he loves. The father explains everything to Gurun. The marriage to La Codre is annulled and the next day Gurun is married to Le Fresne.

## Le Fresne Analysis

The abandonment of a child who is later reunited with its parents is a theme used throughout many works of literature, and is a theme that runs through many of the stories Marie sings. In this case, the fair and noble Le Fresne is rewarded for her loyalty to her lover when an act of selflessness leads to the discovery of her true identity. The



names of the twins are significant, as Le Fresne means "ash tree", after the type of tree where the infant Le Fresne is discovered. By coincidence, her sister is also named after a tree, La Codre, which is a hazelnut tree.



# Bisclavret

## Bisclavret Summary

There is a baron called Bisclavret, with a devoted wife. They are happy together, but she is concerned because for three days of every week her husband disappears. She confronts him insistently, and finally he admits that he is a werewolf. He removes his clothes and hides them when he turns into a werewolf, he tells her, for if he were not able to reclaim his clothes he would remain a werewolf forever. She insists on knowing where he hides his clothes, and reluctantly he tells her the place.

The woman convinces a knight from a nearby land to help her trap her husband. She tells the knight where her husband hides his clothes and instructs him to steal them. After Bisclavret is missing a year, everyone assumes he will never return, and his wife is allowed to marry the knight.

The king of the land goes hunting and his dogs corner the werewolf Bisclavret. Trapped, he kneels down before the king in a sign of mercy. Impressed by the creature's apparent intelligence, the king spares its life and takes Bisclavret back to his castle to live. Bisclavret is gentle and becomes a favorite of the household.

The king holds a festival and summons all the knights in his service to the castle, including the knight who is now married to Bisclavret's wife. When Bisclavret sees the knight again, he lunges for him, pulling him to the ground. This astonishes the king and his court, who have never seen the creature try to harm anyone. Later, while the king is staying with Bisclavret near the home of Bisclavret's wife, the creature sees his wife and attacks her, biting off her nose.

Learning that the woman is married to the knight that Bisclavret attacked before, the king arrests the knight and tortures the woman until she tells everything. She is forced to return Bisclavret's clothes to him, allowing him to change back into a human. The king rewards Bisclavret with land and riches and banishes the knight and his wife forever.

## Bisclavret Analysis

Bisclavret is another story in the "fairy-tale" vein, such as Guigemar and Yonec. Bisclavret is a werewolf, but a gentle and noble werewolf who is wronged by his wife. As in Equitan, a person of higher rank uses love to influence someone of lower status to the sorrow of both. In this case, Bisclavret's wife exploits a knight's affection for her to convince him to help her trap her husband. In the fairy-tale ending, she and the knight are severely punished and order is restored when the good and noble Bisclavret is returned to human form.





# Lanval

## Lanval Summary

Lanval is a worthy knight in the service of Arthur, but when Arthur hands out rewards to his knights, Lanval is forgotten. Out of jealousy for his prowess, no other knights remind the king about Lanval, and so he receives nothing.

While out riding, two beautiful maidens approach Lanval, calling him by name. Lanval follows them to a sumptuous tent, where a beautiful woman reclines inside. She tells Lanval of her love for him and, dazzled by her beauty, Lanval professes his love for her. The woman says Lanval will no longer want for money, because the more he spends the more he will have. Furthermore, he must only wish for his love to come to him and she will be there, although she will be invisible to everyone but him. Their love must be secret, she tells him. If it is revealed, he will lose her and everything else.

She clothes Lanval richly and he returns to the company of his fellow knights. He soon gains a reputation for being generous and living honorably, and eventually catches the eye of the queen. She approaches him when he is alone and offers her love to him, but he declines. She bitterly responds that she thinks he must prefer the company of young men to beautiful women, and Lanval answers her spitefully. He tells her he has the love of a woman who is so fair that her servant is still more beautiful than the queen. The queen immediately tells Arthur what Lanval has said, telling him that it was she who spurned his advance.

Meanwhile, Lanval returns to his empty home, knowing he has lost his love by revealing their secret. Soon he is arrested. Arthur puts the matter to his advisers, who decide that if Lanval can prove the truth of his claim he will be released, but Lanval responds that he cannot produce his lover to prove his claim.

Two beautiful maidens approach the court. They are more lovely than any women the knights have seen. Soon another pair of maidens arrives, even more beautiful than the first, and all more beautiful than the queen. They announce the arrival their mistress, who enters on a white horse. Her beauty stuns everyone, and all agree she is the fairest lady in the world. She speaks to Arthur and tells him that Lanval has been wrongly accused. Satisfied that Lanval has been vindicated, Arthur releases him. Lanval rides off to Avalon with his beloved, never to return.

## Lanval Analysis

The story of Lanval continues the theme of adultery as blameworthy when initiated by the higher ranking person. In this case, it is the queen who sets the main conflict of the tale into action when she makes an advance on a knight and is rebuffed. Lanval's loyalty is tested throughout the story. First is his loyalty to King Arthur, which prevents him from complaining that he does not receive his just rewards from the king. Second is

his loyalty to his fairy lover, whose existence he has promised never to reveal. He fails this test, however, but once again displays his loyalty to both the king and his lover by willingly preparing to suffer the consequences of his actions. In the end, he receives what is due him because of his loyalty.



# Les Deus Amanz

## Les Deus Amanz Summary

Near a high mountain is the city of Pitres, which was founded by a king with a beautiful daughter. The king is devoted to his daughter and does not wish to give her up in marriage. To better keep her for himself, he decrees that any man who wishes to marry her must be able to carry her to the top of the nearby mountain without resting. Many men try, for she is very beautiful, but none succeed.

In a nearby region lives a young and valiant knight who loves the princess, and she loves him. Knowing that he could never meet her father's challenge, he tries to persuade her to elope with him. She will not, for it will devastate her father. Instead, she tells her lover to go to her aunt, who is skilled in medicine and will give him a potion to give him the strength to carry her up the mountain.

The knight seeks out the aunt and obtains the potion. He returns to the king's court and announces his intention to take the challenge. On the day of the challenge, the knight gives the small vial of potion to his lover to hold until he needs it. He picks her up and starts up the mountain. After a while, he begins to slow and the princess offers him the vial. He refuses, saying he has the strength to go on. He begins to falter, but again he refuses to drink any of the potion. He continues on, with his love begging him to drink the potion, but he will not.

He reaches the top and collapses, dead. His lover is distraught and tries to force the potion into his mouth. Realizing he is dead, she flings the potion away and throws herself down next to him and dies. When they do not return from the top, the king climbs up after them. Finding them dead, he is deeply saddened. He orders a marble tomb to be built on the mountainside where they died.

## Les Deus Amanz Analysis

True love and suffering seem to be closely connected in many of Marie's tales. The connection is made quite directly in this one, as a young knight attempts a grueling physical challenge to prove his love. The tragic ending is made even more so by the fact that it might have ended otherwise had the knight not been so prideful.



# Yonec

## Yonec Summary

In Britain lives a rich lord with a beautiful young wife, who he keeps locked away out of jealousy. After a time, the woman's beauty begins to fade because of her captivity. She cries out one day asking God to relieve her suffering.

Suddenly, a large hawk flies into her room and magically transforms into a handsome knight. He tells her he has always loved her, and that her wish brought him to her. Any time she wishes for him to appear, he will come within an hour, he says. The woman gives her love to the knight, and wishes for his company whenever possible.

Because of her new love, the woman's beauty begins to return and her husband becomes suspicious. He spies on her and discovers the hawk knight. He builds a trap for the knight by placing sharp spikes in the window. When the knight returns, he is mortally wounded by the spikes. Bleeding, he tells his lover that she is pregnant with their son. She will name him Yonec, he says, and he will avenge them both. The knight leaves.

The lady is distraught and jumps from the window after him. Following the trail of blood, she finds the knight in his castle. He urges her to leave, but gives her a sword that she is to give to Yonec and a magic ring that will cause her husband to forget everything that has happened. She leaves the knight, and he dies.

She returns to the lord and raises Yonec, who grows into a worthy knight. The three of them are attending a feast when they stop to visit a tomb. They are told the tomb is of a valiant knight who was lord of the nearby city and who was killed for the love of a lady. Realizing it is the tomb of her lover, the lady tells her son the story of his birth and gives him the sword of his true father. She then faints away, dead. Seeing her dead, Yonec cuts off his father's head. The news spreads that Yonec has returned to avenge his father's death. His mother is buried with honor and Yonec is made lord of the city.

## Yonec Analysis

Like in the fairy tale of Guigemar, the action in Yonec is prophesied and the destinies of the characters are pre-ordained. It is also similar to Le Fresne and Milun, in that a child learns as an adult the truth of his parentage, leading to the restoration of the proper order. It is interesting that Marie names this lay after the character of Yonec, when this character appears only briefly at the end of the tale.



# Laustic

## Laustic Summary

In St. Malo live two very valiant knights, who have large fortified houses next to each other. One of the knights falls deeply in love with the wife of the other, and she loves him. Because she is so closely protected, they cannot meet in person. She is able to see him in his house from her bedroom window, however, and they manage to send messages and gifts to each other.

The lady gets out of bed every night to stand at her window and gaze at her lover. When her husband asks why she goes to the window every night, she explains that she is entranced by the song of the nightingale. Her husband laughs in spite. The following day, he traps the nightingale and brings it, alive, to his wife. He tells her she will no longer be kept awake by its song and kills it with his hands, throwing the bloody body against her breast.

She is distraught, knowing she can no longer go to the window to look at her lover. She wraps the body of the nightingale and sends it to him, explaining what has happened. The knight makes a jeweled box to hold the body of the nightingale and carries it with him for the rest of his life.

## Laustic Analysis

Although very brief, this tale includes many of the common themes of Marie's *lais*. There is the jealous husband who keeps close watch on his wife, an honorable form of adultery based on true love, and ultimate sorrow and suffering as a result of this love. It is interesting to compare the image of the dead nightingale being used as a message between lovers with the white swan messenger in *Milun* and the hawk-knight of *Yonec*.

# Milun

## Milun Summary

Milun is the greatest knight in the land who takes the daughter of a nobleman as a lover, giving her a golden ring. After a time, the maiden becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, which she is ashamed to reveal. She tells Milun to take the child to be raised by her sister, along with Milun's ring and a letter explaining about her predicament. Her sister will raise the child, giving it the ring and the letter when it is grown. Milun arranges for the infant boy to be taken to her sister, as planned. Milun then goes out in search of adventure. Meanwhile, the young woman unwillingly marries another man.

Milun returns home after achieving fame as a knight. He is downcast to discover his love has married. He writes her a letter and conceals it beneath the feathers of a swan, which he has a messenger carry to present to the lady. She receives the swan and discovers the letter, delighted to hear again from her lover. She conceals her reply in the swan's feathers and sets it loose to return to Milun. The lovers use the swan as a messenger and arrange to meet from time to time.

In the meantime, their son has learned the story of his parents and has grown into a fearless knight with a broad reputation. Milun hears about this brave knight and determines to seek him out and challenge him, and then to find his son, not knowing the two are the same person.

At a tournament, Milun jousts with the brave knight. The knight knocks Milun from his horse, but then apologizes when he sees Milun's white hair and long beard. Milun notices the ring the knight wears and realizes it is his son. He is overjoyed and reveals his relationship. Learning of his mother's unwilling marriage, the son resolves to kill her husband and reunite her with Milun.

As they are riding back, however, they receive a message from the lady that her husband has died. Milun and his lady are reunited, and they all live happily together.

## Milun Analysis

This lay, like Yonec and Le Fresne, includes the theme of order being restored when abandoned children reunite with their parents. In this case, although Milun's son vows to kill his mother's husband, the husband dies naturally before he is able to carry out his vow. This seems a suitable twist to the story, since his mother's husband has really not done anything wrong.

There is an interesting parallel between the young child being left with a letter and Milun's ring around its neck and the white swan which Milun and his love send back and forth to one another with letters tied to its neck.

# Chaitivel

## Chaitivel Summary

A beautiful lady is courted by four especially brave and handsome knights. They are all worthy, and she cannot decide among them. She arranges to hold a tournament for them to battle for the honor of her love. Many knights come from far away to take part.

The night before the tournament, a battle breaks out among all the knights who have assembled, and three of the four knights are killed and the fourth is badly wounded. Upset that her plan has gone wrong, the lady has the three dead knights buried with honor and has the surviving one nursed back to health.

After recovering, the knight continues to visit the lady. One evening she tells him she intends to write a lai about the four knights and call it *The Four Sorrows* after her grief for the four of them. The knight corrects her, and says she should call it *The Unhappy One*, after himself. Although the other three suffered greatly for their love, he has suffered more by surviving, for he can take no pleasure with the one he loves. She agrees that the knight's title is more appropriate.

## Chaitivel Analysis

When a woman tries to set her suitors against one another because of her own inability to choose among them, disastrous results ensue. In the introduction, Marie notes that the story can be entitled two ways, each suggesting a different interpretation. Some call it "*The Four Sorrows*", which is what the noblewoman would call it, centering the story on her grief for the loss of the four suitors. The knight suggests the title *Chaitivel*, or "*The Lonely One*", which emphasizes his point of view as the victim of the lady's misguided scheme. It is this title that Marie chooses.



# Chevrefoil

## Chevrefoil Summary

Tristram loves the queen Isolde, and she him. King Mark, the queen's husband, banishes Tristram from the kingdom, but Tristram hides in the woods, hoping to catch a glimpse of his love. He takes a stick of hazel and carves his name on it, placing it near where he is hiding by a path in the woods. The queen sees the stick as she rides on the path and discovers Tristram awaiting her. She urges him to return to the kingdom. They weep when she has to leave him again. Tristram composes a lai to express the joy he felt at seeing his love again, calling it Chevrefoil, or "honeysuckle".

## Chevrefoil Analysis

The legendary story of the love between Tristram and Isolde has been addressed in many works of literature. Here, Marie relates one short episode from their affair which she attributes to Tristram himself. Of interest is Marie's description in the introduction to the lay that Tristram and Isolde's love was so pure that it "caused them to suffer great distress and later brought about their death on the same day." (p. 109) This reinforces a theme throughout the lais that one must suffer for true love.





# Eliduc

## Eliduc Summary

Eliduc is a valiant knight in the service of the King of Brittany, who banishes him based on false rumors. Eliduc decides to seek his fortune as a mercenary and leaves the kingdom, promising his wife that he will remain faithful.

Near Exeter, Eliduc comes across a king who is at war because he will not give away his beautiful daughter in marriage. Eliduc cleverly helps defeat the king's enemies and is rewarded with power over the king's lands. The king's daughter, called Guilliadun, falls deeply in love with Eliduc. Eliduc's love for her also grows, and after leaving for a short time to help his former lord, Eliduc returns secretly to Guilliadun and convinces her to return with him by sea to his homeland.

While they are sailing, Guilliadun overhears that Eliduc has a wife and faints away, as if dead. The ship reaches land, and Eliduc has her body placed in a small abandoned chapel near his home. He returns to his wife, but shows her no kindness. After two days he returns to the chapel and is surprised to see that his love still has color in her cheeks. His wife spies on him and goes to the chapel one day while Eliduc is gone. She finds the body of Guilliadun, whose beauty overwhelms her.

Just then a weasel comes from beneath the altar. The lady's servant kills it with a stick. Another weasel comes out and goes to the body of the first. The weasel leaves, then returns with a red flower in its mouth. It places the flower in the mouth of its dead companion, and the weasel miraculously recovers. The servant takes the flower from the weasel, and Eliduc's wife places it in Guilliadun's mouth, bringing her back to life.

Learning Guilliadun's tale, Eliduc's wife replies that she will set him free to marry his beloved and will become a nun. Eliduc is glad at this resolution, and builds an abbey for his wife. Later, he builds a fine church and joins the order himself, sending his beloved Guilliadun to serve as a nun alongside his wife.

## Eliduc Analysis

Marie remarks that this lay is sometimes entitled *Gildeleuc* and *Guilliadun* after the two women in the story, Eliduc's wife and his lover. She rightly suggests that it is the women in this story who are remarkable, *Gildeleuc* for allowing her husband to stay with his mistress and *Guilliadun* for forgiving Eliduc after he deceives her. Eliduc's actions parallel that of the two women, however, for he also forgives the King of Brittany for wrongly banishing him. This theme of self-sacrifice and forgiveness is capped off by all three characters serving God in the end.



# Characters

## Marie appears in All Chapters

Marie is the attributed author of the thirteen lays included in the collection. Her role is to present each lay to its courtly audience and provide context for the events described. She acts primarily as the narrator in each lai, but also appears as herself at the beginning and end of each story to introduce the characters and afterwards to provide a moral or historical note.

Marie also appears within the stories at times, making an aside to the audience about an event of special significance, or to emphasize the truth of a plot point, especially if it is one that might seem unbelievable. Originally, these passages addressing the audience directly were written in the same meter and rhyme scheme as the rest of the story and sung along, meshing seamlessly with the rest of the story.

Marie is courtly and formal when she speaks directly, a style suitable to the original audience, which would have been gentlemen and ladies at court. She is not shy, however, about addressing the less seemly aspects of love and romance.

## Guigemar appears in Guigemar

Guigemar is a brave knight whose only flaw is that he does not show any interest in romance. This changes when he meets the lady who lives in the ancient city. These events are prophesied by the beautiful talking deer that Guigemar mortally wounds, and his life continues to be influenced by supernatural events. In the end, however, Guigemar must resort to force to regain the woman he loves.

## The Lady of the Ancient City appears in Guigemar

The wife of a jealous lord, the lady of the ancient city is kept locked away from the rest of the world. She is attended by her sympathetic niece and watched over by a feeble priest, so it is not difficult at first for her to conceal Guigemar in her quarters. Like many of the female characters in Marie's lays, she is trapped by a man she does not love.

## Meriaduc appears in Guigemar

A wealthy lord who takes in the lady of the ancient city after her escape. Meriaduc falls in love with her, but she does not return his feelings. He challenges Guigemar to take her from him, which Guigemar does.



## **Equitanappears in Equitan**

A king who falls in love with the wife of one of his subjects. He schemes with her to kill her husband, but is finally himself killed when the plot backfires.

## **Equitan's Seneschalappears in Equitan**

The governor of Equitan's lands and the person who administers his kingdom. The king begins an affair with the seneschal's wife, and he narrowly escapes being killed by them when he discovers them together in bed. After the king dies in the trap he had set for the seneschal, the seneschal drowns his own wife in retribution.

## **The Seneschal's Wifeappears in Equitan**

The king's lover and the source of the scheme to murder her husband. She is drowned by her husband when her plot is revealed.

## **Le Fresneappears in Le Fresne**

One of a set of twin girls who is abandoned by her mother outside an abbey. She is raised by the abbess and later attracts the love of the nobleman Gurun, who takes her to live with him but not to marry. She is loyal to Gurun, and her loyalty pays off when he becomes engaged to marry Le Fresne's sister. When her mother realizes who she is, she reveals Le Fresne's noble background, making her a suitable wife for Gurun. Le Fresne means "ash tree", and she is named so because she was discovered in an ash tree as a baby.

## **Le Fresne's Motherappears in Le Fresne**

A petty and vicious woman at the beginning of the story, Le Fresne's mother redeems herself at the end by recognizing her daughter whom she abandoned as an infant, confessing her deed, and restoring Le Fresne to the man she loves.

## **Gurunappears in Le Fresne**

A nobleman who falls in love with Le Fresne, but relents to become engaged to another woman who is of noble birth, who is coincidentally Le Fresne's lost twin sister.

## **Le Codreappears in Le Fresne**

Le Fresne's twin sister, from whom she is separated at birth by their mother. Le Codre marries Gurun, but when Le Fresne's true identity is discovered, her marriage is



annulled. She is later married to another wealthy nobleman. By coincidence, she is also named for a tree. Le Codre means "hazelnut tree".

## **Bisclavret appears in Bisclavret**

A worthy nobleman who turns into a werewolf for three days out of every week. Trapped in his werewolf form by his wife, he becomes a favorite pet of the king, who uncovers his true identity and forces Bisclavret's wife to allow him to change back into a man.

## **Bisclavret's Wife appears in Bisclavret**

Bisclavret's wife no longer loves Bisclavret once she learns he is a werewolf and schemes to get rid of him. She conspires with a knight to trap Bisclavret in his werewolf form and then marry the knight. Her treachery is discovered by the king and she is banished after Bisclavret has attacked her and torn off her nose.

## **Bisclavret's Wife's Lover appears in Bisclavret**

The knight who agrees to go along with the scheme of Bisclavret's wife to trap him. He later marries the woman, but is banished along with her for his misdeed.

## **The King appears in Bisclavret**

The king discovers Bisclavret in the forest in his werewolf form, and is impressed by the beast's apparent intelligence. He takes him into his court, where Bisclavret is much admired as gentle and intelligent. The king eventually roots out Bisclavret's true identity and punishes the woman and knight who have trapped the man as a werewolf.

## **Lanval appears in Lanval**

A worthy knight in the service of King Arthur. Lanval loyally does not complain when the king accidentally passes over him when rewarding his knights. He is also loyal to his fairy lover when the queen makes an advance to him, but he lets his temper flare when she insults him, which is almost his undoing. The fairy lover redeems him from his mistake, however, and takes him away to live with her.

## **The Lady in the Tent appears in Lanval**

A fairy woman of astounding beauty. She loves Lanval and makes him wealthy and popular. Although she forbids him to reveal her existence and disappears when he does, she eventually returns to save her love from being wrongfully punished by Arthur.



## **King Arthur appears in Lanval**

The legendary king of the knights of the round table. Arthur is a fair king, but apparently not always attentive as he forgets to reward the worthy knight Lanval.

## **Arthur's Queen appears in Lanval**

Queen Guinivere, also a legendary character from the tales of King Arthur. The queen makes an advance toward Lanval, but is spurned. She then tells Arthur that it was Lanval who made the advance to her, then insulted her when she refused. It is Guinivere's deception that sets up the main conflict in the story.

## **The Handmaidens appear in Lanval**

The beautiful servants of the fairy lady in the tent, each of which is more beautiful than the queen, as Lanval states.

## **Sir Gawain appears in Lanval**

A famous knight of the round table and friend to Lanval.

## **The King of Pitres appears in Les Deus Amanz**

A king who, out of a desire to keep his daughter for himself, decrees that no man shall marry her unless he can carry her to the top of a high mountain. The king lives to regret his jealousy when his daughter dies from grief.

## **The King's Daughter appears in Les Deus Amanz**

A very beautiful maiden who conspires with her lover to help him pass the king's challenge. When her lover collapses in the attempt, she dies from grief.

## **The Worthy Knight appears in Les Deus Amanz**

The prideful knight who refuses to drink the strength potion he has obtained to help him win the hand of his love. His desire to win the challenge fairly, along with his pride, results in his death.



## **Muldumarec appears in Yonec**

A magical lord who can change into the form of a hawk and read the mind of his lover, who is locked away in a tower. Muldumarec can also see into the future, and prophesies the birth of Yonec and his avenging of his death. Muldumarec dies after being injured in a trap set by his lover's jealous husband.

## **The Lord of Caerwent appears in Yonec**

The jealous husband of Muldumarec's lover. He keeps her locked away, and when he discovers she is being visited by the hawk-knight, he sets a trap that mortally injures the knight. He is later killed by Yonec in revenge.

## **The Lady of Caerwent appears in Yonec**

The unnamed lover of Muldumarec and the mother of Yonec. Once beautiful, her beauty fades after years of being locked away by her husband. When she discovers love again, her beauty returns, betraying her affair. She becomes pregnant by the knight, and gives birth to Yonec. Later, she reveals the story of his father to her son, spurring Yonec to kill her husband in revenge.

## **Yonec appears in Yonec**

The son of the lady of Caerwent and Muldumarec. He has grown into a valiant knight by the end of the story when he exacts revenge on the lord of Caerwent for killing his father. Yonec assumes the lordship over Muldumarec's kingdom.

## **The Lady of St. Malo appears in Laustic**

The wife of a knight who falls in love with the knight in the adjacent house, and who stands at her window every night to gaze at him.

## **The Lady of St. Malo's Husband appears in Laustic**

The jealous husband of the lady in love with her neighbor. He is suspicious of her, and kills the nightingale she claims keeps her awake and at her window all night. She sends the body of the bird to her love in explanation.



## **The Lady of St. Malo's Lover appears in Laustic**

The knight who lives next to his lover, and who returns her gazes through their opposite windows. He treats the body of the nightingale his lover sends him with reverence, having a special case made to carry it with him always.

## **Milun appears in Milun**

A brave knight who fathers a child with a noble damsel, and then helps her hide the child and send it to be raised by her sister, before leaving to go to battle. Milun is later reunited with his child, a son who has grown to be a valiant knight, and with his love when her husband dies.

## **The Noble Damsel appears in Milun**

The young girl who loves Milun and gives birth to a child with him. After Milun leaves, she unwillingly marries another man. When her husband dies, she is able to reunite with Milun.

## **The Damsel's Husband appears in Milun**

The unnamed husband of the noble damsel who is in love with Milun.

## **The Peerless One appears in Milun**

The son of Milun and the noble damsel. He is given the title "Peerless One" for his great prowess in battle.

## **The Lady of Nantes appears in Chaitivel**

A noble woman who has four suitors, but cannot choose among them. She arranges for the four to battle in a tournament for her love.

## **The Three Suitors appears in Chaitivel**

The unfortunate three suitors to the lady of Nantes who are killed in a battle before the tournament for her hand.



## **The Fourth Suitor appears in Chaitivel**

The sole suitor who survives the battle for the lady of Nantes, but who is rendered sexually impotent from his wound.

## **Tristram appears in Chevrefoil**

The lover of Queen Isolde, the queen of King Mark. Tristram is banished for his love, but sneaks back into the kingdom to meet her in the forest.

## **King Mark's Queen appears in Chevrefoil**

Queen Isolde, the lover of Tristram. The queen meets with Tristram in the forest and tries to convince him to reconcile with the king.

## **Eliduc appears in Eliduc**

A noble knight who leaves his wife behind to become a mercenary in another kingdom, where he falls in love with a fair maiden. Eliduc tries to bring his mistress home with him, but his wife discovers her. Eliduc's wife allows him to stay with his mistress while she becomes a nun. Eventually, his mistress also becomes a nun and Eliduc himself joins the church.

## **Guilliadun appears in Eliduc**

The fair maiden who captures the heart of Eliduc. Unaware that he is married, she faints as if dead when she discovers he is. She is later revived by Eliduc's wife, who is so taken by her beauty that she becomes a nun and allows Eliduc to keep his mistress.

## **The King of Brittany appears in Eliduc**

The king whom Eliduc serves, but who is too quick to believe false rumors about his brave knight. Based on these false rumors, he banishes Eliduc. He has cause to regret his actions, however, and asks for Eliduc to return.

## **The Nobleman of Exeter appears in Eliduc**

The father of Guilliadun, and the lord of Eliduc after he leaves the service of the King of Brittany.





## Guildeleucappears in Eliduc

Eliduc's wife, who is greatly wronged, but nonetheless makes a sacrifice for the happiness of her husband by becoming a nun and allowing him to stay with Guilliadun.



## Objects/Places

### Brittany appears in Most Chapters

A region in the northwest of modern France which is the source and the location for most of Marie's stories. Brittany is a peninsula on the sea, and has historical cultural ties to Britain and the Celtic people. The people of the region are known as Bretons, and this is the name of their language. Marie translates these Breton stories into Old French.

### The Bretons appears in All Chapters

The historic people of the region of Brittany. The Bretons are the source of the stories that Marie translates and interprets, she writes. Most of the characters in the lays are Bretons.

### The Mysterious Ship appears in Guigemar

A beautiful ship of ebony with silken sails. The ship navigates with no crew, and is empty except for a large luxurious bed. The ship carries Guigemar from his home to the ancient city where he meets his love, and then back again. It later carries his lover away from the ancient city.

### The White Deer appears in Guigemar

The magical white deer that Guigemar mortally wounds while hunting. Although a female, it has antlers like a male. The deer speaks to Guigemar and prophesies his meeting with his true love, as well as his future suffering.

### Nantes appears in Equitan, Chaitivel

A main city of Brittany and one of its former capitals. Equitan is the lord of Nantes, and the lady who has the four knights compete for her hand in Chaitivel is from Nantes.

### Dol appears in Le Fresne

An area of Brittany where Le Fresne's lover, Gurun, is lord.

### Carlisle appears in Lanval

A city in what is the present day borderlands between England and Scotland. It is a meeting place for Arthur and his knights in Lanval.



## **The Round Table appears in Lanval**

The legendary table around which sat the valiant knights in service to King Arthur

## **Normandy appears in Les Deus Amanz**

A region of northern France along the coast northeast of Brittany.

## **Pitres appears in Les Deus Amanz**

A town in Normandy near where the action in Les Deus Amanz takes place

## **Caerwent appears in Yonec**

An area in South Wales where Yonec's mother is kept hostage by her husband.

## **St. Malo appears in Laustic**

A region in Brittany where the two nights in Laustic live.

## **South Wales appears in Milun, Chevrefoil, Yonec**

The western part of modern day Great Britain, and the location of the stories of Milun, Chevrefoil and Yonec. The legends of King Arthur are also associated with this region.



# Themes

## Love and Suffering

The ideal of love is often equated with suffering in Marie's *lais*. In each instance where characters love one another, some kind of ordeal must be completed before they can truly share their love. If this ordeal can be overcome, the characters can live happily forever after. If they cannot overcome it, their love becomes tragic, but is heightened because of their suffering.

This connection between love and suffering is made explicit in *Guigemar* when the magical deer prophesies that Guigemar will suffer for the love of a woman, and she for him. Guigemar and his lover's suffering comes in the form of being separated from one another, as well as Guigemar's ridiculing from his society for not showing any interest in women. In the tale of *Les Deus Amanz*, the suffering is also quite evident, as the young knight labors to carry his love up the mountainside, only to die from the effort. In this case, the lovers are not able to overcome the ordeal presented by their love, and they both perish because of it. But also because they die for love they are celebrated, both within the story, by the construction of a marble tomb, and outside the story, by the preservation of their tale.

While love often creates the suffering within Marie's stories, it can also be the source of relief from suffering. The image of the fair maiden locked away by her jealous husband is common to these and many other stories from this period. Through the true love of a valiant man, the maiden is released from her suffering, at least temporarily. She may have other obstacles to overcome.

The men in Marie's tales are free to come and go, and so do not suffer from being physically trapped. Yet they are sometimes trapped in a different way, as *Bisclavret* is trapped as a werewolf after he reveals his secret to his wife out of love, and as *Eliduc* is trapped between his love for the fair maiden and his duty to his wife. The male characters are also likely to suffer physically for love, as does the young lover in *Les Deus Amanz*, the hawk-knight in *Yonec* and the sorrowful knight who is badly wounded in *Chaitivel*.

## Parents and Children

The motif of children being separated from their parents to be reunited as adults occurs in three of Marie's tales. In *Le Fresne*, a girl is abandoned at an abbey and then later reunited with her parents. In *Yonec*, a young man learns the identity of his true father and avenges his death. In *Milun*, a knight fathers a son out of wedlock, then does not see him again until they reunite on the field of battle.

The theme of the abandoned child is an old one, found in such tales as the stories of *Moses* and *Oedipus*. In the tales related by Marie, this theme reinforces a notion of



hereditary nobility of character. Regardless of the circumstances under which they are raised, these children of noble heritage develop a noble character worthy of their parentage. In the case of Le Fresne and Milun's son, these noble characters are enhanced by the fact that the children are products of a noble and pure love. In the case of Le Fresne, the abandoned girl even surpasses her mother in good character. In all cases, the children are rewarded for their good character.

Le Fresne is at first denied legitimate love because of her presumed status below that of her noble lover. Nevertheless, she acts nobly as her lover prepares to marry another, and her actions lead to the revelation that she is also of noble heritage.

Yonec is raised in a noble household by his mother and her husband, but when he learns that the man he thinks is his father killed his true father, he rises to the occasion and avenges his true father's death. He is rewarded by assuming his father's high position as lord.

The brave knight Milun is beaten by nobody except the young knight called The Peerless One, who he soon learns is the son he abandoned years before. Like Yonec, The Peerless One vows to avenge the true love of his parents. By happenstance, he does not need to fulfill his vow, but it still one made out of the nobility of character expected of one whose true parents are noble.

## The Noble Code of Conduct

The noblemen of Marie's tales live by a code of conduct referred to as the Code of Chivalry. According to this code, a knight serves a king in battle and in return is rewarded by his lord. In matters of love, a knight is expected to assist any lady in need and to return the affection of a lady who expresses her interest in him. A nobleman is expected to keep his promise.

Much of the action in Marie's tales originates in the violation of this code of conduct. When Lanval rebuffs the advance of the Queen and breaks his promise to keep his true love a secret, he finds himself in dire circumstances. When Eliduc's lord wrongly banishes him, it sets the action of the story into motion. Eliduc later finds himself unable to keep promises to both his wife and his lover. He is released from his conflict by an understanding wife, but in the end all three of them join the Church in atonement. The king Equitan makes his lover lord over himself and then plots to kill his loyal governor. His reward for subverting the code of conduct is a gruesome death.

The women are also expected to observe this code of conduct, especially in matters of love. The lady of Nantes in the lay Chaitivel fails to choose one knight on whom to bestow her love and instead pits four of them against one another for her love. In the end she gets none of them. The wife of Bisclavret does not love the knight who helps her trap her husband, but exploits his love for her to convince him to help her. In the end they are both banished from their homeland.



The Code of Chivalry is one part of a larger code of conduct that the noble men and women of Marie's tales are expected to follow. This code of conduct is centered around romantic love, and interestingly does not seem to prohibit adultery. Implied in many of Marie's tales is that it is acceptable to break the promise of marriage if the marriage is not based on equal love.



# Style

## Point of View

Marie is a woman composing her poetry at a time when most authors are male. Her *lais* sometimes reflect her point of view as a woman by portraying female characters who are strong of character and manage to take control of their destinies despite being trapped by circumstances. Marie's *lais* are often sympathetic to the position of the female characters. In *Equitan*, for instance, *Equitan's* lover is at first reluctant for fear that he will soon tire of her and move on to other women. This is a frank assessment of love from a distinctly female point of view. Marie's male characters do not display such depth when it comes to matters of love.

Marie is also a member of the court society of her day, and her *lais* are composed to entertain other courtiers. Her tales of kings, knights, and damsels reflect the courtly tradition of the level of society to which she belongs. The romance of Marie's *lais* portrays a formal, courtly ideal of love. Surrounding this courtly ideal, however, are more realistic aspects of love, such as adultery, jealousy, and revenge, suggesting that while Marie's point of view is as a member of court society, she still has a realistic viewpoint.

## Setting

The setting for most of Marie's *lais* is during the medieval age of chivalry in Brittany, a region in Northern France, with some taking place in Wales and England. One *lay*, *Lanval*, is a tale from the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

This is a legendary time of knights fighting in the service of noble kings and for the love of fair maidens. Knights meet in tournaments and sell their services to noblemen in need of protection or military strength. The Catholic Church is a dominant influence at this time of history, and religious characters appear regularly in Marie's tales. The characters are nearly all taken from the noble classes or the Church, with very few characters taken from common people. This reflects Marie's intended audience for the *lais*, the courtly classes of her time.

Marie's *lais* also have a mystical setting. Supernatural events occur in many of the tales, such as the talking deer and mysterious ship in *Guigemar*, the beautiful fairy maiden in *Lanval*, the werewolf *Bisclavret*, and the transforming hawk-knight in *Yonec*.

## Language and Meaning

Marie originally composed her *lais* in Old French which has been translated into English. As in any translation, some of the language and meaning is changed in translation. The *lais* were originally intended to be sung, and some of the elements of song are still evident in the translated versions, even when they have been converted



into prose. Songs often have repetitive portions in them, for instance, and some of Marie's *lais* have similar language and episodes repeated through the story.

The action in Marie's *lais* is a formal type of courtly interaction, and the language is also formal. Marie writes primarily as a narrator with occasional passages addressed directly to the audience, where she takes the role of author. In these passages, she describes the origin of the story, introduces the tale, and summarizes the action, sometimes adding a moral. Within the narrative portions she also occasionally appears as author to reinforce certain points or to add historical context.

Marie uses allegorical language and images throughout the *lais*. The character Le Fresne, for instance, which can be translated as "ash tree", is so named because she was left and later discovered in an ash tree. Meanwhile, her twin sister is named La Codre, which can be translated as "hazelnut tree". She uses another plant analogy in the lay entitled *Chevrefoil*, which is French for honeysuckle. At the end of this short lay, she compares the love of Tristram and Isolde to honeysuckle growing on a hazelnut tree. Each supports the other, and if one dies so does the other. In the narrative, Tristram leaves his sign for Isolde carved on a stick of hazel wood.

Interestingly, many of the women in the *lais* are not named, even when they are primary characters. Each lay is named after one of the characters in the story, but not always the primary character. In the lay entitled *Yonec*, the character of Yonec appears only at the end. It is Yonec's unnamed mother who is the main character. Sometimes the title is a figurative reference to one of the characters, such as the lay entitled *Chevrefoil*.

## Structure

The twelve *lais* of Marie de France were not collected during her lifetime. The attribution of these twelve *lais* came some time after her death and the arrangement of them in the present order is traditional. Some translations have changed the order.

Each lay has a similar structure. They begin with a brief introduction of the story and its origin, including any other names the story might be known by. Marie then narrates the tale, closing with a brief passage again in reference to the lay itself.

The *lais* are of varying length and detail. Some are quite short, such as *Chaitivel* and *Chevrefoil*, and narrate only a short series of events. In others, the events unfold over several years and are presented in greater detail. *Eliduc* and *Guigemar* are two *lais* where the action takes place over a long period of time in several different locations.





## Quotes

"Whoever has good material for a story is grieved if the tale is not well told. Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents." Guigemar, p. 43

"Equitan enjoyed a fine reputation and was greatly loved in his land. He adored pleasure and amorous dalliance; for this reason he upheld the principles of chivalry." Equitan, p. 56

"When she reached the age when Nature forms beauty, there was no fairer, no more courtly girl in Brittany, for she was noble and cultivated, both in appearance and in speech. No one who had seen her would have failed to love and admire her greatly." Le Fresne, p. 64

"In days gone by one could hear tell, and indeed it often used to happen, that many men turned into werewolves and went to live in the woods. A werewolf is a ferocious beast which, when possessed by the madness, devours men, causes great damage and dwells in vast forests. I leave such matters for the moment, for I wish to tell you about Bisclavret." Bisclavret, p. 68

"He was the son of a king of noble birth, but far from his inheritance, and although he belonged to Arthur's household he had spent all his wealth, for the king gave him nothing and Lanval asked for nothing. Now he was in a plight, very sad and forlorn. Lords, do not be surprised: a stranger bereft of advice can be very downcast in another land when he does not know where to seek help." Lanval, p. 73

"There once took place in Normandy a now celebrated adventure of two young people who loved each other and who both met their end because of love. The Bretons made a lay about them which was given the title The Two Lovers." Les Deus Amanz, p. 82

"The bird flew into the room; it had straps on its feet and looked like a hawk of five or six moultings. It landed before the lady, and after it had been there for a while for her to see, it turned into a fair and noble knight. The lady was astounded by this." Yonec, p. 87

"'With bird-lime I have trapped the nightingale which has kept you awake so much. Now you can sleep in peace, for it will never awaken you again.' When the lady heard him she was grief-stricken and distressed. She asked her husband for the bird, but he killed it out of spite, breaking its neck wickedly with his own two hands. He threw the body at the lady, so that the front of her tunic was bespattered with blood, just on her breast." Laustic, p. 95

"Anyone who intends to present a new story must approach the problem in a new way and speak so persuasively that the tale brings pleasure to people." Milun, p. 97



"In the city of Nantes in Brittany there dwelt a lady distinguished by her beauty, education and good breeding. There existed no knight in the region with any merit at all who, having once seen her, would not have fallen in love with her and wooed her. It was not possible for her to love them all, but neither did she wish to repulse them." Chaitivel, p. 105

"It pleases me greatly and I am eager to relate to you the truth of the lay called Chevrefoil, to say why it was composed and how it originated. Many people have recited it to me and I have also found it in a written form. It concerns Tristram and the queen: their love was so pure that it caused them to suffer great distress and later brought about their death on the same day." Chevrefoil, p. 109

"The envy of his good fortune, which often possesses others, caused him to be embroiled with his lord, to be slandered and accused, so that he was banished from the court without a formal accusation. Eliduc did not know why and often beseeched the king to hear his defense and not to believe slander, for he had served him long and willingly. But the king did not answer..." Eliduc, p. 111

## Topics for Discussion

What importance does the title of each lay have? Why does Marie include alternate titles?

How does Marie address adultery in the lais? Is adultery always wrong?

What role does the Christianity and the Church play in Marie's lais?

How does the song form affect how the stories are told?

Does Marie's status as a woman seem to affect how she constructs her tales?

What roles do status and class of the characters play in the lais?

What can be deduced about Marie's contemporary audience from her stories?

What role does the supernatural play in Marie's tales? How does she reconcile it with Christian beliefs?