



French Mediaeval Romances from the Lays of Marie de France Queen of Rumania Marie

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The lays of Marie de France are a series of twelve short narrative Breton lays by the poet Marie de France. They are written in the Anglo-Norman and were probably composed in the late 12th century. The short, narrative poems generally focus on glorifying the concept of courtly love through the adventures of their main characters. Despite her stature in Anglo-Norman literature and medieval French literature generally, little is known of Marie herself, though it is thought that she was born in France and wrote in England.

Marie de France's lays, told in octosyllabic, or eight syllable verse, are notable for their celebration of love, individuality of character, and vividness of description – hallmarks of the emerging literature of the times. Five different manuscripts contain one or more of the lays, but only one, Harley 978, a thirteenth-century manuscript housed in the British Library, preserves all twelve. It has been suggested that if the author had indeed arranged the Lays as presented in Harley 978, that she may have chosen this overall structure to contrast the positive and negative actions that can result from love. In this manuscript, the odd lays — “Guigemar”, “Le Fresne”, etc. — praise the characters who express love for other people. By comparison, the even lays, such as “Equitan”, “Bisclavret” and so on, warn how love that is limited to oneself can lead to misfortune.

The Harley 978 manuscript also includes a 56-line prologue in which Marie describes the impetus for her composition of the lays. In the prologue, Marie writes that she was inspired by the example of the ancient Greeks and Romans to create something that would be both entertaining and morally instructive. She also states her desire to preserve for posterity the tales that she has heard. Two of Marie's lays – “Lanval,” a very popular work that was adapted several times over the years (including the Middle English Sir Launfal), and “Chevrefoil” (“The Honeysuckle”), a short composition about Tristan and Iseult – mention King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Marie's lays were precursors to later works on the subject, and Marie was probably a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, another writer of Arthurian tales.

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