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## Courtly Love and the Representation of Women in the *Lais* of Marie de France and the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* of Philippe de Beaumanoir

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The relation of courtly love and the representation of women in Marie de France's *Lais*, taken in an interdisciplinary and cultural perspective, puts the literary representation of women from the *Lais* (ca 1165), particularly within the courtly love discourse, into a dialogue with the legal and historical representation of women in the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* of Philippe de Beaumanoir (1283) in order that we may understand better the discursive space available for the representation of women. In other words, the dialogue between these two works produces a sense of the cultural constraints surrounding the representation of women. A narratological study of these texts provides evidence that despite the valorization of women in the courtly love discourse, the space to speak of women is very similar and very limited in both the *Lais* and the *Coutumes*. Despite these limitations, or perhaps through them, Marie authorizes herself and her representation of women by adapting to poetic reproduction women's legal authority to testify about biological reproduction.

The purpose of a cross-reading of literary and non-literary texts, or what Brian Stock has called a "parallel mode of interpretation" (Stock 7), is to situate the literary representation of women in the *Lais* within a wider cultural and historical horizon.<sup>1</sup> Beaumanoir's *Coutumes* provide us with a legal representation of women that is clearly linked to historical practice. Although Beaumanoir's compilation of custom law is a full century later than Marie's *Lais*, the laws clearly represent accumulated practice and therefore do give a sense of what it was possible to say about women even for Marie in the twelfth century. This legal representation of women delineates one of the spaces in which thirteenth-century women from Beauvais spoke and acted. A juxtaposition of this trace of historical women and social practice with the literary representation of women in Marie de France brings a cultural perspective to the literary representation of women and to the role of "courtly love" in that representation. What were the limits, in social practice, of what one could say about women and what women themselves had the space to

say? Were these similar in literary discourse? Did the discourse of courtly love affect these limits? Did it somehow give women more space to speak?<sup>2</sup> This cultural approach should also be seen as a continuation of John Benton's discussion of courtly love and history. While Benton addressed real historical conditions, the concern here is with a history of representational practices, with, in other words, what was speakable and imaginable rather than what was really practiced. Since structuralism, it seems safe to think of these representational practices as having a powerful historical role. Indeed, they are discourses that constitute and transform the objects of which they speak (Foucault 46).

Why muddle this comparison with the messy concept of courtly love?<sup>3</sup> First, whether one thinks of courtly love as a modern term, imposed anachronistically on medieval practice, or as a convenient general term to describe the art of love in medieval romance, it is clear that twelfth-century French literature inaugurates a new attitude toward love, indeed, a kind of cult of love. This new attitude clearly and significantly affects the image and representation of women. Whether or not this new attitude toward love affected the historical conditions of women is quite another question.<sup>4</sup> It is undeniable, however, that Marie and Beaumanoir use the word "courtois" and invoke the general register that we, since Gaston Paris' famous coining of the term, associate with the expression "courtly love." For my argument, the discourse of courtly love comprises both sincere expressions of love, those Frappier helpfully labels "fin amor" after the troubadours and Chrétien (40-41), to the far more ironic and manipulative strategies of love in Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*. The *Lais* and the *Coutumes* seem to be aware of and to invoke these two widely divergent approaches to the discourse of courtly love.

Looking specifically at the representation of women as it is filtered through the different formal levels of narrative voice allows for more lateral movement between the two texts than would a more thematic approach. First, the diegetic level of narration is where the narrative voice comes from characters within the story. It includes women and men characters speaking about themselves or about other women. The second level is above the first, the extradiegetic level. Here, the narrative voice is formally above the characters. This is the more authoritative voice of the producer of the story, the narrator, who speaks about the characters rather than on their level.<sup>5</sup> The discussion of narrators also considers the way these authors, one male and one female, conceive of themselves and their authority in relation to their own respective texts.<sup>6</sup>

In examining the way that narrative structure conditions the construction of the female subject, we must keep in mind that these custom laws give us a sense of what seemed possible for women to do or think—whether or not they indeed did

these things.<sup>7</sup> This cautionary word should help prevent us from making a feminist of Marie de France or a misogynist of Philippe de Beaumanoir. Both are subject to a similar set of discursive limits, to what it was possible to think, say, or imagine about women. In the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*, Beaumanoir's codification of local custom law provides a prescriptive narrative that suggests an idea of the "imaginable" (or at least legally imaginable) limits of the female speaking subject. From the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* we are afforded a glimpse of the way that local usage conceived of these limits.<sup>8</sup> Through a crossreading of the *Lais*, we will find that female subjects speak in surprisingly similar ways in both legal and literary discourse.

A general sense of when women should or must be heard can be derived from a passage from the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* where Beaumanoir indicates just how limited a space is available for the representation of women. In this passage, Beaumanoir is specifically considering the legitimacy of calling forth women as witnesses and thus directly addresses our central question about the limits and availability of space for the representation of women.

Dames qui sunt atraites en tesmongnages ne doivent pas estre recheues, se eles sunt debatues de celi contre qui eles traites, por nul estat que eles aient, soit qu'eles soient veves ou mariées ou puceles, fors en un cas, c'est à savoir quant aucune coze quiet en tesmongnage de nissance d'enfans ou de lor aages prouver; si comme s'il avient que une feme a deus enfans marles jumiaux, et li ains nés en veut porter l'ains nece: on ne porroit savoir li quix seroit li ains nés, se n'estoit par le tesmongnage des femes: et por ce doivent eles estre creues en tel cas. (II: 103, xxxix, 31)<sup>9</sup>

[Ladies who are called to testify should not be allowed to do so if they are challenged by the person against whom they are called, whatever their estate, whether they are widows, married women, or unmarried women, except in one case alone; this is when testimony is being taken about the birth of children or to determine their age, for example, where a woman has twin male children and the elder wants to take his right of firstborn, the fact of which one is the elder could not be determined except by the testimony of women, and for this reason they should be believed in such a case. (426)]

This one space where women should be believed, "pour ce doivent eles estre creues," can be interpreted only as a rather limited space for an authorized female voice. But, however small it may be, this is a legal space where women have the right and even the obligation to be heard. We need to examine that space.

From the very beginning, the passage is marked by an exclusionary gesture: "ne doivent pas estre recheues, se eles sunt debatues de celi contre qui eles sunt traites." In other words, women cannot be brought forth to testify if their testimony is in

conflict with the person against whom they have been called.<sup>10</sup> This overt muting of the female voice, in fact, is reinforced implicitly in the categorization of women by their legal, sexual, and reproductive relationship to men: “veves ou mariées ou puceles.” The limitations implied here in the space of representation available to women stand out sharply in the exceptional case where women should be heard: matters regarding the birth of one twin boy before another so as to determine inheritance. Women have the right and obligation to speak about their relation to men and to male property. As mothers, they have a key role—both literally and figuratively, legally and sexually—in this passing on of property rights.

In a later passage, women are called upon to testify for analogous reasons: “femes sunt receues en tesmongnier aage d’enfans, et aussi sunt eles oïes, selonc nostre coustume, en cas qui se determine par enqueste” (II: 114, xxxix, 54) [“women are admitted to give testimony to prove the age of children, and they are also heard according to our custom in cases which are conducted by an inquest” (433)]. Thus a woman’s voice is credible and necessary when “eles sevent à le fois ce dont on enquiert, et li home n’en sevent point” (II: 114, xxxix, 54) [“they know what is being inquired into and the men do not know (433)"]. That which men “do not know” here pertains to the important biological domain of reproduction: birth (and the consequent right to inheritance) and virginity (and the consequent right to get married). These passages are admittedly selective. They do not prove that women had no voice in thirteenth-century France. We would, nevertheless, do well to note the limit that common legal usage set on the female voice when we turn to literary discourse and especially the theme of courtly love.<sup>11</sup>

The examples from passages in *Beaumanoir* provide an example of the “imaginable,” and in this case, legal space available for a thirteenth-century female voice. Putting this historically possible space for a female voice into dialogue with the literary representation of women in Marie de France’s twelfth-century *Lais* forces us to look beyond an artificially “literary” isolation, to dispense, as Foucault would have it, with the feeble unity of the volume, of the book, of genre (Foucault 34). What was said by and about women gets filtered through what could be said. With a sense of the historically imaginable space for representation of women in mind, we can now turn to what Marie de France and her male and female characters did say.

The first case of diegetic representation of and about women in the *Lais* gives a picture of courtly love as a discourse that prescribes and circumscribes female behavior. Most typically, the knight addresses his lady and in doing so gives us a description of her. These descriptions frequently present us with a prescriptive narration of the noble woman of the court. To the extent that she corresponds to the ideal courtly lover, she is painted in the most lavish colors: “ceo est la plus bele

del mund, / de tutes celes ki i sunt” [“this is, of all who exist, / the most beautiful woman in the world”] (“*Lanval*” 591-592).<sup>12</sup> When she does not correspond to this ideal image, or does not seem to know of it, the knight describes to her what it means to be a courtly lover. In “*Equitan*,” the king attempts to court his senechal’s wife. Initially, she hesitates to grant her favor: “Sire, la dame li ad dit, / De ceo m’estuet avoir respit” [“My lord,’ the woman said to him, / ‘I must have some time to think’”] (117-118). She argues that the difference in their social status will make life difficult for her: “s’aukuns aime plus hautement / qu’a sa richesce nen apent, / cil se dute de tute rien.” [“Anyone who aims higher in love / than his own wealth entitles him to / will be frightened by every little thing that occurs”] (143-145). *Equitan* responds in the courtly register but with terms that severely limit the power of her “*octroi*,” the ability to grant love or not:

Dame, merci! Nel dites mes!  
 Cil ne sunt mie fin curteis,  
 Ainz est bargaine de burgeis,  
 Ki pur avoir ne pur grant fieu  
 Mettent lur peine en malveis liu.  
 Suz ciel n’ad dame s’ele est sage,  
 Curteise e franche de curage,  
 Pur quei d’amer se tienge chiere,  
 Qu’el ne seit mie noveliere,  
 S’el n’eüst fors sul sun mantel,  
 Qu’uns riches princes de chastel  
 Ne se deüst pur le pener  
 E lealment e bien amer. (150-162)

[Please, my lady! Don’t say such things!  
 No one could consider himself noble  
 (rather, he’d be haggling like a tradesman)  
 who, for the sake of wealth or a big fief,  
 would take pains to win someone of low repute.  
 There’s no woman in the world—if she’s smart,  
 refined, and of noble character,  
 and if she places a high enough value on her love  
 that she isn’t inconstant—  
 whom a rich prince in his palace  
 wouldn’t yearn for  
 and love well and truly,  
 even if she’d nothing but the shirt on her back.]

*Equitan*’s reaction to her hesitation is shockingly proscriptive. It certainly does not look “*courtois*” in the courteous register of that term. In short he tells her she cannot say no to him.

We have a perfect example of one of Andreas Capellanus' tenets of courtly love—love blind to class distinction: “lovers ought to make no more distinction between classes of men than Love himself does” (Capellanus 45). And, consistent with *The Art of Courtly Love*, the invocation of an ideal courtly lover is a rhetorical ploy to convince the lady that a paradigm exists to justify the kind of behavior (adultery across social classes) that he desires and she fears. Equitan could well have taken his speech from Capellanus' advice about wooing a woman from a lower social class (65).

This scene seems to provide evidence of a rather hegemonic “courtly” tradition. For the man, it shows a self-interested investment in love across social classes and blind to marital constraints. For Equitan, the difference in their social status should not be an obstacle to love. Indeed, he implies that all women, even one with nothing more than the coat on her back, are worthy of the love of a rich prince. The passage explicitly attempts to contradict her claim that because he is superior to her and her husband, if she gives him her love, he will be able to dominate her (136). The implication is that if she is courtly she can (and should) say yes to his love, and that by doing so she will, through love, move up the social ladder. He claims even that he will become her vassal. Oddly then, the woman who is truly “curteise e franche de curage” must say yes to the man.<sup>13</sup> Equitan's insistence on a positive answer to his request for love makes courtly love look more like a trap for the woman than a liberation or empowerment. Yes seems to be the only courtly answer to an overture of love.

The crossreading of the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* confirms the idea that the discourse of courtliness can symbolize a trap for women. In a passage of formally similar narration in the chapter on marriage problems, the narrator prescribes a conduct for women that differs significantly from the “curteise” woman whom Equitan's speech seems to envisage. Here, Beaumanoir directly addresses the issue that preoccupied Equitan, women leaving their husbands:

Nus ne se doit merveillier se les aucunes se departent de lor maris quant les resons sunt resnables, mais moult doit prode feme souffrir et endurer avent qu'ele se mete hors de [le compaignie de son mari]. (II: 331, lvii, 4)

[No one should be surprised when some wives leave their husbands when the reasons are reasonable; but an honest woman should put up with and endure a great deal before leaving her husband's company. (594)]

This passage suggests that some women did leave their husbands. However, the prescriptive part of this passage suggests something quite different from the courtly conduct that Equitan wanted from his “lady.” In this case the woman is told to stay home and endure her husband. Though formally similar in the extent to

which they set up an ideal conduct for women, these two prescriptive narratives have a very different idea of the nature of that conduct. The legal discourse prescribes patience and endurance for the wife considering leaving her husband; the literary discourse prescribes an eager and willing partner outside of the traditional marriage relation.

Another paragraph from Beaumanoir's chapter on marriage problems reveals that these two irreconcilable ideas of women (the eager partner in adultery and the patient wife) might be less divergent than they appear. When the narrator considers the possibility of a woman leaving her husband and children, he suggests that if the husband can determine that the fault does not lie with the children but with the mother, "Doncques, en tel cas, doit il reprendre cortoisement se feme qu'ele ayt et honort ses enfans" (II: 334, lvii, 7) ["In such cases, then, he should politely require his wife to love and honor his children" (596)]. This seems to be an odd use of the concept of courtliness. How does this instance of a husband taking back his wife ("cortoisement") to love and honor their children correspond with courtly love, with Equitan's version of the "dame curteise"? The narrator seems to suggest that the husband take back his wife courteously, politely. In this sense, as in "Equitan," a courtly request should be met with a courtly (affirmative) response. But this interpretation throws ironic light on the passage if we recall that Equitan used the same word but for opposite effect (for him it signaled a woman disposed to an extramarital affair). We hardly envision courtly lovers fighting over child custody.

The sense of the word "courtois" corresponds in the two passages only if we think of it as a signal for a certain kind of seductive rhetoric. In other words, if the husband were to use Equitan's courtly language (in spite of the fact that his purpose is totally opposite to a proposition of adulterous love), he might better succeed in keeping his wife at home with the children. In fact, these passages suggest that the word "courtois" operated in both registers. It suggests behavior that is polite and courteous as well as courtly, rhetorical, affected. Beaumanoir's insertion of the word in a context of domestic dispute shows that the courtly ideal prevailed outside of literary discourse and that it could be associated with something other than love from afar and adulterous intrigue at the court.<sup>14</sup>

The *Lais* provide more examples than Equitan's of the way that the discourse of courtly love can be used to circumscribe female behavior. In "Guigemar" the description of a painting in the lady's room suggests as directly as Equitan's words that women were in some sense "locked up" in a predisposition to love. Here, the lady is surveyed constantly and confined in a tower surrounded by a green marble wall. Inside the tower there is a painting of Venus hanging on the wall:

Venus, la deuesse d'amur,  
Fu tres bien mise en la peinture;  
Les traiz mustrount e la nature  
Cument hom deit amur tenir  
E lealment e bien servir.  
Le livre Ovide, ou il enseine  
Comment chascuns s'amur estreine,  
En un fu ardent le gettout,  
E tuz iceus escumengout  
Ki jamais cel livre lirreient  
Ne sun enseignement fereient.  
La fu la dame enclose e mise. (234 -245)

[Venus the goddess of love  
was skillfully depicted in the painting;  
her nature and her traits were illustrated,  
whereby men might learn how to behave in love,  
and to serve love loyally.  
Ovid's book, the one in which he instructs  
lovers how to control their love,  
was being thrown by Venus into a fire,  
and she was excommunicating all those  
who ever perused this book  
or followed its teachings.  
That's where the wife was locked up.]

The painting creates a kind of love chamber where the woman remains confined to be filled with desire, apparently for the next visit of her (jealous) husband or for the adventurous knight who will happen upon her. If we remember that her room is locked in a tower, surrounded by a green marble wall, the image nicely captures the odd combination of an incitement to love and to break out of constraints (the painting) within the context of severe physical and social constraints (the tower). In the painting, Venus excommunicates anyone who reads Ovid (the *Remedia Amoris*) and considers repressing his/her love. A strange reversal of an ecclesiastic term takes place: excommunication ("escumengout") is the penalty for repressing one's love. The legal or religious threat of punishment that hovers over those who would commit adultery here becomes the punishment for those who resist amorous relations.<sup>15</sup> The predisposition to love outside of marriage that this passage seems to encourage and make available is clearly at odds with social practice.

In this passage, as in the passage from "Equitan," the courting process invokes a code or a cult of love that prescribes a certain ideal character for the lady that is in contrast with accepted legal and religious customs. The contradiction is not



simply between a literary ideal and conservative social and historical norms. It also surfaces in the content of the *Lais*. On one level, as we have seen, the courtly ideal seeks to fill women with desire. At the same time, we also see the women themselves locked up (“Guigemar,” “Yonec,” “Laüstic,” “Eliduc”), preserved in a sort of chastity belt (“Guigemar”), mutilated or killed (“Bisclavret,” “Equitan”), constrained by an unchosen marriage (“Milon”), rejected and humiliated for having overtly expressed desire (“Lanval”). The narration that addresses or describes women tends to be both prescriptive and proscriptive; it imposes an image of women as the ideal object of male desire. Beyond this image lies only domesticity or transgression.

Within the context of this prescriptive narration many women do speak. It is worth looking briefly at what they can and do say as they fulfill the courtly ideal. “Fresne” provides a typical example of the “liberation” that the courtly discourse provides for women. Abandoned by her mother and brought up in a convent by her “aunt,” Fresne is eventually courted by a lord named Gurun. For the two of them to see each other outside of the constraints that the aunt and convent impose, Gurun suggests that Fresne leave the convent and come away with him. “Venez vus ent del tut od mei!” [“come away from here and live with me”] (279). He fears that the aunt would be upset about the relation, especially if Fresne were to become pregnant. “Si vostre aunte s’aparceveit, / Mut durement li pesereit. / S’entur li feussez enceintee, / Durement sereit curuciee” [“I’m sure you know / that if your aunt found out about us / she’d be upset / especially if you became pregnant right under her roof”] (280-284). Fresne responds immediately with the “octroi”: “Bien otriat ceo que li plot” [“she willingly granted him what he desired”] (290). The logic of the story and the courtly discourse suggest a certain freedom of movement. The strength of their love —“Cele ki durement l’amot” [“Since she loved him deeply”] (289)—overcomes social restrictions (this ultimately will prove the moral of the story) and allows Fresne to escape from the confines of the convent, her relative poverty, and her past as an orphan. Yet the explicit reference to the threat of pregnancy (surprising in the courtly context and perhaps a sign of Marie’s gendering of this discourse) sends us right back to the opening passage from the customs laws and the legal space of representation available to women: reproduction. While the courtly discourse appears on the surface to give women a certain room of their own—a space for desire and social movement—in the end women remain tied firmly and directly to an economy of reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

Although most of the narrative on the diegetic level seems to prescribe behavior for women, women characters do also take the position of the speaking subject themselves. For the most part, when women speak they seem limited by the

same constraints that we saw in the prescriptive narration about them. If we look first to Beaumanoir, we notice a nearly complete absence of women as speaking subjects. Beaumanoir creates no fictional construct, a “Jane Doe,” of women as he does so frequently of men: “Pierres et Jehans.”<sup>17</sup> But this situation is equally mirrored in the *Lais*, where the women are usually referred to fairly anonymously as “dame” or “fame.”<sup>18</sup> On at least one occasion, though, Beaumanoir does directly cite a woman:

Une feme de le Noeve-Vile-en-Hés dist à un bourgeois, en sanllant d'estre corouchié, en present de bone gent: “Vous me tolés me terre, et metés en vostre grange ce que je deusse avoir, et voz n'en gorrés jà, car je voz envoieai en vostre grange les Rouges Charpentiers.” (II: 97, xxxix, 14)

[A woman from La Neuville-en-Hez said to a bourgeois, with the appearance of anger, in the presence of honest folk: “You are taking away my land, and keeping in your barn what I should have, and you will never benefit from it, for I will send into your barn the red carpenters (= I will set fire to it).” (421)]

Though he does not name this woman, he does refer to her specifically enough to create more than a generic “fame.” The scene of representation has clearly shifted away from reproduction. But we cannot help noticing that the citation is brought forth as evidence against the female speaker. Her statement about “les Rouges Charpentiers” (arson) condemns her to be burnt: “ele fu jugié à ardoir, e fu arse” (II: 97, xxxix, 14) [“she was condemned to be burned and she was burned” (422)]. This case of a particular woman speaking out, breaking into the space of representation, confirms that when women speak beyond the economy of reproduction they move quickly into transgression.

In the *Lais* women subjects are much more readily given the space to speak, but here too they are limited in what they can say. In most cases they articulate their desire for the chevalier after having been sought out by him, or they make heard their “plainte,” lamenting the absence of the chevalier or the cruelty of the husband.<sup>19</sup> We find some exceptions. “Bisclavret” gives us a slightly twisted version of the transgression of the speaking woman subject that we saw with the woman of La Noeve-Vile-en-Hés. Here, the Lady rejects her “werewolf” husband and goes off with another man. She is forced to speak when the authorities catch up with her: “De l'autre part la dame ad prise / E en mut grant destresce mise. / Tant par destresce e par poür / Tut li cunta de sun seignur” [“At the same time he took the wife / and subjected her to torture; / out of fear and pain / she told all about her husband”] (263-266). Here, as in the customs laws, the authorities find themselves in the position of making space for a female subject whose expertise is

not in conception and virginity. But what she has to say, in the *Lais* as in the above example from the customs laws, borders on transgression.

The most obvious examples of women stepping into the space of the speaking subject occur in “Lanval.” Here we find the only instance in the *Lais* of a woman according her love without first having been sought out. As in Fresne, this transgression is punished. The appeals to Lanval (from the fairy queen and Guinevere) are not significantly different the one from the other. One minor shift in tone, however, does result in a major difference. Even though she speaks first, the fairy queen clearly acknowledges Lanval as the motivating force for her action: “Lanval, fet ele, beus amis, / pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma tere” [“Lanval,’ she said, ‘sweet love, / because of you I have come from my land”] (110-111). The human queen, on the other hand, seems to think it unnecessary to flatter Lanval with anything more than her own availability: “Lanval, mut vus ai honuré / E mut cheri e mut amé; / Tute m’amur poëz avoir. / Kar me dites vostre voleir! / Ma druërie vus otrei: / Mut devez estre liez de mei!” [“Lanval, I have shown you much honor, / I have cherished you, and loved you. / You may have all my love; / just tell me your desire. / I promise you my affection. / You should be very happy with me”] (263-268). She moves too fast and expects too much gratitude. The result of this uninhibited expression of desire will be her humiliation in front of the court. The fairy queen’s offer of love to Lanval yields results far different from Guinevere’s. At one level, her offer of love is an example of the “merveilleux.” She comes from the dream-like fantasy world that Duby has associated with courtly love.<sup>20</sup> In this light, the triumphant parade of vindication at the end of “Lanval” should be seen less as the establishment of a female subject and her authority than as a fantasy that is acted out for the pleasure of the attendant male spectators of Arthur’s court.<sup>21</sup> Guinevere’s more forthright demand on Lanval illustrates the extent to which the “prise de parole” by a woman in even the highest and most ideal courtly setting can be considered a transgression.

The limited space for speaking women that we have found here does not indicate that no women spoke, nor that they spoke only to be censored or incriminate themselves. There just is not very much space available for the representation of a female voice by men or by women. Marie’s own voice, or at least the trace of it that we get through the narrative persona, is emblematic of this limitation. The narrating “je” appears in quite self-effacing contexts, as in “Guigemar”: “ceo m’est avis” [“I believe”] (75); “mun escient” [“I think”] (421); “ceo m’est avis” [“It appears to me”] (535). It is perhaps this very slipperiness that constitutes Marie as the only “real” female character of the *Lais*.<sup>22</sup>

The “Prologue” and the *Lais* do, however, explicitly pursue the theme of self-expression and self-representation: “ainz se deit voluntiers mustrer” (“Prologue” 4). Although her stories clearly derive from other stories—“Des lais pensai, k’oiz aveie” [“Then I thought of the lais I’d heard”] (“Prologue” 33)—Marie, as female narrator, is breaking into the space of the speaking subject: “Nel voil mie pur ceo leissier, / Si gangleür u losengier / le me volent a mal turner” [“I don’t propose to give up because of that; / if spiteful critics or slanderers / wish to turn my accomplishments against me”] (“Guigemar” 15-17). This is precisely the movement that her female characters cannot make, or only make in appearance. By having renounced the project of translating stories from Latin into Romance (“Prologue” 30), Marie places herself somewhat outside of the traditional canon. Although this gesture does not necessarily create a new space to speak, it frees her from the constraints and limitations of whatever female space might have existed in a more traditional narrative. The result is not a character/narrator who speaks a new female language, but it is a female narrator who speaks nevertheless. Marie de France does not map out a new feminine space, nor does she articulate a new prescriptive narration for women. Indeed, her resistance to a prescriptive narrative for women signals at least the possibility of a female subject outside the economy of reproduction—she does not repeat that narrative. Instead she produces a “poetic fruit” of quite another order, the *lais* themselves (Freeman, “Sisterhood” 21).

One rhetorical ploy that allows Marie the narrator to tell her stories is her own underscored status as fictional creation. Her deferral of authority is typically medieval, but it also seems ideal for a marginal, female voice. She uses this deferral to put herself in a position of impunity that facilitates the break into language.<sup>23</sup> She will speak, indeed will “show herself” by speaking and writing, but this whole project deflects away from her as narrator or author because she is transmitting the stories she has heard from someone else. As Foulet and Uitti have put it, “it is her Celtic forerunners who authorize and legitimize her collection of stories” (249). The references to Priscian and the ancients also clearly put Marie in the typical medieval position of deferring away from the self to an acknowledged, higher authority. The self-diminishing status of the narrative persona is thus conveniently characteristic of the medieval anxiety of authorship. That status nicely suits the female persona’s break into language.

We must also ask how Beaumanoir, free from the constraints of literary convention, but tied nonetheless to the conventions of his own legal discourse, conceives of his break into language. And what authority or anxiety does he find there? We have already seen that Beaumanoir creates a diegetic level of narrative fiction, the “Pierres et Jehans” who serve to exemplify different customs laws.

Narratologically, Beaumanoir's use of these examples differs from the characters in the *Lais* because he does not acknowledge the fictional nature of his construct. The veracity of his own stories is also put in question by the extent to which he is willing to create a fictional character even of himself. It is not that we doubt the stories that he tells when he uses the fictional "je," but we see the limits of the possibilities of representation that he conceives of for himself and that governs the customs laws.

His persona is concretely and ideologically located. The fictitious "je" appears in the customs laws only when the example in question involves property, privilege, inheritance: "Se j'ai heritage de par mon pere et mes peres muert, et après je muir sans hoir de mon cors, mes heritages de par mon pere ne revient pas à me mere" (I: 237, xiv, 25) ["If I have realty which came from my father and my father dies and then I die without heirs of my body, my realty which came from my father does not pass to my mother" (173)]. The "je" here does not insert itself in the more vulnerable subject position of the narration of theft, arson, beatings. His narrator clearly takes the position of a privileged subject, and part of this privilege is being male. This narrative stance, though at the same formal level of narrative authority, contrasts sharply with the self-effacing "je" of Marie, the narrator, in the *Lais*. On the contrary, as Rupert Pickens has shown, Marie does herself what she says her "matière" does (374).

The ideological stance of Beaumanoir's strategy of representation surfaces on other levels of the narration as well. At the extradiegetic level of narration, above the homespun instructive fictions, a more authoritative "je" transmits his story: "Je vi un cas où ..." (II: 189, xliv, 8) ["I saw a case where ..." (488)]. He claims only to have seen here, but this claim becomes part of a legal discourse with far-reaching effects. The logical and ideological consequence of the claim to have seen surfaces only later when this same narrative voice, though in more disguised fashion, shifts from merely seeing and reporting to a conclusion which prescribes certain types of conduct.

This prescription occurs frequently at the end of a serious case in the form of a short moral. In the case of the woman from La Noeue-Vile-en-Hés, the narrator adds an impersonal note that nonetheless serves as his own judgement of the infraction. "Et par cel jugement pot on entendre le peril qui est en manecier" (II: 97, xxxix, 14) ["You can see from this judgment the danger that there is in threats" (422)]. The more personal "je vis" that we saw above has shifted to a more objective "pot on entendre." But we still feel the enunciating subject projecting his ideology onto the neutral subject pronoun. He enunciates the "on" but projects it on

all those (like the woman from La Noeue-Vile-en-Hés) who might be considering burning their neighbors' barns.

Beaumanoir conforms in some respects to the same narrative paradigm as Marie de France. They both tell stories. But reading Marie alone or Beaumanoir alone does not give us the whole story. Read together, these stories suggest that the courtly discourse empowers women only to the extent that they try to correspond to an ideal created by this (mainly male) discourse. Passages from the customs laws have illustrated both the scarcity of representation of real empowered women and the absence of any "courtly" attitude toward them. Indeed, Beaumanoir needs neither to assume nor to use a subject position to represent the exemplary woman. But the absence of such a subject in Beaumanoir does not suggest that such a voice cannot be found. We can find that voice by reading these two authors and different discourses together. Despite the self-effacing stance of the narrator of the *Lais*, this narrator leaves us with a generic female subject, a space of possibility, a category named "Marie" that must be added to Beaumanoir's "Pierres et Jehans." ✱

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For similar perspectives on a necessary interdisciplinarity of history and literature, see Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past* (44) and Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (35).

<sup>2</sup> Put another way, these are simple but vexing Foucauldian questions that seek to expose the discursive conditions of the twelfth-century literary representation of women. In Foucault's own words: "Comment se fait-il que tel énoncé soit apparu et nul autre à sa place? Pourquoi il ne pouvait être autre qu'il n'était?" (Foucault 39-40).

<sup>3</sup> For a good recent summary of the critical debate on courtly love, see Kay (84-87). Krueger (*Women Readers* 1-2 and "Introduction" 209) also summarizes the debate and gives the appropriate bibliography. In brief, earlier scholars implied that courtly love had an empowering effect on women (cited in Krueger are Paris, Bezzola, Frappier) whereas more recent scholars have questioned whether or not real conditions for women were in fact improved by courtly love and have identified a hegemonic, male-centered project in the courtly love discourse (Benton; Duby, *Mâle Moyen Age*; Kay; Krueger, *Women Readers*). Frappier gives a passionate defense of Gaston Paris and very helpful background on the history and debate of the term.

<sup>4</sup> Surely one of the reasons for the more recent modern resistance to Gaston Paris' concept of love is that one of its key characteristics is the claim that courtly love puts women in a position superior to men (Paris 518). Already in 1968, Benton argued forcefully against the idea courtly love might have empowered women historically (35-36). Even though this is a dubious historical claim, Frappier argues intelligently (against Benton) for the historical significance of the general "imaginaire" that Paris is

describing (65-67). His point is that a shift in mentality, even if it is not immediately measurable in social conditions, can have a real effect on social conditions.

<sup>5</sup> These levels, technically, are diegetic and extradiegetic. Women as characters, whether speaking or spoken about by other characters, function on the diegetic level. Generally, narrators on the extradiegetic level. Genette formulated these distinctions. See especially the section “Voix” in *Figures III* (225-267). Rimmon-Kenan gives a more succinct description of these different levels of narration (86-105).

<sup>6</sup> This is Genette’s “fonction idologique” (262-263).

<sup>7</sup> As Janet Coleman has noted, in the medieval period “the only kind of history there is, is imaginable history.” Material conditions must be “imaginable” or they simply have no meaning at all (Coleman 34).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Stock sums up this approach in his article “History, Literature, and Medieval Textuality:” “Accounting for what actually happened is now recognized to be only part of the story; the other part is the record of what individuals thought was happening, and the ways in which their feelings, perceptions, and narratives of events either influenced or were influenced by the realities they faced” (7).

<sup>9</sup> In order to facilitate cross-referencing with the Salmon edition, references to the Beugnot edition are given as follows: (volume: page, chapter, paragraph). English versions are given by page number from the Akehurst translation.

<sup>10</sup> Godefroy defines “debatre” as “récuser” (to reject, to challenge), using this particular passage from *Beaumanoir* as evidence. Curiously, “celi” is usually a demonstrative pronoun indicating feminine gender (Einhorn 37, Foulet 168). *Beaumanoir*, however, clearly uses this pronoun as a generic category “someone” or (as we will see later with *Beaumanoir*’s generic categories) as a specifically masculine pronoun. A good example of this usage occurs in section 12 of this same chapter (39). Jehan is accused of killing Pierre’s “parent.” *Beaumanoir* clearly uses “celi” as a substitute for “celui,” the masculine singular, oblique: “li dis Jehans courut sus à celi qui fu tués le coutel tret, et tantost s’assanlla une grant tourbe de gens entor eus, qu’il ne virent pas que li dis Jehans ferist celi [“celui” in the Salmon edition] du coustel qui fu mors” (II: 96, xxxix, 12) [“the said Jehan struck with his knife the person who died, but they saw the said Jehan leave the crowd with his naked blade covered with blood, and they heard that the person who died said: ‘He has killed me’” (421)]. Another example of “celi” as a masculine singular, oblique pronoun occurs in section 18 of this same chapter (98).

<sup>11</sup> While the legal space to speak available to women (clearly and almost exclusively the domain of reproduction) seems limited, this limitation can also be exploited. Michelle Freeman shows how Marie de France herself exploits this limitation in “The Power of Sisterhood: Marie de France’s ‘Le Fresne.’”

<sup>12</sup> All citations from the *Lais* are from the Rynchner edition; translations are from the Hanning and Ferrante edition.

<sup>13</sup> In “Guigemar” we see nearly the same prescriptive formula without the class difference. He offers his love. She asks for some time to think it over. He claims that only coquettish women need time to think about such things and that she should say yes immediately (513-526). She does.

<sup>14</sup> By reading backwards from Beaumanoir’s use of this term into the text of Marie de France, we get a particularly explicit example of how “real social contradictions find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm” (Jameson 79). Georges Duby underlines the illusory nature of the empowerment that courtly love is said to provide medieval women (*Mâle moyen âge* 77).

<sup>15</sup> See Brundage for the threat of excommunication (388). Beaumanoir admits death as a possible punishment for the man or woman caught in adultery by the husband (I: 455-456, xxx, 103-105).

<sup>16</sup> Krueger also sees women as locked into an economy of reproduction: “Women were quite literally at the reproductive center of these social processes” (20). For Krueger the centrality of the role of women in reproduction is a source of male anxiety (20). For a near opposite reading of the effects of this economy of reproduction, see Freeman, “The Power of Sisterhood.”

<sup>17</sup> Examples of the generic “Pierre et Jehans” abound, e.g., “si comme se Jehans est tenans de le terre que Pierres requiert à avoir” (I: 106, vi, 14) [“if Pierre holds the land that John is asking for” (81)]. Cf. Volume I: 117, vi, 28; 382, xxvii, 9; 449-450, xxx, 95; and in Volume II: 187, xliii, 2.

<sup>18</sup> For the exceptions and a discussion of the importance of female names, see Bruckner (36-37).

<sup>19</sup> “Guigemar” provides good examples of both the “octroi”: “La dame entent . . . e li otreie sanz respit / l’amur” (527-530) and the “plainte”: “Guigemar, sire, mar vus vi! / Mieux voil hastivement murir” (668-669).

<sup>20</sup> Duby speaks generally about the fantasy element in courtly literature, suggesting that chivalric romances were composed “pour offrir une compensation onirique aux frustrations qui mûrissaient au sein du privé féodal” (*Histoire* 511). Although he obviously focuses here only on male frustration, his comment supports the notion that even in Marie de France images of women are culturally conditioned by a dominant male fantasy. See also Kay (83).

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the text makes this fantasy quite explicit. The knights are all distracted by the scantily clothed attendants to the fairy queen. When the first two arrive “vestues / Tut senglement a lur chars nues” the knights “les esgardent volentiers” (475-477). When Arthur turns to them for the judgment he requested, they make clear how distracted they are by the arrival of this parade of beautiful women: “Sire, funt il, nus departimes / Pur les dames que nus veimes” (503-504).



<sup>22</sup> Freeman analyses this self-effacing stance as a feminist “poetics” in “Poetics of Silence” (esp. 865).

<sup>23</sup> The “poetics” of the Prologue and Marie’s relation to the literary tradition have been amply studied. See Spitzer, Robertson, Pickens, and Foulet and Uitti. While these articles give different readings of the Prologue, they do seem to concur that the narrator’s self-deferential stance is typically medieval.

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