CHAPTER SIX

SPEAKING THROUGH ANIMALS IN MARIE DE FRANCE'S *LAIS* AND *FABLES*

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The animals that perform with such captivating charm in the *Fables* and *Lais* of Marie de France come together onstage in a single manuscript: London, British Library, Harley 978. They speak to each other indirectly across the interval of some 50 folios, the fables preceding the *lais* and thus reversing the order of composition hypothesized by modern editors who place Marie's 12 short tales centered on love before her fable translations.[1] The thread of association offered by her signature and many shared features of her art invite us to follow the medieval scribe's example by looking at animals in both works, together as well as separately, in order to bring into sharper focus what links and what more properly differentiates *lais* and fables. Both illustrate Marie's gift for working in the briefest forms of narrative, packing into their elliptical shapes a many-layered complexity that increases geometrically through the combinations that emerge within each collection, as in their dialogue with a variety of traditions that surround and situate them within the larger literary system of the 12th century. But while lays and fables share the interplay between individual pieces and overall coherence, the difference in their truth claims and shifting modes of fictionality, intimately tied to the character of their animal representations, helps establish the specificity of each.

In her different "translations" from one world to another, Marie de France uses animals in a variety of ways to amuse and engage us but also to make us ask questions. When are these animals only, or not

[1] In *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris, 1969), pp. xii, xix, Jean Rychner locates the collection of *Lais*, unique to Harley 978, on fols 118–60 and dates them *c.*1160–70; others suggest *c.*1170–80. Harley 978 is among 25 manuscripts that include the *Fables*. Charles Brucker locates them on fols 40a–67b and offers a date *c.*1189–1208, in *Les Fables, édition critique*, 2nd ed. (Louvain, 1998; 1991), pp. 3, 18–20; other scholars date them *c.*1167–89. All quotations will be taken from these editions; translations are my own.

really, themselves? How do they figure the multiple relations between nature and human nature, as humans and animals move along the scale from sub-human to supernatural? How do beasts (the term more common to medieval texts) move from the natural to the social world, as their traits and actions encode and comment on our own? Situated at the intersection of so many linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions, from the classical Aesop and the biblical order of creation to the medieval bestiary, from Celtic tales and myths to animal epics in Latin and the vernacular, these animals must find their particular voices, whether literally or figuratively, in the context of fable and *lai*. Readers medieval or modern must likewise engage in the art of interpretation to understand how and why they do so.[2]

If animals are the sine qua non of most fables, their appearance in the *Lais* is more circumscribed. Assorted horses, hunting dogs, singing birds, and crowing roosters are mentioned in the collection to situate action in a setting familiar to a courtly public, but Marie gives animals a special role in six of them: *Guigemar*'s prophetic white hind, the werewolf of *Bisclavret, Yonec*'s shape-shifting hawk-knight, the eponymous nightingale of *Laüstic*, the swan messenger in *Milun*, and the miracle-making weasel of *Eliduc*. Their roles may be primary or secondary, as we shall see, but the concentration on variations entailing birds in three successive *lais*, starting at the midpoint of 12 tales (*Yonec* the 7th, *Laüstic* the 8th, and *Milun* the 9th), offers a guiding thread to follow through the *Fables* as well.

Birds appear in 27 of the 102 fables gathered together in Marie's collection.[3] They offer a representative cross-section of character types and themes, from predator to victim, from kingship and justice to honor, treason, and deception, as the strong and the weak struggle over food, power, and place. An inventory of birds in the *Fables* includes 19 species, in addition to the general category "oiseus" (nos 23, 46, 80) and the bat, who cannot decide if it wants to be counted with the birds or the beasts (no. 23): cock (nos 1, 60), kite (nos 4, 86), crane (nos 7, 80), eagle (nos 10, 12, 23, 46, 62, 74, 80), crow (or rook) (nos 12, 40), raven

[2] Cf. Arnold Clayton Henderson, "Medieval Beasts and Modern Cages: The Making of Meanings in Fables and Bestiaries," *PMLA* 97 (1982), 40–49.

[3] See Harriet Spiegel, ed. and trans., *Marie de France: Fables* (Toronto, 1987). She counts 103 fables since she considers no. 65, *The Wolf and the Beetle*, and no. 66, *The Grey Wolf*, to be two different texts, whereas other editors count them as the same fable.

(or crow)[4] (nos 13, 59, 67, 92), swallow (nos 17, 83), dove (nos 19, 61, 62, 97), hawk (nos 19, 62, 66, 79, 80), peacock (nos 31, 67), nightingale (nos 31, 66), cuckoo (no. 46), titmouse (no. 46), jackdaw (no. 56), owl (no. 79), seagull (no. 80), sparrows (no. 83), jay (no. 86), and hen (no. 102). While the aviary[5] thus constituted does not include exotic beasts like the lions and dragons found in some fables, it does give a sense of the familiar nature of most animals found in fable's barnyards, ponds, clearings, and forests. Indeed, the rural setting of the fables (whose occasional human characters are *vilains*, rustics, peasants, farmers) accords with the generally low and sometimes comic style of the narratives, where dung heaps (no. 1 "The Cock and the Gem"), horse manure (no. 74 "The Beetle," an eagle wannabe), and bird excrement (no. 46 "The Birds and their King") find unblushing expression in the processing of food in and out (no. 79 "The Hawk and the Owl"), the effects of fear (no. 80 "The Eagle, the Hawk, and the Crane"), and the vicissitudes of power (no. 86 "The Kite").

The high style and courtly diction of the *Lais* provide a strong contrast to the *Fables* that is equally reflected in their choice of animals, not only in their connections with the pastimes of aristocratic knights and ladies but most especially in their frequent links with the marvelous, miraculous, magical, and monstrous, the outer (and inner) limits of human experience as it intersects with other worlds. Unlike the horizontality of fables where humans, animals, and even inanimate objects receive the same treatment and interact interchangeably,[6] difference in the *lais* is maximized: humans dominate, and beasts are not expected to speak. Where difference seems to collapse, particularly in the metamorphoses of werewolf and bird-man, confusion threatens. Differentiation between the animal and human realms thus furnishes a point of departure most propitious for the *lais*' metaphorical links, symbolic associations, and figurative meanings.

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[4] In Spiegel, *Marie de France*, p. 268, she explains that "Marie uses *corf* and *corbel* for the Latin *corvus* (raven) of the Phaedrus tradition; and *corneille* for the Latin *cornix* (crow)." She translates both as "crow."

[5] Cf. Hugh of Fouilloy's selection of birds for his popular *Aviarium*, written between *c.*1132 and 1152 and extant in at least 96 (often illustrated) manuscripts. See Willene B. Clark, *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's Aviarium, Edition, Translation and Commentary* (New York, 1992).

[6] Norris J. Lacy's foreword to *The Fables of Marie de France*, trans. Mary Lou Martin (Birmingham, AL, 1984), p. i.

If fables seem to offer nothing of the individual, only types and general dispositions within the collectivity mapped out in the plot and reflected in the lessons of the epimythium (the morality which caps the action), the heroes and heroines of the *lais* use their narrative momentum as a means to distinguish themselves from the sameness of their human starting points, all indistinguishably handsome, beautiful, noble, and courteous, until they establish their difference in action. In the six *lais* considered here, their encounters with animals help make such a project of individuation possible.

The pedagogical imperative of fables, with their neatly distinguished narratives followed by the narrator's articulation of the lessons to be derived, favors the representation of human vices and failings, decked out in animal dress with the kind of selectivity—one trait or typical action per animal—that simplifies and amuses in order to drive the example home, which in Marie's case generally points to the realm of the social, its hierarchical order and interactions.[7] Of course, her dramatic art and clever reinventions of the genre create plenty of wiggle room for interpretation and nuance, but on the whole the picture of animal humanity that emerges tends toward the negative, filled with abuses of power, travesties of justice, failure to keep one's place, and so on. The morals correspondingly tend toward the pragmatic. In no. 46, Marie's epimythium focuses on avoiding lords whose false words may sound menacing but whose actions inspire little fear. The narrative is richer in action and detail, but no less realistic, guided by the titmouse's advice and the narrator's commentary (vv. 45–69). The best king the birds can choose is not the cuckoo, despite his impressive song, but the noble eagle who will not fail to avenge an infamous action, as the cuckoo did when the titmouse's droppings landed on its back. The eagle will continue to devour its prey, to be sure, but only in moderation (v. 64: "il n'est de preie trop engrés"), as it rules with the prowess, wisdom, and vigor kingship requires.

In the world of the *lais*, the lessons are more indirect, subject to writing's obscurities, as Marie explains in the General Prologue, requiring from her readers analysis, reflection, and interpretation. By contrast with the fables' characterizations, humanity appears more varied in its capacity for good and evil and much in between, from Guigemar's

[7] Despite the popularity of bestiaries in the 12th century, especially in Anglo-Norman England where Marie was probably located, she does not use her epimythia as a forum for Christian allegorizing and rarely refers to Christian themes.

reluctance to follow Nature's program until desire for love ignites (thanks to his encounter with a gender-bending doe-stag), to Guildelüec's spontaneous gesture to revive her husband's new love with a weasel's magic flower. The wide variety of animal roles represented within the human world of the *lais* reflects a different set of issues to explore beyond the gap separating vice and virtue, questions that cut deeper into the mysterious duality of human nature, even as they continue Marie's focus on the social embedding of her characters' lives.

Marie designed her two collections so that readers may play a game of combinatorics, that is, identifying sets of like objects and following their interplay: how many fables involve this or that animal, which ones share the same theme or moral, or how many *lais* introduce a *mal mariée*, which ones end happily, which stories favor the lovers and which the husbands or wives? Repetitions once recognized reveal the play of variation that may simply entertain, or uncover significant differences that require interpretation. The game also extends beyond the frame of Marie's collections: which beasts carry associations from bestiaries, lyric poetry, or Celtic myth, which tales or fables echo the Bible, Tristan, or Renart the fox? The remainder of this essay will play just such a game by following the animals' lead (especially the flying ones), picking and choosing as combinations strike this particular reader's ears and eyes.

Taking my cue from the Harley manuscript, I begin with Marie's *Fables*, where animals take center stage.[8] Does it matter what place a particular fable occupies? The play of combinatorics will inevitably reshuffle the order according to a given reader's attention or fancy, and in any case different manuscripts of the fables do not include all 102.[9] Nevertheless, there is an argument to be made for Marie's careful placement of the first and last fables, doubling the outside frame of prologue and epilogue with a narrative pairing that suitably frames the whole by fabling on the nature of fables.[10] A rooster on his dung heap searching for food and finding a gem instead plays off nicely against a

[8] Cf. Rupert T. Pickens, "Marie de France et la culture de la cour anglo-normande: corrélations entre les *Lais* et les *Fables*," in *"Plaist vos oïr boneançon vaillant?" Mélanges offerts à François Suard* (Lille, 1999), where he concludes that the *Fables* function in relation to the *Lais* as an "originary text" (p. 722).

[9] See the Table of Manuscript Concordances in Spiegel, *Marie de France*, pp. 279–82.

[10] See Jan M. Ziolkowski on the many different meanings associated with *fable* in "The Form and Spirit of the Beast Fable," *Bestia: Yearbook of the Beast Fable Society* 2 (1990), 4–18.

hen who will continue to scratch for food, even if her mistress provides a full daily ration.[11] This set of fables naturally attract each other, as do the male and female of the same species. Together, they crystallize two major issues that characterize Marie's use of animals throughout the collection. One concerns the constant slippage between the animal and the human, both in the fabric of the narrative and in the move from narrative to epimythium, the moral lesson drawn. The other results from the coupling of narrative and epimythium: possible tensions or dissonance between them frequently appear when the "natural" world of performing animals serves as example for the social world and human hierarchies represented in the lessons. The liveliness that Marie's art lends to her beasts, even within the fable's small dimensions, brings these problems into the foreground, as the first and last fables demonstrate.

In the opening lines of "The Cock and the Gem," the fowl climbs on a dung heap to search for food "sulum nature" (v. 3), according to his nature as a particular kind of domesticated poultry. But when he finds a gem instead of something to eat, the cock begins to speak, refusing to honor the precious stone:

> "ja n'i ert pur mei *honuree*!
> Si un riche hume vus trovast,
> bien sai ke de or vus aürnast,
> si acreüst vostre beauté
> par l'or, que mut ad grant clarté.
> Quant ma volenté n'ai de tei,
> ja nul *honur* n'averas de mei." (vv. 10–16, emphasis added)
>
> ["Never will it [the gem] be honored by me! If a rich man found you, I know well that he would adorn you with gold, so your beauty would increase through the brilliance of the gold. But when I cannot have what I desire from you, you will never have any honor from me!"]

This barnyard bird knows a surprising amount about gems, precious metals, and what people do with them. His insistence on not honoring what a rich man would certainly adorn provides Marie the link to exploit in her moral, which typically builds on analogy:

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[11] On the first and last fables, see Spiegel, "The Male Animal in the Fables of Marie de France," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees et al. (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 111–26, here 122–23; and Howard Needler, "The Animal Fable Among Other Medieval Literary Genres," *New Literary History* 22 (1991), pp. 423–39, here 432–34.

> Autresi est de meinte gent,
> [.....]
> bien et honor nïent ne prisent,
> le pis pernent, le meuz despisent." (vv. 17, 21–22)
>
> [So it is with many people…they don't esteem good and honor, they take the worst and despise the best.]

At the risk of playing the straight man, I would observe that, according to its nature, the hungry cock's disdain for the inedible gem is perfectly reasonable and fails to ground the human lesson Marie draws from it. Her analogy is founded not on a bird's understandable neglect of something he cannot eat but on the cock's elaborate speech about what has value and deserves honor. Of course, as soon as the bird begins speaking we know that we are not in the natural world but the world of fiction, where animals speak like and for the men and women whose foibles they represent. Truth in this context is to be located not in the representation of the animal "sulum nature" but in the verisimilitude of typically human behavior. We are in the space between a cock and the very human quality of being cocksure.

If speech is precisely what differentiates man and beast, according to biblical and classical traditions, then Marie has clearly not "taken the side of animals," as Francis Ponge claims to do for objects in *Le parti pris des choses*. Her characters frequently wear fur or feathers, but the fabulist's object of study is human nature, not nature per se. Nevertheless, if we pay close attention to the subtle slips of language and description that weave back and forth between animal and human nature, we discover that Marie's fables may act like Ponge's poem objects, which often move imperceptibly between the point of view of things and that of their human manipulators. Marie's *translatio* is not merely linguistic: carrying over from animal to human and human to animal, her translation leads to an exploration of how and when human nature coincides partly, though not completely, with the nature of animals. The *lais* will plumb those depths further, as we shall see.

In the Middle Ages, different modes of thought offer competing perspectives on the relationship between animal and human. In the first account of creation in Genesis 1:20–30, three categories of animals sorted by place—sea, air, and land—precede the creation of man, male and female, made in God's image and given dominion over all animals. In the second version (Gen. 2:18–23), Adam names all the animals, but God finds no mate for man among them and so creates woman from his side to be bone of his bone. Based on these verses,

Christian exegesis from St Augustine's *City of God* (1.20) to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologica* (96.1) emphasizes the break between beasts and humans. While Augustine (in accord with philosophical tradition) bases the crucial difference on animals' lack of reason, Aquinas's discussion of Genesis expands the distinction into a graduated series: "Man shares reason with the angels, sense-powers with other animals, natural vital powers with plants, and the body itself with all non-living things."[12] As Jan Ziolkowski points out, "an absolute divide between the human and the animal" is the natural result of medieval theocentrism and anthropocentrism, yet a number of factors problematize any clear boundary: the existence of monstrous races (like dog-headed men) and mixed animal-human forms (like werewolves), as well as the possibility that, even though animals do not have souls, they might in certain circumstances be treated as if they did and thus be excommunicated, converted, preached to, or put on trial for their actions.[13]

So under one light, animal and human may be neatly divided; under another, they overlap and risk confusion; and both views, in defiance of Aristotelian logic, may apply at any given moment. We humans obviously share animals' appetites for food and sex, run the same risk of domination by the strong, experience life as they do within the dimensions of physical bodies, and demonstrate sense and sensibility to some degree. Frequently, Marie's fables describe animal behavior that observation can readily confirm: hunted foxes do show cunning, and they certainly fancy eating poultry, as the *gupil* (who elsewhere takes the name Renart) readily demonstrates to the cock on his dung heap (no. 60). In the *Fables*, the trick is figuring out when the beast mask hides not an(other) animal but only our human self. When do

[12] *Summa Theologica: a concise translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Westminster, MD, 1989), pp. 146–47. On Augustine and Aquinas in relation to the treatment of animals in ancient philosophy, see Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), pp. 195–207. I would like to thank Susan Crane for these references and also recommend her article "For the Birds," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: the Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 29 (2007), 23–41.

[13] "Literary Genre and Animal Symbolism," in *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*, ed. L.A.J.R. Houven (Groningen, 1997), pp. 1–4 (quotation on p. 1). Cf. Jacques Derrida's interrogation of the animal/human divide in Western tradition, in *L'animal que donc je suis*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris, 2006), pp. 15–77.

Marie's examples seek to push us beyond the limits of our animal half into the province of our potentially reasonable other?

Consider in this respect the last fable, where the question of appetite and aptitude returns, this time in a feminine context.[14] Once again the role of nature is evoked, but here it plays a prominent role in the verbal fabric of both narrative and epimythium. Indeed, Marie's narrator and hen seem to speak with a single voice, drawing their lessons on the unchangeability of nature and custom.

> "Nenil, nenil," fet la geline,
> "si devant mei estut une mine
> *tuz jurs* pleine, pas ne lerreie
> ne pur ceo ne [me] targereie
> que jo ne quesisse *tuz jurs* plus
> sulunc ma *nature*, sulunc mun *us*."
> Par ceste essample veut mustrer
> que plusurs genz poënt trover
> aveir e ceo quë unt mester,
> mes [il] ne poënt pas changier
> lur *nature* ne lur *usage*;
> *tuz jurs* coveitent en lur curage. (vv. 15–26, emphasis added)
>
> ["No, no," says the hen, "if there was placed before me a measure *always* filled, I wouldn't stop or hesitate to search *every day* for more, according to my *nature* and my *customary use*." Through this example it can be seen that many people can find possessions and what they need, but they cannot change their *nature* or their *usage*. They will *always* covet in their hearts.][15]

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[14] Spiegel contrasts the male world of the first fable with its hierarchies and vanities with the loving female company of the last fable, where Marie's reworking differs from a Latin analogue that emphasizes the insatiability of female lust ("The Male Animal," pp. 122–3). See also Spiegel, "The Woman's Voice in the *Fables* of Marie de France," in *In Quest of Marie de France, A Twelfth-Century Poet*, ed. Chantal E. Maréchal (Lewiston, NY, 1992), pp. 45–57.

[15] Marie's generalizations in the epimythium are frequently limited: rather than speak of all men or all women, she tends to limit the claims of type (some women, some men) and thus frequently avoids or downplays the misogyny built into fable by classical authors. See Sahar Amer, "Marie de France Rewrites Genesis: The Image of Woman in Marie de France's *Fables*," *Neophilologus* 81 (1997), 489–99. In *Esope au féminin: Marie de France et la politique de l'interculturalité* (Amsterdam, 1999), Amer analyzes the flexibility with which Marie treats animals who do not always appear in her collection according to type. As Augustine demonstrates in *De doctrina christiana*, animals (like other signs) have variable meanings and may be treated *in bono* or *in malo*. See D.W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer, A Study in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 295–97; and Francesco Zambon, "*Figura bestialis:* Les fondements théoriques du bestiaire médiéval," in *Epopée Animale, Fable et Fabliau*, ed. Gabriel Bianciotto and Michel Salvat (Paris, 1984), pp. 709–19.

Both bird and narrator draw their lessons in the realm of nature, which makes a perfect match with human nature. In this last fable, story and lesson fit together so precisely that the gap insinuated in the opening fable stands out all the more starkly by contrast. What then is the proper relation between the natural world of the narrative and the social thrust of the epimythium?

Given the fables' classical heritage, Marie seems to share Aristotle's lesson that man is a social animal.[16] She prefers to emphasize the social ramifications of her tales and frequently avoids moralizing directly on the givens of nature and human nature, despite the ease with which many a fable narrative might produce such a lesson. Such is the case with no. 67, "The Crow who found the feathers of a peacock," where, envious of the peacock's beauty, the crow pulls out all its feathers to cover itself with the peacock's, only to be rejected by the "other" peacocks and killed by the crows, when the species cross-dresser tries to return to its own. Here Marie's moral on those who covet more possessions and honors, yet cannot retain even the ones they have, recalls aspects of both the first and last fables but emphasizes the behavior of groups rather than individual character.

Nevertheless, the topic of nature's limits does surface in a number of fables: within our aviary most particularly in no. 79, "The Hawk and the Owl." While the two birds are gendered masculine in French, they are clearly mothers, excellent friends laying and hatching their eggs together in a single nest. One year, however, the hawk chastises her young for soiling the nest, and they excuse themselves by putting the blame back on her: the mother hawk has given their rear ends brothers ("lur derere unt eü frere," v. 25); the owlets are the ones whose droppings have dirtied the nest.[17] The mother hawk responds by recognizing the limits of nurture in the face of nature's constraints ("nature" and "nureture" are placed at the rhyme for emphasis, vv. 31–32). Corroborating the hawk's view, Marie begins her epimythium

[16] Though much of Aristotle was not available in the 12th century, see Brucker, introduction, pp. 3–11; and Amer, *Esope au féminin*, on Marie's possible links with Jewish, Arab, and oriental fable traditions.

[17] The bad reputation of owls may recall the bestiary's link between the "night bird" and the diabolical (Pierre de Beauvais and Guillaume le Clerc both use anti-Jewish themes to explicate the *nycticorax*). Or it may echo classical associations, available to a courtly public in *Philomena*, Chrétien de Troyes's translation of Ovid's tale from the *Metamorphoses*, where owls and other bad signs announce on the night of Tereus's marriage to Procne the future disasters.

with a proverb (encapsulating common wisdom in a form even more miniaturized than the fables): a sweet apple may roll under a bitter tree but, at the first bite, it can be traced back to the tree where it grew (vv. 33–38). Real identity may be momentarily hidden by a false or misleading appearance, but nature will out in the end. Marie's concluding verses translate further from nature to human nature: a man may turn his nature but no one can completely escape it (vv. 39–40: "Sa nature peot hum guenchir, / mais nul n'en put del tut eissir").

In some contexts, that bite of apple might conjure up Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; it certainly calls attention to a troubling issue that emerges most clearly in those fables where the snug fit between nature and human nature, tale and epimythium, operates on the same model as the closing fable. If nature's constraints establish such firm boundaries for an animal's character and behavior, what happens to the pedagogical aim of the fables as a genre designed to chastise, correct, and improve the humans reading them? Is change really possible in the kind of world the fables construct and, if not, has the fable paradoxically undone its own *raison d'être*? We might postulate answers to those questions from several different angles within the collection.

Consider first the question of "species trouble," to paraphrase Judith Butler,[18] an issue already hinted at in the examples of the crow who would be a peacock (no. 67), the beetle, neither worm nor bird (v. 12), who wants to fly like an eagle but ends up starving to death when he ventures too far from the horse manure he feeds on (no. 74), and the bat who wants above all to take the side of the winners in the battle between the lion king of the four-footed beasts and the eagle king of the birds (no. 23). The bat's mix of physical traits allows her to join the mice, but when she sees how numerous the birds are, she deserts to join the winged creatures and then finds herself rejected by both sides, cursed, and deprived of her plumage (hence her name, *la chauve-souris*, bald mouse).

Although Marie's moral in each of these fables evokes the social dimension of human pretensions and betrayals, the stories themselves leave a strong impression that underlines the problematic nature of border crossings, whether in the difficulties experienced by those whose identity is not easily defined within a single category, or in the troubles encountered when one creature tries to be something or someone

[18] *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

other than (its) nature intended. The lesson for human nature remains unexplicated, but the narrative implies that the business of defining exactly where nature places us is not always so obvious. Adam and Eve's bite of the apple opens the choice between good and evil for all humanity and leaves us with the necessity to make choices, exercise reason, the very quality that is supposed to distinguish us from (the rest of) the animals, even if only within the constraints of nature's boundaries, wherever they may be located.

The question of location is precisely the issue raised in another fable that speaks to the possibility or impossibility of change. In no. 80, "The Eagle, the Hawk, and the Crane," an angry eagle sends all the birds to capture a hawk. But when their target hides in the hollow of an oak, they can only besiege the place and wait for the long-beaked crane to probe and pierce his niche. The martial character of the confrontation, built into Marie's choice of words, evokes the sort of quarrel that might break out between a king and one of his powerful barons. But when the crane shoots her beak forward like a lance ("La grüe lance bek avant," v. 13), the hawk suddenly seizes her head, and the register of language falls: the crane has a mishap from the rear ("li mesavient par derere," v. 17), soiling all the animals below. Humiliated, the crane decides to leave the place where her shame ("hunte," v. 27) will be a constant source of reproach, but when crossing the sea, she recounts her "vileinie" (v. 34) to a seagull who counsels her to return home since the "instrument that shamed her" (v. 37) remains in her possession. Marie's moral transposes "cest essample" (v. 45) into human terms by comparing the crane to evil-hearted people who commit wrongs in their own country and then abandon it only to do the same or worse elsewhere. She passes from description to prescription in the last two verses: "Lur mauveis quor deivent changer, / ne mie lur mauveis quor lesser" (vv. 51–52: they should change their bad heart and not leave their ill-intentioned heart to abandon).[19]

The play here between place and displacement, position and disposition, cuts to the heart indeed, and not only to the hearts of the creatures described in the narrative and epimythium (which do not quite coincide: the crane seems less evil-intentioned than victim of

[19] My translation follows Brucker's reading of Harley 978. The repetition of *quor*, which appears in only one other manuscript (p. 309, n. 7), is elsewhere replaced by *païs*: "and not abandon their country").

an unfortunate accident, as suggested by the verb *mesavenir*). The possible links or disconnects between where we are and what or who we are remain crucial in evaluating our capacity to change and the fables' ability to help us do so. The heart is a powerful site in medieval usage, entailing not only love, as moderns expect, but memory, understanding, and courage. We learn with our hearts, and our hearts once formed may lead us well or ill, wherever we find ourselves.[20]

Changing place does not change disposition: this is the conservative message that the *Fables* repeatedly convey (cf. no. 22, "The Hares and the Frogs"). If nature prepares each of us a place that matches who or what we are (creatures of land, sea, or air), its hierarchies "naturalize" society's own. As the wall instructs the vole (no. 73, vv. 75–94), he should not despise his nature and go seeking a wife in high places instead of right next to him with his relative, the little mouse (cf. no. 15, "The Donkey who wants to play with its master"). But what about the movement allowed in the moral on how we may turn from our nature (no. 79)?

Reason says that we humans should be capable of exercising some control over our hearts to learn, improve, and change. Our disposition may be a given, but it is not given as a license. We are caught in the bind of placement, our place in nature, as well as the placement and dispositions of human nature. But sometimes we may just be in the wrong place, as happened to the poor crane or the dirty owlets. When do position and disposition coincide, when do they reasonably part company? Consider no. 66, "The Hawk and the Nightingale," a very short fable that brings together two animals featured in Marie's *Lais*. Here a hawk sits on the same tree where the nightingale has her nest and nurtures her young. While the hawk and owl mothers of no. 79, both hunters, have no trouble forming a friendship, the disproportion between predator and songbird, weak and strong, makes for uneasy proximity. When the hawk commands the nightingale to sing (that is, perform in her most characteristic lyric role), the mother bird cannot do so as long as the hawk stays so close. Let the hawk move to another

[20] As Gornemant de Goort counsels Perceval in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, one can learn anything, when heart, effort, and practice (*us*, v. 1415) work together. Chrétien de Troyes, *Romans*, La Pochothèque (Paris, 1994), vv. 1411–40. Gornemant's *us* is the same word used by the hen for "customary practice" and associated with the epimythium's *usage* (nos 102, 20, 25).

tree and she will sing more beautifully, "as all the birds know" (v. 12). As the narrator extrapolates: where we fear, we cannot speak well.

In this fable, changing places does make a difference, though no change in disposition seems to be in play (cf. no. 62, where a hawk threatens doves momentarily protected by the presence of the eagle king). Is it because no avoidance of disposition is at stake here that displacement matters? Yet the nightingale's request that the hawk move away, "si vus pleiseit" (v. 9: "if it pleased you"), invites him to curb at least momentarily his ill-intentioned heart.[21] Even in the wolf-eat-lamb world of the fables,[22] being in the wrong place at the wrong time is a danger that occasionally may be avoided, as the lamb learns too late (no. 2, "The Wolf and the Lamb"), but the pregnant sow puts to her advantage (no. 21, "The Wolf and the Sow"). Place and disposition, whether in nature's determinations or society's hierarchies, are necessarily linked but not always locked together with no room for turning. The trick is to determine, in any given instance, how much or how far we can curb our "natural" tendencies.

The issue of placement is no less vital in the *Fables*' operation as a collection. As the reader moves through it, following the play of connections through the displacements of shifting combinations, chains of interconnected fables thus revealed (and continually reordered) yield more and more pleasure but also more information, more possibilities for learning lessons, whether directly in Marie's epimythia or implicitly inscribed in the dramatic action of her lively narratives. This is equally true of the *Lais*, though without direct lessons in all but the second.[23] Position and disposition function formally in the interplay among the 12 *lais*, thematically within the tales themselves and intertextually with the *Fables*, included in close proximity in Harley 978, where we can once again follow the trail of animals—especially the

[21] Do wild hawks ever listen to nightingales sing or voluntarily abandon their prey? Perhaps the place to find a precedent for Marie's hawk is the bestiary rather than the natural world. See Hugh of Fouilloy's opening chapters on doves and hawks (tame and wild), especially the initial illustration, which places dove and hawk together on a single perch (Clark, *The Medieval Book of Birds*, Figs 1a–1f). While the peaceful bird represents the prior Hugh, the other bird represents his addressee, Rainier, a former knight and now a "Lay-brother known as the Kindhearted" (p. 121), a hawk who has indeed learned to tame its predatory instincts.

[22] Needler, "The Animal Fable," pp. 437–38, analyzes the fable's double perspective: idealizing morality versus dog-eat-dog world.

[23] See Pickens, "Marie de France," pp. 714–20, on *Equitan*'s intermediary status between fable and *lai*.

flight of birds—to see what more they reveal about nature and human nature in the entanglements of Breton tales.

The question of proximity leads directly to the constellation of three *lais* that feature birds, most particularly to the pivotal "*Laüstic*," which furnishes a transition between the marvelous treatment of animal-human metamorphosis in *Yonec* and the more naturalistic treatment of the swan messenger in *Milun*. The nightingale is merely a bird, but it carries a heavy burden of figurative associations and literary traditions. In "The Nightingale" (Marie is at pains to translate *Laüstic* into French and English for her Anglo-Norman public), the lovers are able to initiate and maintain their love for a long time because their houses, placed side by side like those of Pyramus and Thisbe, allow married lady and single knight to speak across the space of their facing windows. As in many other *lais*, metonymy and metaphor, each with a distinctive spatial configuration, come together in the figure of the nightingale to produce key actions in the plot as well as an emblematic substitute for the lovers.[24] Ovidian allusions with unpromising overtones continue to mark the *lai*'s narrative, as the eponymous bird of the title undergoes a series of changes that play off against Ovid's tale of *Philomela*, whose victims and perpetrators of monstrous deeds for and against love are all transformed into birds: Tereus the hoopoe, Procne the swallow, and Philomela the nightingale. In Marie's story, none of the human participants changes form, but the unfortunate nightingale—who goes from singing bird to captured bird, from dead bird to enshrined bird—catches in its bodily transformations the lovers' own changing reflections. As such, it provides a mirror for the different refractions of animal and human found in *Yonec* and *Milun*.

In *Laüstic*, we may wonder whether killing the bird ends or eternalizes the lovers, whether it functions as a sign of fidelity transcending bodily distance or as a substitute that merely embalms but no longer sustains their love. In other words, how do we read the emblem and the ending? If propinquity initially solves the problem of the lovers' meeting, does its unhappy side effect, setting them close but always at a distance, foreshadow triumph or failure? Love based on nearness

[24] See my discussion of metaphor and metonymy in "*Le Fresne*'s Model for Twinning in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *Modern Language Notes* 121 (2006), 946–60; and Jean-Michel Caluwé, "Du chant du rossignol au *Laöstic* de Marie de France: sources et fictions dans le lai," in *Chant et enchantement au Moyen Age* (Toulouse, 1997), pp. 182–87.

("ele l'ama sur tute rien, /…/ Tant pur ceo qu'il iert pres de li," vv. 26–28) may not be sufficiently strong to face the test of continual separation, once the nightingale's death prevents their mutual gaze from one window to the other. In probing the semiotic potential of Marie's ending, we need to follow more closely how different combinations of the nightingale's figurative associations align position and disposition in the *lai*.

The evocation of springtime, which initiates many troubadour and trouvère poems, marks the passage here from initial situation to dramatic confrontation. When nature's renewal invites the lovers to share in the joys of flower and bird song, the wife's repeated absences from bed provoke an angry query from her husband. To justify her nightly vigils at the window, she describes with exuberance the joy of listening to the nightingale who sings in the orchard outside the window (vv. 83–90). Metonymic displacement to a bird so metaphorically identified with love and the lover's song is such a thin veil that the jealous husband has no difficulty deciphering the figurative from the literal level. His revenge, however, is phrased in his willingness to take the lady at her word. With trap, net, or snare ("engin, reis u laçun," v. 96), he will have the innocent nightingale caught ("Le laüstic enginnera," v. 94), instead of the guilty lover across the way. The bird will shift from bystander to doomed player in the tale, its fate reflected in the fable of the swallow who tried to prevent the sowing of linseed, from whose flax bird snares are made (no. 17). Ovid, too, prepares us for Marie's intertextual linking of nightingale and swallow: while Procne flies away, neither the nightingale nor the lady will escape the husband's trap in *Laüstic*.

Treatises on memory frequently use birds kept in cages to signify the action of storing memories, but the lady's husband has no intention of memorializing love.[25] He shows his wife the trapped nightingale only to break its neck and toss it against her breast right above her heart. Readers may recognize a repeat of Philomela's revenge,

[25] Logan E. Whalen, *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory* (Washington, DC, 2008), p. 87, makes the connection between birds in these *lais* and medieval memory systems and points to Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1992). In Fig. 27, she shows a manuscript page from a book of hours, where a border of birds caged and penned clearly represents the notion that "[b]irds, like memories, need to be hunted down…or stored up in a cage or coop" (p. 238). Carruthers also analyzes the use of summary pictures, like the dove and hawk illustration mentioned above (*Book of Memory*, pp. 239–42).

when she throws Ithys's bloody head against his father's chest, once Tereus has consumed the rest of his son at the horrid feast Procne prepared to avenge her sister's rape.[26] We may recognize as well the lady's weakness and vulnerability, her subjection to the husband's authority and aggressive power, figured in the little bird's fragility ("le cors petit," v. 121). He controls her body, sexuality, and pleasure, even if he cannot control her heart. The lady herself, like the nightingale, could speak only of love, could not not speak of love, however much she intended to hide it. She too has set a trap, but in words that catch herself. Once any diversion to the nightingale has been eliminated by her husband's villainous actions, she will have to act as if the literal meaning of her speech was all she meant: silenced like the nightingale, robbed of any figurative flight of meaning, the lady no longer has any reason to gaze from her window.

But if the dead bird signifies the end of nightly visits with her lover, she will nevertheless send the knight one last message to correct the unintended signifier her absence risks expressing. The bird's dead body wrapped in a gold cloth—"all written" ("tut escrit," v. 136), like Philomela's tapestry, with the adventure—will signal not the lady's sudden absence of love but the impossibility of sharing it. The voiceless bird will no longer sing, but its corpse, so beautifully adorned, tells a story. The knight enshrines the dead bird in a small vessel forged of gold with precious stones (no rooster he!). With lid sealed, the "chasse" (v. 155), the small casket or coffer "that he always has carried with him" (v. 156), resembles a reliquary for saintly remains. Can the nightingale's body activate a saint's vivifying powers to keep love alive?

The lady and the knight will no longer share the same location; the end of propinquity signals the end of one kind of contiguity and sets in motion a new combination of metonymy and metaphor. While the live bird was a too transparent metaphor for the lover and their joy, the dead bird now serves as substitute by displacement for the ever-absent lady. A new couple has formed—or, rather, two new couples. First, the bejeweled casket made with one part contributed by the lady, inside another contributed by the man: the enclosure suggests a kind of union the lovers themselves could never achieve. Second, knight

[26] The husband's action may also echo stories of the eaten heart familiar in troubadour lyric and romance. See Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 3.

and emblem form a couple, as the artful casket remains always near by, contiguous to his person. Does it signify both lovers or just the lady, now transformed into a faraway love? Or have the lovers ceased to be themselves as lovers, just as the nightingale who died in their place ceased to be a living embodiment of joy? Is it love or just the memory of love that can be preserved? The ambiguities of Marie's ending do not resolve the questions, and different readers will no doubt interpret according to their own sense of optimism or pessimism about the capacity of love to survive distance and separation. The dead bird's body disappears into its golden shrine, while the lovers' story escapes to circulate elsewhere in other places, until it reaches Marie, who turns it into her own *objet d'art*. Fascinated by her verbal fashioning, we may be ensnared more by her art than by the lovers themselves: lady and knight remain nameless, while their story has taken on the name and signature of the nightingale whose innocent demise for the sake of love has transformed it from a creature of nature, caught in the cycle of life and death, to a time resistant symbol caught by the esoteric yet mnemonic power of human writing.

Birdcatchers are again on the program when we turn for a moment from *Laüstic* to *Milun*, as the next tale introduces a swan who for 20 years flies faithfully back and forth between two lovers. Its limited but important role in the plot begins when Milun sends a messenger to present a pet swan to his lady, now married to another man. The messenger claims to be a birdcatcher ("Jeo sui uns hum de tel mester, / D'oiseus prendre me sai aidier," vv. 182–83), trying to secure the protection needed to operate in the country. Once the gift has been accepted and a hidden letter found, the narrative will concentrate on the details of how to alternately feed and starve the swan so that it will act like a carrier pigeon flying between master and mistress (thus guarding the secret of their love from prying eyes and ears).[27] Such details of animal training were well known to Marie's aristocratic readers who hunted with trained birds and dogs (as *Guigemar* and *Bisclavret* attest). Though swans, like nightingales, offer some potential for symbolic resonance, traditional symbolism associated, for example, with the swan's dying song in bestiaries and lyric, is here unexploited,[28]

[27] Cf. the little dog in *La Chastelaine de Vergy*, who signals the lovers' rendezvous and keeps their secret secure until the knight reveals it to his lord.

[28] For other possible associations with the swan (hermaphroditic or phallic form, doubles, etc.), see Rupert T. Pickens, "The Poetics of Androgyny in the *Lais* of Marie

which leads June Hall McCash to suggest that in *Milun*, Marie demonstrates her awareness of a new, more scientific interest in the direct observation of nature associated with the 12th-century renaissance and the school of Chartres.[29]

Certainly, in the six *lais* where beasts play a significant role, Marie deploys a striking variety of uses for her animal characters and many different strategies for representing their relationship to humans. Indeed, the prologue to *Milun* insists on the diversity of her stories, as well as the diversity of approaches required to please her public. Among the 12 *lais* of the collection, there are many recurrent patterns, yet every one of the tales is distinct within the set of 12, especially for readers who take the time to reflect on and through the regular interplay of recurring elements. The trio of birds that link the 6th, 7th, and 8th tales establishes an intense focus on successive avian incarnations, as well as the interactions among them. But as we pivot back through the figure of the nightingale to explore the animal transformations in *Yonec*, the hawk-knight also points us back to the 4th lay's werewolf, Bisclavret.[30]

Two tales of shape-shifting, but this is a reprise with a difference. By including both *Yonec* and *Bisclavret* in her collection, Marie probes more deeply the conjunction between human and beast to explore another facet of human doubleness: created with the animals, we are nevertheless linked to the divine. The choice of animal other plays an important role here. In the world of the *Fables*, hawk and wolf are more or less equivalent predators.[31] In the *Lais*, one is feared and hunted, the other potentially admired by equally predatory aristocrats,

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de France: *Yonec, Milun*, and the General Prologue," in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture, Selected Papers from the Seventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA, 27 July–1 August 1992*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 211–19; Marie-Noëlle Toury, "Le bestiaire de Marie de France dans les *Lais*," *Revue de littérature française et comparée* 5 (1995), 15–18, here 16.

[29] "The Swan and the Nightingale: Natural Unity in a Hostile World in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *French Studies* 49 (1995), 385–96. Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf," in *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), pp. 77–111.

[30] Guigemar's antlered white hind, a beast with magical powers able to foretell the hero's future, may also allude to tales of shape-shifting between stag or doe and fairy. In "A Welsh Motif in Marie's 'Guigemar,'" *Studies in Philology* 39 (1942), 12, Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr., cites a number of examples from Stith Thompson's *Motif-index of folk-literature*.

[31] Pickens, "Marie de France," p. 721: "L'autour est l'équivalent aviaire du loup."

who can identify such a noble bird with their own courtly pastimes (cf. how Lanval's lady appears at his trial: followed by a greyhound and carrying a sparrowhawk on her wrist). In "Human Animals in Medieval Fables," Joyce E. Salisbury notes the greater role given to noble animals in medieval fable, used as a tool in the service of the hierarchical status quo that reflects the interests of both clerical and courtly publics.[32] But she also points out the contrast between animals on the top of the food chain, for example lions and eagles, generally shown sympathetically (though they require lessons on just rule), and wolves who "become a metaphor for nobility gone astray" (p. 53). When these same animals appear in the *lais*, they inevitably trail behind them a variety of associations from clerical and popular, Latin and vernacular traditions.[33]

The knight who regularly disappears from human society to turn into a wolf three days a week risks sinking into the most repugnant and beast-like characteristics we possess as part of our dual nature, crystallized at its most frightening in the image of the werewolf, the "beste sauvage" (v. 9) described at the beginning of Marie's *lai* who devours people and does great harm (v. 11). We humans frequently project on to animals precisely those parts of ourselves that we find most unacceptable: by labeling such conduct as bestial (with all the charge of emotion such a term carries), we seek to eliminate from our own image monstrous acts that frequently lie outside the ken of real beasts.[34] The paradox here is that Marie's werewolf, whose metamorphosis is presented as real and recurrent, turns out to be a man as noble in nature as his social status implies he should be. He is fully capable of controlling, if not the metamorphosis itself, at least the effects of his animal self. Even in wolf form, whether hunted by dogs or accepted at the king's court as dog-like pet, this werewolf exercises reason. So the courtiers themselves believe, even when the wolf acts precisely like a beast and bites off his wife's nose.

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[32] In *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York, 1996), pp. 49–65.

[33] On the multiple strands woven together in the image of the hawk, see McCash, "The Hawk-Lover in Marie de France's *Yonec*," *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1991), 67–75.

[34] Mary Midgley, "Beasts, Brutes and Monsters," in *What is an Animal?* ed. Tim Ingold (London, 1988), 35–46.

The plot's unfolding reverses our expectations and reveals that the real beast here, humanly speaking, is the supposedly loving wife who betrays her husband in a monstrous act of treason that upsets the most basic principles of conjugal, as well as feudal, loyalty, trust, and fidelity. She gives birth accordingly to a line of potentially noseless females who carry the same bestial inclination in their nature. Of course, only some of those descendants ("Plusurs des femmes del lignage," v. 312) are born without noses, a subtle reminder that the continuing duality of human nature still leaves open the choice of good and evil handed down by Adam and Eve to both men who can turn into wolves and women who might cut off their noses (however indirectly) to spite their faces.[35]

When Bisclavret's ex-wife confesses under torture the truth of the wolf's identity and turns over the clothes that permit his return to human form, the beast refuses to take any notice of them. Too ashamed to change in front of others his "semblance de beste" (v. 286), his beastly appearance or his form as beast, he needs privacy to become a man, dressed once again in the sign of human identity. The key word here, *semblance*, also takes a turn in describing the wife's offspring, recognizable "in appearance and face" ("del semblant e del visage," v. 311). "Semblance" suggests that exterior form may either hide or reveal one's true self. It is surface and yet potentially something deeper than mere façade. When the same word *semblance* and its many variations repeatedly resurface in *Yonec*, the verbal network provides a key to what brings together two tales of metamorphosis (two explorations of semblance and resemblance, physical form, and ontological identity), while at the same time introducing between them a significant shift in the examination of human nature's multiple dimensions.[36]

These two forms of animal-human metamorphosis point first to the question of nomenclature, a powerful indicator of their difference. Just as Adam had names for all the animals, languages have a word for werewolf—and Marie's prologue supplies translations into Breton and Norman French, although she subsequently uses only the Breton form

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[35] See Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts in *Bisclavret,*" *Romanic Review* 81 (1991), 251–69.

[36] In *Yonec*, variations on *semblance, semblant*, and *sembler* are scattered from the wife's lament through the second prophecy of Muldumarec: vv. 79, 110, 161, 181, 227, 247, 258, 272, and 322.

as both common and proper names, slipping back and forth between a very human Bisclavret and his werewolf alter ego. Muldumarec is a knight who repeatedly changes into a bird, but there is no term in common language for his metamorphosis. We cannot fit it into a long tradition of worrying about the interface between our animal and human selves. Does this mean that the human-hawk transformations do not touch man's essential nature, as do stories of werewolves? We need to consider more data before answering, especially in light of Muldumarec's ability to assume his lady's *semblance* (v. 161).

Indeed, close examination of Marie's *lai* suggests that metamorphosis is as important for the lady as it is for her lover, though in her case it plays out more figuratively than literally. It might even be argued that the *lai* is more interested in the series of changes triggered in the *mal mariée* than in Muldumarec's actual metamorphoses. As the title indicates, the knight is not the ultimate focus of the adventure: *Yonec* culminates in the son produced by the hawk-knight's union with the lady, the final transformation of their mutual love—hence the importance of the couple and the lady's changing forms from wife to beloved to mother. Imprisoned for seven years by her jealous old spouse, the still childless lady prefers a quick death to continued life with a husband who must have been baptized in Hell. But when spring returns, she remembers the old stories people tell of knights who find noble and beautiful damsels, and ladies who find handsome, courtly, and valiant lovers. Her wish for such an adventure underlines the extent to which here, as in *Guigemar*, nature is out of kilter: in the first *lai* because of Guigemar's lack of interest in love, here because of the mismatch between young and old, noble and ignoble. An animal reminder logically plays a crucial role when nature requires humans to properly realign sexuality and the sexes.

The lady's prayer to God completed, she sees the shadow of a great bird at her narrow window, which she follows with her gaze. "Ostur sembla" (v. 110): it seemed to be a hawk and, as she looked intently, "it became a handsome and noble knight" (v. 115). This is indeed the kind of man she desires, but the unusual arrival occasions some understandable fear. Before following the resolution of her qualms, we need to reflect briefly on the plot necessity of giving Muldumarec the power of flight. A lady imprisoned in a tower obviously presents a challenge for her would-be lover. Is his bird transformation a mere trick of the plot to bring them together or something more significant? Two Celtic stories that probably furnished source material for Marie's *lai* involve

supernatural lovers in the form of a bird-man; in neither is the type of bird specified.[37] So we may reasonably interrogate Marie's decision to make her knight metamorphose into a hawk. What kind of meanings would such a *semblance* invite?

Inasmuch as Muldumarec is the king of his country, Marie might have chosen the eagle by analogy. In fables, the eagle is the king and noblest of birds (e.g. no. 46), the hawk merely his seneschal (no. 62). By contrast, when the hawk is chosen by the doves as their king, based on his ability to defend them well and do the least amount of harm (no. 19, "The King of the Doves," vv. 3–4), he shows himself to be an unreliable ruler who devours his subjects and carries out openly what he previously did only with deception. While Marie's moral lesson falls on people who choose bad lords, the hawk's conduct recalls his equally negative role in nos 62 and 66. Of course, the same animal may signify in many different ways, positively or negatively. Since hawks are not only wild creatures but also domesticated servants of men—and women—they have the advantage of being a regular part of the aristocratic world in which Marie's characters live, a hunting bird identified with its pleasures, a courtly accoutrement connoting nobility. Significantly, when the lady sees the hawk appear at her window, the narrator mentions the jesses tied to its feet: they are the sign of a tamed bird who has subordinated its predatory instincts to his mistress's command.[38] Moreover, this particular kind of hawk, *ostur*, is the goshawk, the largest of the species and in this case a fully grown bird of five or six moltings (v. 111), plainly in its youthful prime and worthy of love. This bird's "semblance" already figures the perfect match of knight and lady.

The marvelous element in Breton tales connects the knight's metamorphosis to magic and fairy power. Indeed, when the lady follows Muldumarec to his domain, Marie's narrative includes many traits that point to the Other World of Celtic myth (the underground passage through the hill, the city of silver, etc.), even though later in the tale, when she returns there with husband and son, the same kingdom will be seamlessly connected with the geography of their journey from home to court. As in *Lanval* and many anonymous *lais*, we can

[37] R.N. Illingworth, "Celtic Tradition and the *Lai* of *Yonec*," *Etudes celtiques* 9 (1961), 510–20.

[38] Muldumarec's predatory (and aristocratic) instincts will resurface in the son's assignment of future vengeance.

see here the recurring theme of supernatural and mortal unions, the medieval fascination with the mystery of how human nature interacts physically and psychologically with something beyond the natural. In *Yonec*, these Celtic elements are skillfully woven into the Christian context within which her characters function: Muldumarec recites the *credo* and takes communion to allay the lady's fears. When he predicts the birth of their child, the scene echoes the Annunciation to the Virgin.[39]

But at first glance, the hawk-knight's metamorphosis suggests the troubling appearance of diabolical powers. In the *City of God* (18.18), St Augustine warned that animal-human metamorphosis is simply an illusion, the devil's work.[40] While his transformation entails secrets which remain obscure ("li segrei vus sunt oscur," v. 123), Muldumarec insists that the goshawk is a noble bird (v. 122) whose love merits the lady's own, without endangering her soul. The choice of animal here has ramifications not only for the social status of Muldumarec; it introduces further symbolic meanings associated with birds and triggered explicitly by the narrative's Christian elements. Birds are traditionally identified with spiritual things, thoughts and memories that must be captured before they fly away, the flight of the human soul toward the divine.[41] Muldumarec's links with the supernatural, recontextualized in Marie's tale within a Christian perspective, point toward the duality of human beings created in God's image: we are a mix of animal and divine elements not easily managed or understood.

If the traditional werewolf represents a kind of monstrous and threatening hybridity, whose contamination Bisclavret's wife greatly fears (only to fall into bestial conduct herself), once proven a good Christian by accepting the body of Christ, "le cors Damedeu" (v. 162) administered in communion, the bird-man in *Yonec* escapes the negative views associated with bird-women, sirens, or harpies who appear in the medieval bestiary to charm and kill their male victims.[42] Perhaps paradoxically, the Christian connection serves to highlight the role of

[39] The specific language used to describe his arrival at the window, seen first as a shadow, "umbre" is one of the figures (which goes back to Luke 1:35) used in medieval explanations of how the Virgin conceives with the Holy Spirit.

[40] See Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Métamorphose et bestiaire fantastique au moyen âge* (Paris, 1985), pp. 11–12.

[41] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 246–47.

[42] See Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1962), pp. 166–71.

the body within a spiritual context. The mystery of transubstantiation—the wine and bread transformed into the blood and body of Christ (vv. 184–88)—plays off against Muldumarec's change of *semblance* into that of the lady, in order to receive the "*corpus domini*" (v. 186).[43] Consider the puzzle of how their two bodies, now side by side in the lady's bed (vv. 166–68), fuse into one when the lady—or is it Muldumarec in her *semblance*?—pretends to faint ("Semblant fist," v. 181), so that the old woman who guards her will bring in the priest, despite her husband's absence. Where are the precise limits between the lady and the bird-man, between body and spirit, between semblance and resemblance? In pagan mythologies, metamorphosis takes place precisely because the boundaries between gods, animals, humans, and even plants are imprecise and permeable, their links inscribed in the double nature of being.[44] How does this resonate in *Yonec*'s hybrid mix of Christian and Breton threads?

Humans have physical bodies in common with the animals but spirit, soul, and reason in common with angels, those other flying creatures. The lady's *semblance* includes her physical appearance but also her nature as a human being who takes shape in a body that reflects her state of mind.[45] Faded after seven years of marriage, she will now regain her youthful beauty as fulfillment of her desire finds expression in the return of her physical form to its natural loveliness. The joy of seeing her hawk-lover whenever she wants to effects a complete change in her "semblanz" (v. 227), which her jealous husband readily observes. Muldumarec warned the lady to observe "mesure" (v. 201), reasonable limits, in order to avoid betrayal by the old lady, who like a hunter after her prey will track and spy on them ("nus gaitera," v. 204). In that admonition, the lover spoke not only like the troubadour who associates *fin'amor* with *mezura* but also like a preacher who warns the Christian sinner that reason must control the body's urging, the animal side of human nature.

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[43] The doctrine of real, not figurative, change between body and bread was a subject of debate among theologians in the 12th century. See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA, 1987), on the Eucharist as a form of cannibalism (pp. 1, 30, 275, 412, n. 77).

[44] Harf-Lancner, *Métamorphose*, pp. 4–5.

[45] In *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York, 1992), Elisabeth Bronfen discusses the psychoanalytic notion of the symptom as both denial and acknowledgment, the body's expression of what we cannot know (e.g. pp. x–xi).

But how much lies within the mind's control when love makes the body flower, just as the month of April makes birds sing (vv. 51–52)? Is the lady guilty of excessive desire? Is she, like the lady in *Laüstic*, too quick to speak her love, even if she does so through body language rather than speech? There, an innocent nightingale dies; here, the lover himself pays the price of her joy. He predicted that her appearance would be lethal for them: "Vostre semblanz nus ocireit" (v. 322). But even knowing that her coming into bloom leads to his own death, Muldumarec comforts the lady (vv. 325, 400). His sympathy, shared by the narrator, suggests that the body naturally seeks and expresses, voluntarily and involuntarily, the fruits of love, just as the hawk-lover responded to his beloved's call and could only come if she called. The goodness of creation in the biblical account, sustained for Christian theology by Augustine's rejection of Manichaeism, includes the body as well as the spirit. It finds expression in the command that humans multiply. As nature intends then (and despite the misalliance with her old husband), the lady's body will be transformed by pregnancy; she will become a mother by giving birth to their son, her comfort after the lover's death (v. 329).

Muldumarec's sacrifice for love (whose Christian overtones are inescapable in the tapestry of Marie's text) nevertheless sounds a somber note. The body is inevitably linked to suffering as well as joy, death as well as life. Ironically, the bird of prey will himself become the object of the bird hunter's trap, mortally wounded by the sharp iron barbs the husband has installed in his wife's window frame. Compelled to follow the bird-man whose wound has forced him to return to his marvelous castle, the lady leaps (Tristan-like) out of her tower, guided by the traces of Muldumarec's blood, which flows abundantly through Marie's text.[46] She passes into a city where not a single man or woman appears, enters the castle, and sees two other knights sleeping in chambers[47] before she finds her dying lover and receives his last prophecy and gifts: the tunic, ring, and sword guarantee her safe return and eventual revenge for her lover's death. At the abbey where they happen upon the king's tomb, the lady tells her son their story,

[46] vv. 316, 334, 342, 348, 357, 359, 373, 378.

[47] In "Bisclavret et Muldumarec: La part de l'ombre dans les *Lais*," in *Amour et merveille: Les* Lais *de Marie de France, Etudes recueillies par Jean Dufournet* (Paris, 1995), Jeanne-Marie Boivin explores the mythical overtones of sleep, dream, and awakening (pp. 147–68).

and Yonec kills his false father with the hawk-knight's own weapon. His mother, who fainted repeatedly during and after her last moments with Muldumarec (vv. 323, 396, 449–51), now faints gently into death (vv. 540–41), and the reunited lovers are buried together in the same sarcophagus. When the son takes his father's place as the long-awaited king, the strength of their love endures triumphantly into the next generation, as their final reunion mirrors by contrast the nightingale's reliquary in *Laüstic*.

Throughout *Yonec*'s closing events, the body plays an insistent role, passes through different states—fleeing and following, waking and sleeping, conscious and unconscious, dead and alive, in bed and in the grave—as if the narrative searches agonizingly through the lady's experience, as well as the knight's, to find out what happens to the body when the spirit flies away, when the body goes in pursuit of the winged flight of memory, the animated idea of love. Is the *semblance* merely a physical form or does it retain some stronger link to the self? What does the Christian body become when the soul departs? The questions raised by Marie's tale echo a shift in emphasis found in the bestiary tradition's commentary on the phoenix, the bird who renews its own life in the fire of its death and rebirth. In the *Aberdeen Bestiary*, the mystical explanations found in *Physiologus*, based on Christ's dual nature and limited to his resurrection, take a turn toward moral instruction in the 12th-century gloss, which applies the example of the phoenix to mankind's bodily resurrection after death separates body and soul, thus "assuag[ing] fears concerning the fate of the human body after its deposit in the grave."[48]

Marie's *lai* is no bestiary gloss, but her exploration of the hawk-knight's metamorphosis and his lady's corresponding transformations, triggered by the joy of shared love and experienced in a very physical form, may similarly reflect the concerns of a public anxious about finding and transcending the limits of the self, the duality of human kind, and the inevitability of death. Respect for nature and human nature in Marie's courtly and Christian context requires an exploration of the entire spectrum of our identity as body, spirit, soul, animal, and human created in the image of God.

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[48] According to Debra Hassig, this phoenix "would have been perceived by medieval readers as support for the dogma of the resurrection of the flesh, in line with contemporary theological opinion." Cited by Lisa Verner in *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2005), p. 104.

I conclude here with a brief return to the issue of truth claims, since those associated with the *lais* seem to differ radically from those of the *Fables* and thus cast a different light on the animal characters who perform in the narratives. In the prologue to *Guigemar*, Marie tells us that she is going to recount stories that she knows to be true (v. 19), about which the Bretons have composed *lais*. The motif is repeated in the epilogue of *Bisclavret* (vv. 315–16), and similarly, in the prologue to *Eliduc*, Marie promises to tell us the truth of an ancient Breton tale:

> D'un mult ancïen lai bretun
> Le cunte e tute la reisun
> Vus dirai si cum jeo entent
> La verité mun escïent. (vv. 1–4)[49]

The way modern editors choose to punctuate this introduction produces several different ways of understanding the passage and thus uncovers its syntactical ambiguity. Does the phrase "as I understand it" ("si cum jeo entent") apply to the three possible objects for "vus dirai": I shall tell you, as I understand it, the story, explanation, and truth? In this case, truth belongs (as in the previous examples) to the adventure itself. Or should we rather attach only "verité" to the verb "entent" and anticipate that Marie's sense of truth here is hers, the product of her understanding or intent?

As with the surplus of meaning caught in the grammatical ambiguities of the General Prologue (vv. 9–22), truth appears to oscillate between the source and the receiver/transmitter. The slippage is reminiscent of the subtle glide back and forth between animal and human traits represented in the fables. In either case, we are simultaneously invited to depend on what Marie gives us to be the truth and forced to evaluate the nature or credibility of her claim. Indeed, the threshold of credibility becomes crucial when animals begin to speak in the *Lais*, or change into humans, since otherwise beasts appear in this context only to be themselves, instruments of human domination as prescribed by

[49] I removed the commas from Rychner's edition so readers can see how the translation will change depending on where they are placed. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*, 2nd ed. (London, 1999; 1986), p. 111 (based on Alfred Ewert's edition): "I shall tell you the story and the whole substance of a very old Breton lay, in so far as I understand the truth of it." Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris, 1990), p. 271, vv. 3–4 (based on Karl Warnke's edition): "Je vais vous faire le récit / d'un très ancien lai breton / et je vous en dirai l'histoire / et toute la vérité, comme je crois savoir."

Genesis. Theological views reject the possibility that humans can really turn into animals, but in Marie's "translation" of popular Breton tales, characters as well as readers encounter materials formed outside clerical purview.[50] How literally, or not, should we understand the truth she translates? In what dimension might the marvels of Celtic lore convey truth(s)?[51] It may be difficult for us moderns to gauge what medieval readers believed, but it seems likely that a sophisticated, courtly public, like a critically inclined modern audience, would most likely have included a spectrum of possible reactions to tales of werewolves, hawk-knights, and prophetic deer. In search of the figurative truths of fable and fiction or the literal truth of lived human experience, we can be sure that Marie invites her readers to seek meaning in the rich obscurities of her *lais*, as in the tensions between narrative and morality staged in her *Fables*. Speaking or speechless, her animals have many a tale to tell us humans.

[50] See Harf-Lancner, *Métamorphose*, pp. 3–25; and Bynum, "Metamorphosis."

[51] As suggested by *Eliduc*'s weasel, this question applies in the domains of the Christian miraculous, the magical, and the scientific as well. Pierre de Beauvais's bestiary, filled with allegorical and moralizing explanations, includes "the old belief that the weasel can revive its dead young offspring" (McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin*, p. 187). But in the *Livre du trésor*, Brunetto Latini takes a more scientific approach, questioning the claim that the weasel conceives through the ear and gives birth through the mouth ("already refuted by Aristotle," McCulloch, p. 187) but including the weasel's ressuscitation of her young, while specifying that the "medicine" involved remains unknown (in *Jeux et Sapience du Moyen Age*, ed. Albert Pauphilet [Paris, 1960], p. 809). Cf. Richard de Fournival's weasel, who becomes a model for the lady to revive her dying lover (*Li bestiaires d'amours di maistre Richart de Fornival e Li response du Bestiaire*, ed. Cesare Segre [Milan, 1957], p. 53). In relation to the "truth" of a tale that combines secular and spiritual love, how might medieval readers interpret the weasel's red flower, used in *Eliduc* to revive her companion: marvel, magic, miracle, or medicine? In Marie's *lai*, as in the bestiary tradition, the weasel retains its life-giving power, even if it does so to very different effect. Cf. McCash, "The Curse of the White Hind and the Cure of the Weasel: Animal Magic in the *Lais* of Marie de France," in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture*, pp. 199–209.

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