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## “Speak Now: The Power of Words in the Lays of Marie de France”

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### **Abstract**

The idea of chivalry came about in the Anglo-Norman period of medieval history and is understood to be a complex code of rules for behavior. One of these rules was to respect women. Furthermore, in many literary texts of the period, when a chivalrous gentleman hopes to offer love to a lady, he is expected to devote his entire life to his beloved. This would lead some to believe that chivalry gave women influence over their male counterparts during the medieval period. In this project, I analyze how the chivalric code gives or denies women power and agency in the texts of Marie de France.

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Medieval literature romanticizes the image of chivalry: the gallant, courageous knight rescuing the beautiful, courteous lady. But what is the true story behind this fairy tale? Twelfth-century writer Marie de France explores the problematic conventions of chivalry in her lays (short romances written in verse), which focus on medieval nobility who, theoretically, live by the chivalric code. However, Marie challenges this concept by exposing the reality behind the fiction. According to her, the power of "chivalry" is really the power of words: saying the right things, having a good title, and presenting oneself in the best light are the best routes to success. Often these words are empty promises made by men for personal gain. Chivalry itself was nothing more than a series of valued traits drawn from a variety of literary sources and compiled together to form the ideal models of nobility. Therefore, the only power a woman has through "chivalry" is by using language to her own ends. In her lays, Marie de France features both women who know how to navigate society using language and those who are inept at it. In the first half of this essay, I will argue that the knights and kings in three of Marie's lays, *Le Chaitivel*, *Equitan*, and *Lanval*, draw their power from language rather than from upholding the chivalric code. In the second half, I will further observe these three texts to demonstrate the influence language can give a woman in feudal society, which is characterized by a hierarchy of men in the roles of servants, knights, and lords. Firstly, I will show how the lady in *Le Chaitivel* is an expert in using language to her advantage. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the lady in *Equitan* tries to deflect men with words but fails. Finally, I will discuss how the fairy mistress in *Lanval* is an outrageously unrealistic character, demonstrating how her assets are not a real way for a medieval woman to achieve power. Women have spent most of history trying to ascertain themselves in a world that until recently has been dominated by men. Seeing how women expressed themselves and exercised power at a time where it is commonly assumed they were at their worst educates and inspires women trying to assert themselves today. Living in a world where the system is designed to work against you, open rebellion does not always have the desired effect. The women in the lays of Marie de France show society for what it is, not as what other works have romanticized it to be, and how by learning to manipulate the system women can gain power and produce gradual change over time. Today, women have the right to protest and fight for their rights, but can still learn from the earliest stages of this struggle from equality about how to gain advances without anyone even trying to stop them.

Many of the powerful male characters in Marie's lays demonstrate how language is the best way to advance oneself in feudal society. Furthermore, their lifestyles show how chivalry is an

unrealistic concept and the perfect society in a medieval court is "unreal and [can] exist only in the poetic imagination" (Bumke 376). Marie never uses the word "chivalry" in her lays, demonstrating how she believes truly chivalric characters only exist in stories. In the first lay I will discuss, *Le Chaitivel*, a beautiful lady is pursued by many suitors and four knights stand out to her and become the contenders for her heart. The lady and the text view the knights as perfect nobility, however, "each one sought her for himself," revealing that they only want to possess the lady and have sex with her (*Le Chaitivel* 45). In the second lay, *Equitan*, the title character is said to be "of great renown" and "very courtly," but he consistently abandons his duties as king throughout the lay and has an affair with his seneschal's wife (*Equitan* 11 & 13). Despite the implication that he is a chivalric leader because he is "very courtly," *Equitan* is lazy and disloyal and these benevolent qualities the text gives him are only words. Similarly, in my final lay, *Lanval*, the title character expresses little interest in performing the duties of a knight. *Lanval* has become unpopular and poor in Arthur's court and while the text suggests *Lanval*'s poverty is not entirely his fault because jealousy of his supposed virtues has made him unpopular but goes on to say that he does not "ask [the king] for anything" (*Lanval* 32). This implies that *Lanval* makes no effort to advance himself and that he would rather spend his time alone. Even after he has regained regard in society thanks to the patronage of a fairy he found in the country who became his lover, he remains uninterested in playing the part and only wants to be alone with his fairy mistress, as "the joy of others he values little / if he does not have what pleases him" (*Lanval* 258-259). This quote shows *Lanval* does not care about entertaining and being a good host; he only cares about his lady. Being a patron and host was an important part of feudal society because "men deprived of wealth and status by the rigid hierarchies...[could] still attain both through gifts...from more powerful men" and while *Lanval* does participate by giving gifts, he cares little for any of his clients (Finke & Shictman 35-36). In this way, the lays *Equitan* and *Lanval* are similar, because the narrator calls the title character good and noble, saying that he has all the characteristics the medieval literary canon attributes to a chivalrous knight, but their actions suggest that they have no desire to be this character. Through the men in these texts, one can see how the men in Marie de France's writing fail to live up to their reputations, which are nothing more than words.

While men rely on empty flattery, women must use words differently in a time when "law discriminated against them, adjudging their testimony inferior to that of men" (Mundy 138). Marie's lay *Le Chaitivel*, ou *Quatre Dols*, is about a beautiful lady who is courted by many suitors and must decide for herself who to marry,

as she has no family mentioned who may influence her decision. This text features a woman who answers to no father or husband and uses language to manipulate her peers. She is independent of male power, but is also the ideal courtly lady, "of great worth / in beauty and learning / and in every good behavior" (Le Chaitivel 10-12). She matches the stereotypical image of a noble woman, beautiful and charming, who watches men fight from "up on a tower" (Le Chaitivel 109). The woman in the tower, separate from the men, was the image of the ideal courtly woman (Bumke 335). However, despite being courtly society's "perfect" woman, this lady is not confined by her public image, but uses it to her advantage. Marie calls her "of great worth in...learning" and not just in looks to demonstrate how this woman is educated and intelligent, not just the empty headed object of a man. The lady is courteous towards her suitors, but their empty words do not affect her. For example, a frequent claim made by medieval lovers is that if they are refused by a woman they will die of heartbreak. Some women in medieval literature feel obligated to love a man in order to save his life, but this lady rejects this notion with words of her own. She does not "wish to kill [her suitors]," so she flatters and rejects them skillfully instead of being coerced by their claims (Le Chaitivel 18).

...if she does not want to hear them,  
she should not speak ill of them,  
but honor them and hold them dear,  
willingly serve and thank them (Le Chaitivel 25-28).

This passage demonstrates her methods of using or not using language to deflect unwanted suitors. She does not insult them but respects them, thanks them, and when they have been complimented enough, sends them away. Furthermore, the lady is not a victim to pledges of love even when she is attracted to a suitor. When she considers her four preferred lovers, she "[is] very sensible: / she [takes] time and careful thought" instead of acting impulsively (Le Chaitivel 49-50). She is one of the few who follows the advice of having "sense and moderation in love," evoked in a different lay of Marie's (Equitan 17). The lady retains her power because she knows how to politely deflect men and what words to take seriously.

This woman refuses what men want and what she "must" do. Heather M. Arden argues that the women never get what they desire in Marie's lays because "a masculine solution replaces or rewrites the feminine one...in all of them," but she does not appreciate the subtlety of La Chaitivel (61). For example, it is expected that the lady choose between her four suitors. However, even though she never picks one to be her husband, she retains her status as

a respectable lady but sacrifices nothing. The lady gets what she wants because she gets to "love" all the knights, but none of them ever have her as a lover. When her four suitors compete in a tournament to try and impress her and all but one are killed, the surviving knight is literally "carried to [the lady's] chambers" to recover, but they do not consummate the relationship (Le Chaitivel 165). This demonstrates how the lady has the men in the position of lovers but does not give up anything in return. Furthermore, the lady claims authority over the title and the lay itself. When she decides to write the lay, she wishes to call it *Quatre Dols*, or *Four Sorrows*, making her experience of loving and losing four men the focus. However, the remaining knight tells her to call it *Le Chaitivel*, or *The Wretched One*, because of his misfortune to love a woman who he can never have physically and who still loves his late companions. This practice of having one title reflect the masculine perspective and one the feminine appears multiple times in Marie's collection of lays. Her lay *Eliduc*, so named for the male protagonist, is also called *Guilhelüec et Guilliadun* for the two principal female characters. The usage of the masculine title as the primary one is an example of how Arden believes "it is clearly the male lover who determines the significance of the adventure lived by the lovers" (61). However, while the lady in *Le Chaitivel* agrees to call the lay by the knight's title, the text adds that "Some of those who would tell it abroad / call it *Four Sorrows*," demonstrating that even though the knight tries to claim the text through the title the lady's perspective is not forgotten (Le Chaitivel 233-234). Furthermore, because the lady is the one who has written the lay, it is truly a story about her feelings and perspectives. By calling it *Four Sorrows*, she shows through language how she never chose between her four lovers, not even in death; therefore, she has everything despite what the men wanted of her.

While the lady of *La Chaitivel* is an expert of language, the one in *Equitan* demonstrates the dangers of taking men's words seriously and using words improperly. In this second text, *Equitan* is a king who lusts after the wife of his seneschal, a knight who serves him. The narrative of *Equitan* and the lady's forbidden love affair demonstrates the power of such words, but only if used in a certain way. While the previously discussed character in *Le Chaitivel* maintains her appearance of a gracious woman who must be respected by treating all of her suitors with courtesy, *Equitan's* lady's first use of language is to diminish herself.

Since you are a powerful king  
and my husband holds his lands from you,  
you would expect, I imagine,  
to have dominion in love.

Love is not worthy if it is not equal (Equitan 133-137).

When Equitan first confesses his feelings to the lady, she tries to reject his offer of love by saying she is not his equal because of class status and therefore their love would not be worthwhile. This demonstrates how she is not adept at spoken argument because this is a flimsy defense, easily deflected by empty words from Equitan, who promises “[she] will by the lady and [him] the servant, / [her] the proud one and [him] the supplicant” (Equitan 175-176). She attempts to be diplomatic and respectful with her king by humbling herself to him but succeeds only giving him more power over her. The lady’s second mistake is taking these words and his claim that he will die if rejected literally. Again returning to the woman in *Le Chaitvel*, who is not affected by such words and makes decisions independently, while Equitan’s lover ultimately decides to give him her love because he “begged so many times for mercy” and she believed she was saving the life of her king (Equitan 178). Despite the promises he makes to be her “servant,” the relationship is one where she serves him. When they plan to do away with her husband so they can marry, it may be interpreted that he assisted in the attempted murder on the seneschal to please her. However, Equitan is the one who originally suggesting to the lady that “if [her] lord were dead, / [he] would make [her] queen and lady” (Equitan 226-227). She immediately takes up this idea and promises to “quickly arrange / for her husband’s death” as a service to him (Equitan 233-234). Heather M. Arden agrees that Equitan demonstrates male dominance over women because not only does the lady submit to her lover’s wishes, she is punished in the end by her husband, when he kills both her and Equitan for their infidelity (62). The lady does not use language to promote herself and therefore puts herself into a relationship where her lover merely wishes for something and she does everything possible to have it come to pass.

Furthermore, the lay Equitan also shows the dangers of wishing for something and having these words backfire. According to R. Howard Bloch, Equitan and another of Marie’s lays, *Le Fresne*, resemble each other in that they both feature “an almost fatal speech act” coming back to haunt the speaker (76). In *Le Fresne*, the title character’s mother “slandrously accuses a neighbor of adultery for bearing twin children...[but] when she herself bears twins, she realizes she has brought about her own disgrace” (Hanning & Ferrante 88). Likewise, the lady and Equitan wish for the death of the seneschal so that they do not have to hide their affair. These words turn on them when their plan fails, and they instead are killed. This is another example of how Equitan’s lady is ignorant of the true power of words and how to use them correctly; she only wishes ill on others and lowers herself. She could

have gained power from this situation if she had used language differently. For example, Marie’s text implies that the seneschal is the true king in everything but name, because Equitan neglects his duties in favor of pursuing the lady and other pastimes. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante go as far to say that the king and the seneschal have traded places because the seneschal has “assumed a good part of the burdens of kingship” while Equitan “[assumes] part of the burden of his wife” by being her lover (71). The lady could have gained status by refusing Equitan because if he had made good on his promise and “died,” she would have become queen, her husband being the obvious heir. She also could have exchanged tokens with him but refused to love him physically, as the lady in *Le Chaitivel* did with her four suitors. In this scenario, Equitan would be occupied with pursuing her and her husband would continue to administer justice to the land, making her the queen in practice if not in name. She also could have simply refused to love Equitan if her husband was not dead and let the two men fight each other for her favor. Regardless of which man survived, she would have been made queen after. However, the lady views herself as below Equitan because he is the king, so she does not see any of the other avenues to exercise power over him and her husband through language.

While Marie demonstrates how Equitan’s lady fails to use language, she also creates a fantasy woman who does not use language at all in *Lanval*, the third of my chosen lays. *Lanval*, a lonely and impoverished knight, meets a fairy sorceress in the country one day who becomes his lover and benefactor. *Lanval*’s fairy mistress is outrageously wealthy, beautiful, and has no boundaries to her power. All her power comes from physicality and material wealth, but because she is such an impractical character, the text appears to be demonstrating how women’s power does not come from physical objects because no woman such as this can exist in reality. Her wealth is beyond anything in the real world; just the cords and stakes that “held the sides of the tent; / no king under heaven could buy them / for any wealth he might offer” (*Lanval* 90-92). The description of her wealth goes on for some time, referencing several famous rulers who cannot match her, in order to illustrate how fantastically rich she is. The following is just a small excerpt from the long description of her camp when her and *Lanval* first meet.

Not Queen Semiramis,  
when she had her greatest wealth  
and greatest power and greatest wisdom,  
nor the emperor Octavian

could have bought the right flap (Lanval 82-86).

She is completely unrealistic because her riches outmatch any royalty in the world but has no clear source. Furthermore, she consistently uses her body as a conduit of her power rather than saying anything intelligent. When she first meets Lanval she is dressed "in nothing but her shift" – much more scantily than most female figures in medieval literature (Lanval 99). When she comes to Arthur's court for Lanval's trial for insulting the queen, "she let her mantle fall / so that they could see her better" (Lanval 605-606). She literally throws off her clothes so that her body is visible as a testament of Lanval's honesty about her beauty. Marie seems to be suggesting that it would only be possible for women to have this kind of power over men if they are impossibly wealthy and supernaturally beautiful. Because these traits are impossible expectations of a woman one can conclude that the power demonstrated by the fairy mistress is not meant to be a realistic representation of a medieval woman. She is a direct contrast to some of Marie's other female characters who use language as a means of power. These women are more accurate representations, because they exert control using something actually at the disposal of women in reality.

Unlike men, women in medieval society could not win favor through shows of strength, limiting them to either sexuality or language. Laurie A. Fink and Martin B. Shichtman argue that any influence a woman could gain through sexuality only makes her "a conduit for her husband's patronage," or his ability to influence the lives of others, therefore she is still not the dominant figure (38). Marie, however, sees the power and value of language as something that can be entirely her own. This is why she famously declares herself as the author in the epilogue to her fables: "I will name myself for remembrance: Marie is my name; I am from France" (Bloch 2). By claiming her works as her own and leaving no room for doubt; any effect or influence these words have in the world belong entirely to her. Marie also strives to take control over the meaning of her writing. The plot lines of her lays come from other sources, but she retells them in her own way which suggest "a deep desire... over meaning, over intention – over words" (Bloch 51). She takes stories she has heard during her life and writes with more focus on certain characters or events. Furthermore, she "manipulates traditional literary codes" to feed her "desire for independence within the male-dominated feudal system" (Guy-Bray 56). For example, a common trope in medieval lays in general is that the story ends with the consummation between the principal lovers, but in *Le Chaitivel*, Marie makes a point of stating that the knight will never have the lady as a lover (Guy-Bray 58-59). Furthermore, Marie also writes of an obligation to speak in the prologue to the lays.

One whom God has given knowledge  
and good eloquence in speaking  
should not keep quiet nor hide on this account  
but rather should willingly show herself (Prologue 1-4).

Marie's belief in the power of language goes so far to say that one must speak. If they have the power to change people with words, they must do so. In this passage, she also specifies that one should show "herself." By using a feminine pronoun here, she again alludes to the power that words give women specifically, herself included. Her assertiveness of her own power is something that was essential to women in the middle ages as still is today.

In conclusion, the power and influence available to women is very complex in the lays of Marie de France. The genre of her writing, the setting in which they take place, and the class of people they focus on all would normally mean her characters adhere to chivalric values. However, she shows the realities behind these assumptions. The concept of a knight offering his love to a lady and promising to be her servant and fulfill her every wish would suggest that the lady is the one in power in the relationship, but the complexities of spoken word challenge this. If men say whatever is necessary to get a woman into bed, women in turn will learn how to see through their words and manipulate language for themselves. Women found many ways to manipulate the literary code during the medieval era so they could present their thoughts in written works, including taking control over texts from male authors by acting as translators (Barratt 11). Everyone grows up seeing the image of the knight in shining armor coming to save the beautiful princess in the tower from Disney films, but learning the origins behind these tales reveals a not-so-simple reality. Snow White lived happily ever after, but there is so much more for women to learn to achieve their goals. Learning to speak for oneself is an essential skill for a woman, both in modern and medieval society.

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My name is Abigail Stevens and I am a second-year honors English and French double major specializing in medieval literature. I am planning on attending graduate school to earn my PhD in medieval literature after UCSB. I hope to do more research on women in medieval literature in the future as well as work on Arthurian literature.