

A Medieval Woman Dares to Stand Up: Marie de France's Criticism of the King and the Court

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Abstract:

While medievalists have long recognized Marie de France's extraordinary literary abilities, we have not yet fully identified the extent to which she stood up as a social critic who attacked many social ills within her society, not holding back in her sharp attacks both against the figure of the king and against the powerful nobles of her time. Only if we combine her *lais* and her *fables* in our analysis, can we gain a full understanding of the far-reaching discourse about the danger of abuse of power at the hand of the mighty and rich in the high Middle Ages. Although we tend to identify that past era as deeply remote from us, as repressive, simple-minded, and submissive, Marie's strong criticism of the abuses by the high-ranking contemporaries sheds important light on a world that was not really that far away from us in many different ways, with many intellectuals already extensively aware about social injustice and the danger of tyranny.

Keywords: Marie de France, court criticism, criticism of the king, *lais*, *fables*

Introduction: Criticism of the medieval ruler

For many medievalists it might be tantamount by now to carry coals to Newcastle if we were to re-introduce Marie de France, to use an anachronistic proverb. She was simply one of the greatest writers of the entire Middle Ages, and so she would no longer need an extensive treatment. But it still might be worth to remind ourselves about some of the basic biographical facts that we know of her and to situate her more deeply within the literary-historical context of her time. Most of those data are now actually easily retrievable even from common online encyclopedias, which allow us here to stay clear from the pitfalls of traditional positivism and to try to read her work more intensively within a larger social-critical fashion. The intention of this paper is, first, to reflect on her role as a female writer in the Middle Ages; second, to examine the question what makes her literary contributions so valuable also for us; and third, to investigate the extent to which she contributed to the political discourse of her time. In particular, the focus will rest on the phenomenon that already the pre-modern world witnessed considerable debates about the role of the ruler and about the influence of the nobility or even the urban elites on the public affairs to the detriment of the lower social classes both in the cities and in the countryside. However, we also have to be very clear about the difference between the criticism of a ruler and any attempts to establish democracy or a republic, a phenomenon that did not fully emerge until the eighteenth century.

Whatever critics such as John of Salisbury, Gerald of Wales, Henry of Bracton, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, or Giles of Rome expressed in their works targeting evil rulers, nothing indicated that they might have favored the dissolution of the monarchical or feudal system. The

central issue was always the observance of natural law, divine law, justice, and fairness within the framework of the feudal structure. Moreover, although medieval and early modern societies were mostly determined by kingship, we have learned already for quite some time to discriminate more carefully and not to confuse monarchy with dictatorship or tyranny, although the question whether a tyrant could be legitimately assassinated was certainly raised as well, such as by John of Salisbury (115/20–1180; cf. Nederman; more broadly, Turchetti) and others. The basic premise was always and consistently that God had established the social structure which was not to be changed, not even by a king.

Best known in that regard might be the example of the *Magna Carta*, John Salisbury's court criticism, and the elector system in place in the Holy Roman Empire (*Challenges*; Morris). There were even cases when a ruler was dethroned, such as King Wenceslaus of the House of Luxemburg, who was removed from his office in 1400 when the electors agreed that he was no longer worthy of this position. Although deposed, however, Wenceslaus ignored that decision and claimed royal status until his death in 1419 (Rieder; Vurm and Foffová; Bendheim and Sieburg, ed.; Holz). Other kings who experienced enforced deposition were Diarmait Mac Murchada of Leinster (1167), Sancho II of Portugal (1248), Adolf of Nassau (1298), Edward II of England (1327), and so forth (Woodacre, Dean, Jones, Martin, and Rohr). In other words, medieval and early modern kings (including other high-ranking nobles, bishops, even popes) did not occupy absolute positions and could be removed (impeached) under certain circumstances (Schubert). Both in northern and central Europe some societies successfully managed to stay free from monarchical rule (Iceland) or to liberate itself (Switzerland), and we could easily find many more cases where the concept of kingship was not even in place

However, there is no denying that medieval kingship was ubiquitous and dominated virtually most societies in full power, similar to other countries in Asia, Africa, or the Americas, often using, of course, different titles for the ruler. The emergence of democracy is only the result of fairly recent struggles, if we think of the American Revolution in 1775–1783, the French Revolution in 1789, and the Russian Revolution in 1917. The role of the king was hardly ever questioned, and if at all, then it was not the position of the king itself within the general medieval hierarchy, but the individual person sitting on the royal throne and his/her unfitting character. At the same time, below the king, the aristocracy and the clergy firmly held on to their own power and gladly supported the king because he was the kind of keystone for their social structure. The peasantry was consistently suppressed, and even various social uprisings by the peasants, such as in England, 1381, and in Germany, 1524–1525, did not change much in the overall social and economic conditions, especially not for them (Ullmann). Much more significant for the growing paradigm shift leading to the early modern age was the emergence of the urban class in medieval cities, which ultimately developed further throughout the late Middle, to transform into the early modern bourgeoisie, from which the really revolutionary spark originated (*Urban Space; Paradigm Shift*).

But this did not mean that medieval society, at least in Europe, was caught in a completely crystallized form, without any changes, movements, transformations, rebellions, or even revolutions. In fact, many scholars have discussed already for quite some time social unrest throughout that entire period (Fourquin; Sizer). Our interest is here focused on the situation of the king/queen and his/her relationship with the court, which often proved to be rather rocky and unstable for a number of reasons. The king could rule too dictatorially, he could be too weak and unsteady, depending on various counselors and advisors representing competing forces, he could lose his mind or simply die, or he could become the victim of competing, hostile forces at

his court which aimed at replacing his dynasty with another one.

Medieval literature and criticism of the king

We know already much about the larger discourse on court criticism and the criticism of the king in the pre-modern era, relying, however, commonly too heavily on the chronicles, annals, and other historical documents. Many times, contemporary literary texts invite us in quite dramatic fashion to inspect more closely the larger attitudes and ideas prevalent within a society. Despite being mostly fictional, medieval romances, verse narratives, heroic epics, later also religious plays, courtly poetry, and other genres contain, at closer analysis, often rather drastically negative opinions about kings and their courts and thus suddenly rise to the status of valuable 'historical' sources, mostly in the way as the School of the History of Mentality has taught us (Dinzelsbacher). What relevance, however, would such statements have for the historical perspective?

Very parallel to the modern situation, medieval poets and artists provided entertainment and enjoyment, offered narratives or art work that allowed the audience to reflect upon critical issues, and they also shaped the public discourse with their opinions which were intriguingly packaged in textual or visual form. Today, the book or art market determines in economic terms the existence of literature, but the latter has also a deep impact on our culture, shaping the market in its own terms. By the same token, medieval poets/artists sought out patrons and created works that appealed to them, but every text and every piece of art contains also individual elements, comments, and remarks, as long as we are not simply talking about *mimesis* (Auerbach), that is, imitation, mere ornament, lacking in critical perspectives. Great art and great literature have always been provocative, challenging, and inspiring, if not upsetting or disturbing, appealing to our inner deep self. This observation applies, of course, also to the Middle Ages (Classen 2016, "The Meaning"), and thus we gain solid criteria to recognize or to identify powerful and influential literature (or art) from throughout time.

A poet like Marie de France (ca. 1160–ca. 1190/1200) also needed or desired an audience, and her writing had to be appealing in one way or the other in order to be successful, although we will quickly learn that she was not a submissive, passive, or obedient author at all. Hence, maybe not so surprisingly, as soon as we take a close look at any of her texts, we observe a startling and sharp tone of voice in her narratives directed at weak, waffling, manipulable, passive, indecisive, and unjust rulers, but then also at vile, evil people at large, young and old, powerful or not. This forces us to reflect more deeply about the audience addressed in her work, the poet's external and her internal intentions, her literary means to formulate her critical opinions, and especially her unabashed comments about shortcomings and ills during her lifetime (late twelfth century).

Marie de France's biography and works

She composed in elegant Anglo-Norman verse, she was familiar with various literary genres and could employ those well for her own purposes, and her texts were preserved in highly valuable parchment manuscripts. It seems very unlikely that Marie was a social rebel and might have intended to incite her audience to embrace the idea of a radical, maybe Socialist revolution, an entirely anachronistic idea by itself for the Middle Ages. In her fable "The Ass Who Wanted to Play with His Master" (no. 15), for instance, Marie explicitly condemns those who dare to try climbing the social ladder in disregard of the traditional, God-given hierarchy determined by birth-rights. Nevertheless, as we will observe, she hesitated little to express her objections to evil

or failed kings, to corrupt courts and judges, and to criticize rather bitingly painful shortcomings among the nobility of her time. This might also explain why some of her texts, especially her *lais*, courtly love narratives (basically contained only in British Library, Harley MS 978), were not preserved in more manuscripts (perhaps too disturbing for her aristocratic audience), while her *fables* have survived in the large number of twenty-three manuscripts (Marie de France, ed. Gilbert; Marie de France, ed. Spiegel), maybe because those followed a more traditional narrative pattern which found more approval.

Marie de France composed, as far as we can say firmly, twelve *lais*, that is, verse narratives addressing mostly issues of courtly love; a large body of *fables*, and the religious tale of the *Espurgatoire seint Partiz*, a religious account of a cave in Ireland where people could climb in and then observe the horrors of Purgatory (Marie de France, *Le Purgatoire*). Whether she was also the author of *La Vie Seinte Audree*, a legendary hagiography, cannot be determined here (see, however, June Hall McCash), but altogether she left us a considerable œuvre that underscores undoubtedly that we are dealing here with a truly major female author from the late twelfth-century, a very prolific writer, and a strong spokesperson of her time.

Marie was apparently well educated, insofar as she indicated that she knew both Latin and Breton, apart from her native Anglo-Norman, and was well informed about ancient Celtic/Breton folklore and also classical literature in Latin (Mickel). Since she dedicated her *lais* to a king, who might well have been Henry II, and since she wrote rather sophisticated courtly narratives, we can situate her within the royal circle in England, although it has not been possible for us so far to determine for sure who this Marie might have been specifically. Since she identifies herself as “de France,” we are certain that she had close connections to the Continent, and many of her *lais* actually take place in Brittany, or they reflect much traveling between southern England and France.

Women in medieval literature

Why would Marie de France represent such an important voice within the canon of medieval literature? Apart from the fact that she excelled in many different ways as a writer of *lais*, *fables*, and a religious tale, she also represented her gender in a remarkable way. To a large extent, when medieval women turned to writing, they resorted to religious narratives, such as liturgical texts, saints' lives, prayers, plays, paraphrases of the Bible, and the like. Recent research has realized that we can actually assume that most women's convents contained scriptoria where the nuns produced texts, either copying or creating their own. An astounding number of late medieval women were deeply inspired by mystical visions, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth von Schönau, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrud the Great, Catherine of Siena, Brigit of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, etc., and they left behind often rather startling accounts of their revelations mirroring deep poetic and religious perspectives.

Marie de France, however, was basically the first medieval woman writing primarily secular texts, destined for the court. She was later followed, in a sense, by the famous French poet and author, Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), whom we can identify today as the first true ‘feminist’ of her time, strongly defending women against traditional misogyny, and as the first female writer who supported herself with her own literary and didactic narratives. Christine was followed soon thereafter by the French princess Elisabeth who married the Count of Nassau-Saarbrücken (1395–1456) and created, either by herself, or with the help of a courtly staff, four major prose novels. We also know of the contemporary Austrian-Hungarian diarist, Helene Kottannerin, and

of the truly powerful Queen Marguerite de Navarre, best known for her collection of tales, *Heptaméron* (1538/1539), with which she successfully managed to compete with the famous Italian Renaissance writer, Boccaccio (1313–1375), best known today for his *Decameron* (ca. 1350). Other major European women writers were Leonor López de Córdoba (1363–1430) and Eleonore of Austria (ca. 1433–1480), and also a number of twelfth-century Old Provençal *troubairitz* and a handful of fifteenth-century German women poets (Classen, *Reading*). We could also list the names of many more women producing historical, economic, or political documents, letters, diaries, and other ego-documents throughout the Middle Ages (*Medieval Writings*).

Probably well ahead of her time and of many contemporary women, Marie de France stands out as a highly self-conscious and proud author who knew exactly how to present herself to her audience, insisting that no one, and the least a woman, should hide her intellectual abilities which were granted to her by God (Prologue to her *lais*). In the audience address at the beginning of “Guigemar,” she explicitly takes a strong position: “Good seigneurs, listen to Marie, / who in her time takes seriously, her duty, not neglecting it” (3–5). Drawing from classical antiquity (Priscian, *Institutes of Grammar*, ca. 500 C.E.), she deliberately introduces the notion of ‘obscurity’ as an important strategy to establish some suspense in her tales and thus to create a literary and philosophical medium to sharpen the audience’s attention and inquisitiveness. She establishes her own platform as an independent poet, and then plunges into telling us ancient oral stories from Brittany which she now has rendered into the elegant form of rhyme and meter. Even though Marie did not create any Arthurian romance (“Lanval,” however, takes place at King Arthur’s court), any heroic epic, and not even lyric poetry (she was, however, familiar with and engaged with the *Tristan* tradition in her *lai* “Chevrefoil”), she earned a major spot in the annals of medieval literature and hardly finds a match, not even in modern literature, considering the wide range of genres she used, her impressive psychological insights, her command of a plethora of literary motifs, themes, and topics, and her elegant and entertaining style with which she addressed fundamental issues of her time.

Modern scholarship

This now takes us to the issue of the criticism of a ruler. We are dealing here with the abuses of power by the king, above all, which recent scholars have addressed quite intensively, though often ignoring the important voice of Marie de France in that regard. Rulers were normally thoroughly educated before they ascended to the throne, but the real shortcomings and failures due to the person’s individual character and inclinations became noticeable, of course, only once they were fully established. In fact, many philosophers and theologians from the high Middle Ages were quick to observe the grave dangers for the entire kingdom when the prince did no longer live up to the ideals and virtues expected from him (and sometimes from the queen; cf. Turchetti). In the relevant scholarship, however, Marie de France does not seem to figure in this regard, although she had many important comments to offer about a failing, if not evil or tyrannical king. Neither the volume by Bejczy & Nederman (2007) nor the recent collection by Kellermann, Plassmann, & Schwermann (2019) has considered Marie’s contributions, a considerable shortcoming that this paper will address (but see already Classen 2008).

The didactic genre of ‘Mirror for Princes’ has also been discussed already at length, but since Marie de France did not embrace it in specific terms and only offered literary examples, her name has been ignored within that discourse as well (Bratu). However, the literary text itself invites the very same critical approach, but it offers the essential comments wrapped more into a fictional format which avoids the direct attack, like a bitter pill with a sugar coating. Both Marie’s *lais* and

her *fables* thus prove to be ingenious literary media to participate in the public discourse on failures by the king, but also by the various lords in their relationship with the ordinary people. Even though, to remind us of same fundamental concern, Marie did not question the traditional aristocratic society as such, she definitely incorporated also the concerns of the poor and disempowered of her time, and she also argued strongly for a renewal of traditional ethical and moral standards and norms.

Marie de France's stance toward the ruler: Her *lais*

For a quick overview of the *lais*, Marie incorporated social criticism in "Equitan," "Lanval," "Deus Amanz," and "Eliduc." In her *fables*, we find too many examples to list them here individually, but in the subsequent discussion I will bring to the fore a sufficient number of examples to confirm my claim. Granted, in the *lais*, Marie does not launch a barrage of criticism directed against a king. There is no dictator or tyrant to be found. No social structure is in danger in Marie's world, even if a king is misbehaving at times, or proves to be subject to evil rumors, or if there is indeed a case of injustice and cruelty. Sometimes this unethical comportment finds expression mostly within the private sphere, such as in family life, but sometimes we clearly perceive a sharp disconnect between the idealistic expectations of a king and his often brutal and crude actions in concrete terms.

There are also some *lais* where the focus does not rest on political issues, and yet we still observe commonly Marie's strong objections to character flaws especially among the male ruler figures, but sometimes also among the female characters, such as in "Bisclavret," where the protagonist's wife betrays her husband because he reveals to her, under considerable duress, that he is turning into a werewolf for three days per week. She is so horrified about this news that she has another knight, who had wooed her already for a considerable amount of time, steal Bisclavret's clothes, which makes it impossible for him to return into his originally human shape. At the end, the protagonist is rescued and can shed the vestiges of the werewolf – we do not know, however, for how long, if for a short period or forever – but not before he has punished his wife by biting off her nose, whereupon the king expels her from the country.

The king here proves to be an ideal character because he is the only one to recognize in Bisclavret's behavior when his hunters have caught him in the forest and are about to kill him that this beast has a noble soul and deserves to live, even at the royal court. The king is supported by a wise and intelligent advisor, and both men can thus solve the case, recover the worthy knight Bisclavret, and ostracize his evil wife. Of course, there are many opportunities to criticize her husband as well because of the lack of trust and communication, but the critical issue for us proves to be the fact that the king operates in a truly noble fashion and rises before our eyes to an ideal leader of his people.

By strong contrast, in "Lanval," almost everything goes wrong, with King Arthur proving to be oblivious to the basic social and ethical norms for a king, at first grossly disrespecting a significant guest from a foreign country, who thus loses his financial support, his esteem, and purpose. Arthur also listens more to his wife's evil comments about that same young knight, Lanval, and disregards the basic standards of a legal process requiring a hearing with a judge and attorneys, to use modern terms.

Deeply frustrated and despondent, Lanval had encountered a fairy maid outside of the castle in a meadow (*locus amoenus*), more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. After she has granted her love to him, he is not allowed to talk about her to anyone (taboo), but upon his

return, Queen Guinevere suddenly gets interested in Lanval, particularly because he suddenly enjoys much wealth from his fairy, so she tries to seduce him, which he rejects resolutely, insisting on not wishing to break his oath of loyalty to King Arthur.

Next, Guinevere attempts to employ a second strategy and calls him a secret homosexual, which he rejects immediately as completely unfounded. Unfortunately, then he himself resorts to a counter-attack and identifies the lowliest maid in the service of his own lady as being much more beautiful than the queen, which constitutes a breaking of his promise to the fairy not to mention her to anyone, and also insults the queen, of course.

Naturally, Guinevere feels deeply insulted and thus turns into an avatar of Potiphar's wife who had tried to seduce Joseph (Old Testament, Genesis 39:2–23): "Great was her grief, rage, wounded pride, / she was so shamed and vilified. / Wretched at heart, she went to bed" (305–07), and as soon as she has an opportunity, she publicly accuses Lanval of having tried to rape her. There is no evidence, only her word against Lanval's, but Arthur quickly takes his wife's side and attempts repeatedly to convince his barons to execute the poor man without delay. They try to resist, but they fail numerous times, when finally the mysterious lady appears and proves through her presence that Lanval was completely innocent and that the queen was terribly guilty of malignment and lying.

This concludes the court proceedings, and Lanval is free from all charges, but he is so disgusted by King Arthur and his court that he departs with his lady and disappears in Avalon, the medieval concept of utopia (Hartmann and Röcke, though with no reference to Marie de France). Kinoshita and McCracken suggest, drawing from the linguistic evidence in that passage, that Lanval abandons in this process his previous high rank as a knight, which does not seem fully convincing. But we can agree with them that "[o]pting out of the feudal system altogether, he achieves (presumably) personal bliss at the cost of social erasure" (63).

We could content ourselves with the simple observation that Marie projected a controversy between Lanval and the queen, or an idyllic love affair between Lanval and the fairy, but the most critical issue at stake is here specific criticism of King Arthur who does not want to obey his own laws, disregards the barons' recommendation, and is ready to commit a tyrannical act against the innocent knight because he only trusts his devious and immoral wife and thus turns into an evil ruler (Rice Rothschild). Although Arthur is commonly identified throughout the entire Middle Ages as the ideal king without fail, here he proves to be a miserable person who cannot be trusted, who does not pay any respect to the rules, and who would have almost committed a major crime against an innocent person because Guinevere wanted him to avenge her out of envy, self-pity, and a major sense of rejection by Lanval. As the narrator emphasizes: "The king was in a tearing rage" (386), "King Arthur pressed them to make haste / for the queen's sake" (469–70), and, when the barons do not immediately comply with his wishes: "He was incensed" (501).

Granted, there are a number of problems for Lanval as well insofar as he does not have any evidence for his claim, and he has no supporter at that court, as much as the barons tend to favor his side and so delay the final judgment repeatedly, which saves the young man's life. But he was sexually harassed, as we would say today, and put under completely undue pressure by the queen when she did not get her way with him. The real problem, however, rests with King Arthur, who tries to circumvent his own legal system and attempts to coerce the barons to condemn Lanval quickly so that Guinevere's wrath can be soothed. Arthur is obviously dependent on his wife, follows all of her wishes, and thus he deliberately disrespects the good advice of a collective of his barons, certainly a bad sign for any king. No wonder that Lanval at the end does not tarry at his court and disappears together with his fairy queen, never to be seen again (Classen 2016,

“Outsiders”; Classen 2019). There is no hope left for him (and for us?) that Arthur could be counted on as a just and fair ruler, having betrayed his own ideals and values.

Marie’s *lai* “Eliduc” provides yet another example for inherent problems with medieval kingship. The protagonist Eliduc is identified as an outstanding knight, counselor, and supporter of the king, but once he has achieved a too high level, at least for the taste of some of the courtiers, evil rumors are spread about him, which robs him of his king’s favor, who quickly and impulsively loses his temper: “his King [] was in a dreadful rage” (58). This forces worthy and virtually admirable Eliduc to leave the court and to look for his good fortune elsewhere. He finds new ‘employment’ at the court of the old king of Exeter who is badly threatened by a hostile neighbor who is trying to gain his daughter’s hand in marriage by means of a major military operation – a common motif in medieval literature. As the narrator also alerts us, “Many kings in that country were. / Between them was much strife and war” (89–90). Eliduc quickly assesses the situation, figures out a good strategy, and can defeat that opponent, which grants him the old king’s great favor.

Soon enough, his daughter falls in love with Eliduc, and eventually both elope back home to his country, where numerous other problems emerge, especially because he is happily married there (Classen 2015). Those issues with his marriage do not concern us here, whereas the focus rests on the fact that Eliduc’s former liege lord had quickly changed his mind once he was suddenly in great need again of his knight’s military and strategic skills, being almost entirely defeated by his opponents. As we are told in explicit terms: “Evil counsel he had received, / and evilly had it belied” (559–60).

Treason is identified as the main cause for this new development (Tracey), so the king reverses course completely and calls Eliduc back, now realizing how much he had been deceived about him by jealous courtiers. Chaos seems to rule among medieval kings, especially because of a widespread lack of ethics, ideals, mutual respect, or observance of the laws. Marie does not hold back with her criticism, though she does not profile it in drastic terms. We recognize, however, without fail that she argues vehemently against such rulers who are so malleable, unprincipled, weak, and impudent, acting only impulsively without any long-term strategies and governmental skills – something which many modern critics have also voiced against current presidents, chancellors, prime ministers, etc. The medieval lens thus allows us to examine more closely political problems today.

In “Les Deux Amanz” we are confronted with a peculiar situation that sheds rather bad light on a king who has become a widower and now tries to keep complete control over his daughter as a kind of substitute for his wife: “he could not bear a life without her” (28). In order to avoid any suitor to take her away from him, he imposes such a difficult condition that no man has a chance to win the young woman’s hand in marriage. People far and wide criticize him for this rigid and unfair scheme, but he does not care and acts, in a way, as a terrible autocrat and brutal father who basically abuses his own daughter until she secretly develops a love relationship with a young squire and can solicit her aunt’s help down in Salerno (north of Naples, Italy) to procure a magical potion that would help him to carry her up a steep mountain – the condition set up by the king. Tragically, her lover at the end refuses to take this potion, and miraculously succeeds in the deed, but only to die from having overstrained himself at that moment. She also dies, but from a broken heart, and thus leaves behind a deeply grief-stricken man, a king who did not know the natural limitations for him as a father and now has to suffer the bitter consequences. The narrator, however, refrains from criticizing the king in any further details, obviously because the outcome already speaks volumes about his wrong behavior and dictatorial rule which almost amounted to a form of incestuous control of his daughter (for other examples, see Black).

Even when we think that a *lai* deals with a relatively affable and generally liked king, such as in the case of “Equitan,” we discover quickly to our great dismay that he easily acquiesces to his beloved’s murderous plans to get rid of her husband, who is the king’s own seneschal. Because of his love affair, Equitan abandons the fundamental bonds between lord and vassal and thus assumes the strategies of a tyrant (Kinoshita & McCracken, 63–68).

Marie de France’s *fables*

Other examples of evil men, though not necessarily kings, who abuse their young wives and sometimes even imprison them, can be found in “Guigemar,” “Yonec,” “Laüstic,” and somewhat in “Milun” and “Chevrefoil” (a brief account of the love between Tristram and King Mark’s wife, Yseut). For further criticism of bad kings, however, we have to turn to Marie’s *fables*, many of which she derived from classical sources (Aesop, Avianus, Neveleti, etc.), some of which, however, she created by herself. As Harriet Spiegel already noted, “she medievalizes her classical fables; hers are manifestly a product of the twelfth century, providing commentary on contemporary life, particularly on feudal social structure and questions of justice” (Marie de France, *Fables*, trans. Spiegel, 9).

Of course, as an experienced author of fables, Marie addressed many other evils and problems of her time, never hesitating to address things directly and unhesitatingly. She proudly displays her learning when she reminds her audience that the classical philosophers had already developed deep insights into the human nature and had consequently formulated comments of timeless value, which we could easily approve by the study of any fable collection from Aesop to Lessing, and later (Dithmar; for a useful list of fable authors from past to present, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fable>).

In “The Wolf and the Lamb” (no. 2), the innocent lamb is terribly abused by the wolf who construes a fake excuse for killing his victim, which the poet correlates with the situation at her time: “And this is what our great lords do” (31). False charges are raised to justify the illegal actions by the powerful, while the weak and powerless suffer at court just as Lanval had to experience: “They strip them clean of flesh and skin” (37). Worse even, in “The Dog and the Ewe” (no. 4), the dog takes the ewe to court and brings with him false witnesses who then convince the judge that the ewe is indeed guilty. Evil people exist everywhere and use deceptions, lies, false claims, and mean strategies to destroy their victims: “By lies and trickery, in short, / They force the poor to go to court. / False witnesses they’ll often bring / And pay them with the poor folks’ things” (37–40). Even though Marie does not specify whom she means with ‘poor,’ the social difference between the mighty and the downtrodden is explicitly addressed here, with the rich taking everything they can, while the poor have to content themselves with utter defeat and loss (41–42).

The fable “The Sun Who Wished to Wed” (no. 6), the poet takes an even stronger stance against tyrannical sovereigns, who strive to accumulate more power than they need and thus threaten to destroy everyone within society. In this case, the hot sun wants to marry and thus increase its might, against which the animal community protests and complain about to Destiny, who supports their case and prevents this marriage from happening. In her epimyth (moral conclusion), Marie does not waste any words to address the critical issue head-on: “When under evil sovereignty: / Their lord must not grow mightier / Nor join with one superior” (26–28). As to the poor, once again, the poet explains specifically that they continually have to suffer from “wicked lords” (no. 7, 33), who do not hand out any rewards and perform in an arbitrary and

absolutist fashion, trampling the laws under their feet (34–38).

Of course, Marie does not formulate explicit criticism of bad kings or lousy lords; instead, she observes shortcomings and failures everywhere, both among the mighty and the poor, as many other fables confirm impressively. Nevertheless, she mostly warns about haughty and rich people (no. 11), she notices with horror how selfishly kings might perform (no. 11a), and she warns her audience not to trust the powerful and to abstain from becoming their friends, which will never be of profit for the poor (no. 11b).

When we follow the subsequent fables, we realize what the reason might have been for modern scholars not to consider Marie de France as a major contributor to the discourse on criticism of the king. She explores, in fact, many other facets of human life and addresses human vices and frailties at large, attacking people for their villainy, giving bad advice, and misleading their neighbors out of a callous disrespect (no. 12). I would question, however, Bloch's claim that she "can be situated within the context of the peace movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries" (Bloch, 187). The prideful ones are just as much the target of her criticism (no. 13) as those who despise and disrespect old and weak people, to whom they had sworn an oath of loyalty (no. 14).

Marie, however, did not intend to undermine the social structure and vehemently warned about those who would dare to aspire for a social rank far above their own status according to their birth into a certain class. At the same time, she urges the rich and mighty among her contemporaries to show those stuck in poverty and misery some charity because everyone would contribute to the well-being of the social fabric; those on the top could realize surprisingly that those on the bottom might be their own life-savers under certain circumstances (no. 16; see also Bloch, 190).

There would be many other topics of a social, ethical, and moral nature, but let us conclude with the analysis of "The Doves and the Hawk" (no. 19), which brings us back to our main issue because Marie addresses here one more time, and now maybe in the most drastic fashion, what danger might await those who foolishly elect as their sovereign a murderous and criminal individual. The example in this *fable* pertains to the ignorant doves who choose the hawk in the hope that he would protect them against other enemies. Of course, the opposite is the case, and as soon as the hawk has assumed complete control over the doves, it kills and devours each one of them when they dare to approach it with some request. As one of the doves then expresses in a rueful mood, "We watched out for him earlier / And had no fears except ambush. / But ever since he's come to us, / He has done all things openly / That he before did secretly" (16–20).

Even though Marie only expresses ridicule for those who would be foolish enough to grant such an evil person to assume the royal throne, the brief fable also indicates more serious criticism, targeting the hawk which has no concerns for its subjects and kills them at will. As a dictator, it has now full control and uses the doves, its subjects, for its own nourishment. Marie's contemporary, John of Salisbury, would have certainly agreed that this represented a case in which tyrannicide would have been justified. Most curiously, the poet even put words into a wolf's mouth to express great fear of slavery and the profound desire for the individual's freedom: "I'd rather live as a wolf, free, / Than on a chain in luxury" (no. 26, 37–38).

This does not sound anything like a medieval idea, and yet, here we have it, a cry for freedom, and this already at the end of the twelfth century. The dog might enjoy good food, but the wolf realizes quickly what the true cost would be for this short-term material advantage. This does not mean at all that Marie might have felt any preference for wolves over dog; on the contrary, as

several other fables clearly indicate (no. 29, no. 40), but she utilizes the various animals not for what they stand for in nature, but, as all fable authors have done, for what they might relate about social, ethical, and moral concerns.

Conclusion

Let us conclude here, although there are many more fables that would deserve to be discussed further. We have realized many different important aspects pertaining to Marie de France. She was a major public spokesperson of her time and did not mince her words when she found things to criticize, among the poor as well as among the rich and mighty. She demonstrated with her works that medieval women could enjoy a high level of education, if they had the right means for it. She was the first female writer to address primarily secular topics, but she was certainly not the only woman author in the Middle Ages.

Most important for us here is the fact that Marie voiced rather poignant criticism of evil rulers and presented even cases of kings who acted like tyrants. Along with these reproaches, she also publicly exposed the wrongdoings of many of her aristocratic contemporaries and opened new windows to the affairs and needs of the poor and underprivileged. By the same token, she did not intend to provoke any kind of social revolution, as she actually embraced a rather conservative worldview, but she certainly aimed at “taming the feudal beast, the institutionalization of the violence of the feudal world” (Bloch 175), without undermining its fundamental structure. Marie demanded submission under God, proper behavior, observance of the ethical and legal rules, charity for the poor, and a harmonious cohabitation of all members of her society. The majority of her *fables*, however, and a good number of her *lais* specifically target evil kings and their terrible wrongdoing. In this respect, Marie deserves a major spot in our histories of literature, and great respect for her outspokenness in addressing social ills and political dangers, while at the same time demonstrating extraordinary literary skills in formulating her ideas in a storytelling fashion that thinly veils and yet reveals the crucial issues at the same time.

In short, Marie de France was, as countless other scholars have already agreed, one of the best medieval authors, and she also added, which truly deserves to be underscored and profiled more in detail, impressive social, ethical, and political criticism. Although she did not join her male learned colleagues in composing treatises aimed at educating the rulers of that time (*Mirror for Princes*), her literary works might have addressed the issues at hand in a much more poignant and insightful manner because both the *lais* and the *fables* prove to be, until today, highly entertaining and instructive at the same way, and this in the best possible way as Horace had formulated it already in his *Ars Poetica* (19 B.C.E.): *prodesse et delectare*. He would have been deeply delighted with her works, and so could we, now ca. eight hundred years later.

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