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The Lai, the Fae, and Spaces to Play: The Legacy of Medieval Fantasy and Subversions of Gender in the Lais of Marie de France and Le Duché de Bicolline

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The Lai, the Fae, and Spaces to Play: The Legacy of Medieval Fantasy and Subversions of
Gender in the Lais of Marie de France and Le Duché de Bicolline

by

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the legacy and cultural work of the supernatural fantasy tradition in queering heteronormative society and contemporary gender ideals in both the medieval period and modernity. In her introduction to the 2017 publication *The Middle Ages in the Modern World* from Oxford University Press, Bettina Bildhauer writes, “the subjects of enquiry pursued by medievalism are of pressing concern in the twenty-first century, not only, but also [sic] to professional historians of the Middle Ages” (2). This project engages with the rising trend of medievalism in twenty-first century academia and trace the literary tradition of the Middle Ages in modern forms of performative storytelling. My research will build upon the work of Tison Pugh and Carolyn Dinshaw in exploring the queerness and gender subversions inherent in medieval literature, and the use of this literary tradition in the evolution of “queer worldmaking” in a contemporary context (Dinshaw *MAIMW* 304). I specifically examine the queering power of the fae and fantasy in medieval literature and fantasy role-playing games.

This thesis grapples with queer spaces and creatures in two distinct storytelling modes: first, the *Lais* of Marie de France, originating in 12th century England; and second, the live-action role-playing game *Le Duché de Bicolline*. I will be specifically analyzing my experiences at the week-long summer event *Le Grande Bataille*, from 2017 to 2019. For the purposes of my study, the *lais* will represent the fae in medieval popular culture, while *Bicolline* will embody the pseudo-literary representation of the fae in modern consciousness. I analyze these two seemingly different mediums of storytelling in tandem to reveal their foundations in a shared tradition of supernatural fantasy and oral performance. I posit here that the use of fantasy, particularly through the fae, in both medieval *lais* and modern modes of storytelling like live action role play (often abbreviated as *larp*) opens up queer space, which allows societal

expectations of gender and the status quo to be played with, challenged, and subverted. These queer spaces can be opened using the fae and Otherworldly elements that speak to audiences, both modern and medieval, in ages of religion, skepticism, superstition, and science.

Keywords: Community, Culture, Embodiment, Fantasy, Feminism, Gender and Sexuality, Identity Kinship, Lai, Larp, Marie de France, Medievalism, Medieval Literature, Oral Culture, Performativity, Play, Queer Space, Queer Studies, Role Play, Storytelling, Subjectivity, Subversion, the Other.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished work by the author, K. Anderson.

Le Duché de Bicolline belongs to itself and its creators.

The Twilights Dawn and the Court of Mirages belong to K. Maddox, R. Maddox, and C. Adams.

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Dedication

To K, R, and C. This was a hard-fought labor of love, made of long sleepless nights, blood, sweat, and tears; one last gift to you. Thank you for letting me play in your world for a while.

Le túsa gcónai.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I analyze two seemingly different mediums of storytelling—the 12th century *Lais* of Marie de France and the live action role playing game Le Duché de Bicolline—in tandem to examine their foundations in a shared supernatural fantasy tradition. I posit here that the use of fantasy, particularly through the fae, opens up queer space in both medieval *lais* and modern modes of storytelling like live action role-play (often abbreviated as larp), which allows societal expectations of gender and the status quo to be played with, challenged, and subverted. These queer spaces can be channeled using the fae and Otherworldly elements that speak to audiences, both modern and medieval, in ages of religion, skepticism, superstition, and science. With the prevalence of fantasy creatures and settings throughout medieval literature, I wondered why Otherworlds were so popular and how they continue to shape readings of medieval texts and survive in modern culture. In reading through and studying these fantastic elements in the *Lais* of Marie de France, I was fascinated by their similarities to storytelling practices found in modern culture. I was especially intrigued by the growing prevalence of fantasy elements, particularly in a growing community of fae characters, in the larp game Le Duché de Bicolline, which I have been attending and researching yearly since the summer of 2017. Throughout this experience, I became interested in the extent to which larp builds upon the medieval literary tradition, and this thesis was born. In the following pages, I will compare the functions of the fae on the grounds of Bicolline to the fae that inhabit medieval literature.

Queer theory as a literary concept focuses on theory and criticism that runs counter to heteronormative ideals and lifestyles, focusing instead on representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities. Previously a derogatory term for sexual minorities, the word ‘queer’ has been reclaimed by queer individuals and scholars to open up new spaces for identity

and community formation and to challenge heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be framing queer space as a physical or literary area that challenges or overturns heteronormative, heterosexual, or human-centric norms of dominant society. The queer, as argued by Tison Pugh in his book *Queering Medieval Genres*, “disrupts heteronormativity and resists societal and ideological sexual regimes” (4-5). While the term queer does not have the same connotation or meaning in the medieval period as it does in the present day, as ideals and societies evolve over time, I still believe that queer theory as Pugh defines it can be applied to the *Lais*. In fact, many other medievalists have applied queer theory to their own research. My structure and theoretical framework owe a life debt to both Tison Pugh and Carolyn Dinshaw in particular. Both these academics are interested in “the ways in which queerness resists heteronormative ideology” in medieval literature and in medievalism as a study (Pugh 8). Dinshaw writes in her book *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern* that “a historical past can and does provide material for queer subject and community formation now” (22). In a later book, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Dinshaw argues that medieval literature, medievalists, and the queer are all interconnected:

queer love, quite inexplicable in everyday modernist frameworks
[...] can nonetheless rouse us to look for other ways of world
making, for other ways of knowing, doing, being. It can move us
to revalue such failures, amateurisms, nonmodern temporalities,
and the attachments they foster. (170)

I want to build off Dinshaw’s work and highlight the queerness and queer spaces of medieval literature, especially as created through the use of fantasy. I argue that this phenomenon is

present in the transitions of medieval fantasy literature into medieval fantasy role play, and that liminal spaces and Otherworldly elements play a key role in this community formation. As an amateur and deeply personal form of storytelling, larp is inseparable from emotional attachment, making it a medium full of queer potential. The addition of fantasy further emphasizes this queer potential, especially through the introduction of the nonhuman and Otherworldly fae. Rosemary Jackson refers to fantasy as “the literature of subversion,” claiming “fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (3). It is through these theoretical lenses of desire, love, and subversion that I examine the queer spaces opened by fantasy.

M.H. Abrams, in the seventh edition of *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, clumps science fiction and fantasy into one category, writing “These terms encompass novels and short stories that represent an imagined reality that is radically different in its nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience” (3). For my purposes in this thesis, I will be considering fantasy in its most popular sense, as a genre that that uses elements of magic, imaginary creatures, and wonder to build a distinctly separate world from the mundane. As I am a medievalist, I will be focusing entirely on fantasy inspired by the culture and history of the Western medieval period. My analysis of fantasy comes mainly through the examination of the fae in both medieval literature and modern live-action role-play. I use the term ‘fae’ here to define the collective race of ‘fairy’ entities that appear in these sources. It is important to distinguish the fae from ‘fairies,’ as fairies are types of fae, but not all fae appear remotely fairy-like as modern-day western culture traditionally perceives them. Since no two fae are alike and often possess some variety of shapeshifting abilities that destabilizes any permanent appearance

entirely, they can appear human but usually have a sublime quality that marks them for what they truly are. At other times they are clearly inhuman, with sharp fangs, glowing eyes, or widespread wings. There are many different types of fae, varying in appearance and personality, though I want to focus less on distinguishing between species and more on what the fae make possible in literature and story. These Otherworldly creatures act as conduits for the queer, thriving on subversion and creating alternatives to reality and society in queer spaces.

This thesis grapples with queer spaces and creatures in two distinct storytelling modes: first, the *Lais* of Marie de France, originating in 12th century England; and second, the Canadian live-action role-playing game *Le Duché de Bicolline*, specifically at the week-long summer event *Le Grande Bataille*, from 2017 to 2019. For the purposes of my study, the *lais* will represent the fae in medieval popular culture, while *Bicolline* will embody the pseudo-literary representation of the fae in modern consciousness. My thesis will itself exist in its own liminal space, bridging the gap between the rigidly scholarly and the extremely personal. Structurally, it represents the inherent queerness of medievalists and their amateur projects, a subject Dinshaw focuses on in her book *How Soon is Now*. Like her, I will be dipping into my own branch of “queer worldmaking” using creative reflections and narrative description in order to convey my observations and research (Dinshaw *MAIMW* 304).

I know there will be people who question why I am choosing to analyze a larp of all things alongside Marie’s work. Justifying my academic intentions with this choice requires a consideration of the concepts of medievalism and embodied performance. In their book *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, Tison Pugh and Jane Weisl write,

In its simplest sense, *medievalism* refers to the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of

entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artist's contemporary sociocultural milieu. (1)

As a form of play that is inspired heavily by medieval history and fantasy literature, larp is a form of medievalism that allow participants to experience a medieval aesthetic and atmosphere firsthand. However, I argue that larp is not merely an escapist recreational form of storytelling, but a continuation of a medieval storytelling tradition based in performance, ephemerality, and embodiment. As Bettina Bildhauer writes, “The object of the study is inseparable from the study of the object; the ‘real’ Middle Ages are only apprehended through acts of ‘medievalism’” (16). The stories told in the *lais* of Marie de France originated as oral performances, sung and spoken by travelling bards and often accompanied by music. Until Marie wrote these stories down, there was no one single version of the tales: they were memorized, improvised, and revised in each retelling. The boundaries between story, drama, and literature during the Middle Ages were flexible, with “no hard and fast line between ‘literature’ and ‘drama’: both were performance arts” (Twycross 43). The *lais*, performed yet clearly narratives, are a product of this oral tradition. Larp, as a performance-based, improvisational play practice, recalls this medieval oral culture. In Chapter 11 of *Role-Playing Game Studies*, Sarah Hoover writes,

Role-play is a form of performance. We take on roles, speak and use body language to represent our characters—our own or through avatars. We engage in verbal storytelling, and we take actions in the characters' worlds. (Hoover et. al. *RPG Studies* 213)

In role playing games, players create ephemeral narratives through the physical embodiment of their characters, creating a kind of self-contained performance much like immersive theatre does. Participants in a larp are both player and audience, giving every character agency and the ability to impact the stories they tell. Role-play, and by extension larp is thus an embodied performance practice, creating ephemeral but memorable stories and experiences for players to enjoy. As a player at Bicolline, I used embodied performance to conduct research for this thesis; I embodied a character, interacted with other characters, and created and influenced stories that emerged from each event. This thesis is the culmination of this research, an analysis of my experiences in an embodied performance space. Performance practice and practice-based research (abbreviated as PbR) are most often used in the fields of drama and theatre; however, embodied performance and practices are slowly expanding into other academic spheres. For example, medievalists like Claire Sponsler use performance practices to recreate performances of medieval dramatic texts. In her chapter in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and Their Audiences*, titled “From Archive to Repertoire: The *Disguising at Hertford* and Performance Practices,” Sponsler explains,

Although history tends to target written documents, knowledge of every kind—including information about performances—can be passed on in other ways: from person to person and by word of mouth, as stories are told or recollections shared. Information about performances can also be conveyed through embodied memory, that is, through a handed-down, even if often greatly altered, performance tradition. (Sponsler 34)

Performance and other ephemeral art forms are part of an alternative system of knowledge production that is just as enlightening as textual and written knowledge. While larp lacks the material permanence and structure of dramatic texts, the practice of embodied storytelling and performance functions in much the same way in larp as it does in dramatic texts. As practice-based research becomes more and more prevalent in non-theatre fields, I suggest that role-playing games, especially embodied practices like larp, should be thought less as a form of frivolous escapism and more as a valuable source of cultural narratives and practices. Spenser notes that practitioners of practice-based research “have faced the suspicion that their work fails to be rigorous enough, is not sufficiently scholarly, is perhaps too much fun” (31). Outside of drama, PbR and practice-as-research (PaR) are slow to gain respectability, especially in societies that privilege material text over other forms of knowledge production. Larps, as games and pastimes, face the same scrutiny, perhaps even more so than non-academic forms of medievalism like medieval drama. However, as Sarah Lynne Bowman argues in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*,

Many art forms involve the playful alteration of identity on the part of the artists and performers, particularly creative writing and theatrical dramatization. Role-playing represents a recent permutation in the evolution of such artistic expressions and, thus, scholars should place it on a continuum with other forms of cultural expression. (13)

Role-playing games, especially live action role-playing games, are at their core interdisciplinary, bridging performance, storytelling, history, and social psychology among many other academic fields. As a form of narrative creation, role-playing games also share many of the same concerns

as literature and literary studies. Through an embodied methodology and examining larp as a performance practice, I want to position Bicolline on a continuum with medieval literature. As performative and narrative products of their time, both medieval *lais* and modern larps are part of the same oral performance tradition, and can thus be analyzed in conversation with each other.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Following this introduction, I will address the historical context of the *Lais* of Marie de France, including how concepts of romance and the Otherworld were understood in the medieval period. I will then individually analyze three of Marie's *lais*—*Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Bisclavret*—focusing on how they employ Otherworldly spaces, creatures, and interactions to subvert and challenge societal and gender norms in the Middle Ages. In the next half, I will analyze the ways in which the fae role-playing group the Court of Mirages at Le Duché de Bicolline opens up new opportunities for role play, creates alternatives to gender and cultural norms, and subverts the status-quo both in-game and out. Finally, I will tie the two together, addressing the ways in which the *Lais* and larps work together to create queer spaces that provide subversive alternatives to societal and cultural norms. Both these sources illustrate the persistent presence and power of the fae in the Western cultural consciousness, initiating and continuing a creative loop that both founds and preserves a fantastic literary legacy. In summary, this thesis maps the queer spaces inhabited by the fae, from the medieval period into the modern era, and examines how and why these traditions have had such a lasting impact on the human imagination.

Marie de France, Medieval Romance, and the Otherworld in Context

The *Lais of Marie de France*, a collection of short, narrative-driven romances, were believed to have been written in twelfth century England, approximately 1160, by an author who consistently identified herself as 'Marie of France' in the four works attributed to her. Woman

writers were rare in the Middle Ages, and though they did exist their work was often written anonymously. Marie is unique in that she refuses to give up credit to her work: in the epilogue to her translation of Aesop's Fables, *Ysopet*, she writes, "me numerai pur remembrance:/Marieai num, si sui de France" ("I shall name myself for the sake of remembrance:/Marie is my name, I am from France") (ll. 2-4).¹ Many of her works have similar signatures embedded within the text. As a woman writer in the medieval period, Marie holds a unique and integral place in the medieval literary canon: she is the first identified woman writer in England and introduced the lai, formerly a folk genre passed through an oral tradition, into the courtly sphere. Although Marie is an extremely important figure in the literary cannon, there is very little surviving information about her from a biographical standpoint; most suggestions as to her life and identity are found in her lais and other writings. However, based on her literacy and her skillful use of language and narrative, it is assumed that she was highly educated and most likely was of noble birth. She was a well known and acknowledged poet during the reign of Henry II (Waters 13, 19). While she is believed to have written for the Anglo-French aristocracy in the Britain, Marie may have been born in Brittany in Northern France, an intersectional, transnational, and politically charged area following the Norman Conquest, and many of her stories take place in this geographical area (Waters 20-21). Marie wrote twelve lais, many of which were early interventions into Arthurian legend, and integrated issues of courtly romance, chivalry, nobility, and loyalty, all aristocratic concerns, into her retellings (Waters 12). The *Lais* were originally written in a dialect of Anglo-Norman using rhyming couplets, in the style of a variety of French medieval narratives at the time. Marie often introduces her stories as retellings and translations

¹This citation is taken from Claire Water's translation in Appendix C of *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation* (390).

of *lais* created by the Bretons. Inspired by both Celtic folktales and Arthurian legend, the Breton *Lais* are a hodgepodge of classical myth, chivalric romance, and unique tales that are thought to have emerged from the Celtic nations in Brittany, Normandy and the British Isles (Waters 16). They tend to be smaller works of romance, short in length and scope, and focusing on the internal lives and emotions of their characters. The works were transmitted orally, brought from place to place by bards and French jongleurs, or storytellers, who paired these narratives with musical accompaniment (Knight 5). The poems often featured Otherworldly creatures and phenomena interacting with human characters, and could end happily or tragically depending on the story and its intended message. As I previously mentioned, these texts were ephemeral, part of a popular folk genre enjoyed by the common people of France and Britain; it is commonly assumed that many were never recorded and were thus lost to time. While six of these stories can be found in Middle English translations, Marie's *lais* are the earliest translations of the Breton *lais* that survive today. Marie is a significant figure in that she made these oral stories material, writing them down and translating them for her aristocratic audience. These stories have been adapted and translated countless times throughout history, but Marie's literary translations mark the beginning of a written romance tradition.

Medieval romance, sometimes called chivalric romance, is a genre of literature originating early in the Middle Ages. While it may include themes of love and courtship, it is not synonymous with modern conceptions of romance. Instead, medieval romance focused on chivalry, nobility, courtly love, and tales of knights and their quests, often using poetry forms originating from their oral and musical tradition. This tradition began with the Breton *lais*, disseminated through ephemeral performances in Old French. In the 1100s, Marie translated the romances of the Breton *lais* into her Anglo-Norman *Lais* for the noble classes of her

contemporary society, integrating religious iconography and aristocratic characters and concerns into the narratives. Her *lais* feature strong female protagonists, present alternatives to the gender norms of her society, and include pointed critiques of courtly conduct. These narratives evolved into the six surviving Middle English Breton *lais*, including Thomas Chestre's "Sir Launfal," a direct translation of Marie's *Lanval* from the fourteenth century, and the anonymous poem "Sir Orfeo," written around 1325. Chaucer paid homage to these conventions around the same time when he translated *Le Romance de la Rose* and the multi-genre poem *The Canterbury Tales* in 1300s England, his own contribution to the romantic genre. In the 1500s, Edmund Spenser was heavily influenced by both romance conventions and Arthurian legend in crafting his epic *The Faerie Queen*, the first three books of which were published in 1590, making it a derivative of this same tradition. The concrete origins and original creators of these stories remain relatively unknown, but the tales they tell continue to survive today in collections, books of fairy lore, and textbooks alike, sparking the human imagination even in modern times. Marie de France's work has also led to a slew of modern translations and editions; Glynn S. Burgess is well regarded for his translations and detailed contextual analysis of Marie's work, and Claire Waters has created an excellent edition and translation of the *Lais*, which I will be using for my analysis here.

Marie de France is a significant but unusual figure in medieval literature, not only as an outspoken woman writer in a patriarchal society, but also as a translator of folk stories. While translations and retellings were a common framework in medieval literature, these translations were most often taken from classic Greek and Roman texts, granting these works a literary authority positioned clearly in a highly respected cultural tradition. Marie, however, pushes back against this authorial framework, translating not only an ephemeral text, but a popular one. In her Prologue to the *Lais*, Marie outlines her aim in writing these poems:

Pur ceo comenc[ai] a penser	<i>Therefore I began to think</i>
De aukune bone estoire faire	<i>of making some good story</i>
E de latin en romaunz traire;	<i>and translating from Latin to French.</i>
Mais ne me fust guaires de pris:	<i>But it would hardly be worth it to me:</i>
Itant se sunt altres entremis.	<i>so many others have undertaken it.</i>
Des lais pensai k'oï aveie.	<i>I thought of lais that I had heard.</i>
Ne dutai pas, bien le saveie,	<i>I did not doubt, I knew well</i>
Ke pur remembrance les firent	<i>that they made them for remembrance</i>
Des aventures k'il oïrent,	<i>concerning adventures that they heard,</i>
Cil ki primes les comencierent	<i>those who first began them</i>
E ki avant les enveierent.	<i>and who sent them forth.</i>
Plusurs en ai oï conter,	<i>I have heard many of them told;</i>
Ne[s] voil laisser ne oblir.	<i>I do not wish to leave them aside or forget</i>
(ll. 28-40)	<i>them.</i>

(ll. 28-40)

In this passage, Marie indicates that she has put aside more 'learned' and respected Latin and French texts and decides instead to preserve the French folk stories that she has heard told throughout her life. Rather than retranslating a more traditional, respectable, and classic narrative, Marie translates vernacular, popular narrative. She appears attached to these stories—she does not want to forget them, but to preserve them. Marie chooses to adapt what she loves rather than repeat what other writers of her time are more focused on, what is considered more legitimate. In this way, she is an amateur creator much like the modern day medievalists

Dinshaw describes; within her own society, Marie is a queering figure. Her use of the supernatural in her tales further subverts the ideals and norms of her society.

Many of Marie's *lais* heavily feature Otherworldly elements that enhance the mundane realities they are juxtaposed against. Although the medieval world was predominantly Christian, medieval literature contains numerous references to supernatural and fae creatures and the Otherworld they inhabit. In medieval literary tradition, the Otherworld is a conception of a place and society that incorporates mythical creatures and settings from Celtic and other pagan folklore to create a topsy-turvy world full of trickery and new possibilities. These Otherworlds are usually set within a clearly defined and marked physical space. In his essay "Medieval Descriptions of the Otherworld," Howard Rollin Patch offers a broad definition of these spaces and markers:

The Otherworld realm is usually quite easy to identify. Its situation is various: on a mountain, perhaps, or on an island, or cut off from the every-day world by some sort of water barrier. The Celts usually put their happy isles far in the west; the Norse, if they thought of any particular locality for the Otherworld, seem to have held it to be in the north; the Oriental earthly Paradise was somewhere in the far east. The other elements, however, are sufficiently fixed: a splendid castle, usually guarded by armed figures; and a garden, with a beautiful fountain or fair running streams, and trees and remarkable birds. For the people in the story the land is hard to enter, and sometimes it is still more difficult to leave. (604-5)

This article cites several key elements in depictions of the Otherworld, many of which appear in Marie's lais: beautiful gardens, spectacular castles, and locations isolated beyond mountains, hills, or water bodies, all of which are indicators of Otherworld spaces. These spaces exist separately from the perceived reality of the mundane and are full of magic and possibility.

While it sometimes indicates of a kind of afterlife, the Otherworld is often portrayed as its own world, running on a parallel plane to the mundane. Markers such as the meadows, rivers, and hills, discussed by Patch, signify the boundaries of these Otherworlds, acting as entry points into liminal spaces that Meg Twycross and Sarah Sprouse refer to as "the magic circle" or "the game space" (Twycross 61, Sprouse 169). The creation of a clearly defined and physically grounded space to play is a key element in creating subversions and allows alternatives to be embodied and performed. This space allows authors to critique medieval society by juxtaposing the norms of 'reality' with the subversive alternatives created in the Otherworld. Such subversion highlights the problems and discrepancies writers see in medieval society.

In folklore, the Otherworld is often home to supernatural entities, creatures, and monsters. In medieval literature, these entities often come from a collective race of fairy-like creatures that I will henceforth refer to as the fae. The supernatural appearances and abilities of the fae grant them an Otherworldly and altogether 'Other' status. By existing outside of mundane reality while simultaneously playing a part in it, the fae become vessels for subversions of and alternatives to the mundane. Both the fae and the space they occupy are intensely political, critiquing and overturning societal ideals and norms. In countering dominant regimes and disrupting the status quo, the fae position themselves as inherently queer creatures; they present alternatives to heteronormative ways of being and challenge the status quo. Like the greenmen Dinshaw studies in Chapter 14 of *The Middle Ages in the Modern World*, "Black Skin,

Green Masks: Medieval Foliate Heads, Racial Trauma, and Queer World Making”, depictions of the fae

picture intimate interrelations between the human and the non-human—interdependencies between species that throw taxonomies into question, press categories up against each other, put classifications and hierarchies of the human under scrutiny. These are queer creatures indeed. (276)

Like Dinshaw, I believe that fantastic creatures like the fae represent new ways of thinking and being in literature and culture. Despite the consistent efforts of literary critics to isolate the fae and faerie stories as mere fantasies, escapist substitutes for the mundane world, the fae and the world they inhabit actually enhance and enrich the ‘real.’ They give reality more meaning, offer demonstrations of new possibilities, and create new characters that would not have had the opportunity to exist otherwise. In the literary tradition, the Otherworld is often kept separate from the mundane one, with interactions between the two maintained by strict rules and regulations. However, these two worlds bleed into one another, creating a territory between the two which I will refer to as a liminal space.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘liminal’ as “characterized by being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate between two spaces, situations, etc” (*OED*). For the purposes of this thesis, I will use liminal when referring to spaces that act as unclaimed territory or points of transition between the mundane and the Otherworld. The space between the mundane and the Otherworld acts as a neutral and politically charged territory, allowing both worlds to meet in a magical no-man’s-land, and thus cross over into each other’s spaces. The introduction of liminality in works of medieval literature creates a space for

exploring new ideas and discovering new possibilities, which might have otherwise gone unexpressed, by creating a clear contrast between the status quo and its alternatives. The intervention of the Otherworld through these liminal entry points creates subversions and radically disrupts societal norms. In these new territories, women fulfil the feudal obligations of kings, rescue knights, and sweep them away on horseback. Hawks turned human grant women a reprieve from abusive relationships and give them swords to wield. Werewolves act more chivalrous and noble than human knights and provide loyal service to their kings. Liminal spaces in Marie's *Lais* allow gender roles to be overturned, expectations to be subverted, and feudal societal norms to be questioned and critiqued in a queer space.

This thesis examines three of Marie de France's *lais* in particular: *Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Bisclavret*, all of which survive in the British Library manuscript MS Harley 978. Compiled by a later scribe, this manuscript includes all twelve of Marie's *Lais*, as well as the collection of *Fables* that scholars have also attributed to Marie. The titles, not originally written by Marie herself, originate from notations, written in a secondary hand, in the upper left-hand margins of MS 978—*Yonec* was originally titled *Ywenet* in its marginalia, but I will be referring to it by the name it is most commonly assigned in academic editions. While many of Marie's *Lais* include fantasy elements, these three *lais* demonstrated the strongest and clearest connections to the Otherworld and the fae, and the fantastical creatures within play crucial roles in both the atmosphere and the plot of these stories. In my research, I used Clare M. Water's scholarly edition, which contains an edited version of Marie's original Anglo-Norman and English translations side by side. For purposes of language analysis, I will focus on the Anglo-Norman. To create accessibility for readers not familiar with the original language, I will subsequently provide Water's English translations, italicized to further distinguish them from the Anglo-

Norman. While these lais, on the surface, may appear to promote the patriarchal norms of medieval society, a focused analysis of the scenarios and characters they contain reveals a complicated relationship between the societal ideals and the alternative, one that creates subversive ideas and radical possibilities that are portrayed in a deeply unique way.

In the first half of this thesis I examine each of these lais separately, drawing comparisons between them when applicable. I start with a brief summary of their plots and a short explanation of the lai's significance in this thesis. After this, I examine the form and function of the Otherworld and its creatures in the lai, addressing the creation of physical liminal space, the appearance of Otherworldly creatures, and the interactions that result between the Otherworldly representatives and members of the mundane. Within each section, I analyze the challenges and subversions the three lais present through each of these supernatural elements, and how such use of fantasy makes these subversions possible. I propose that Otherworldly spaces and creatures create opportunities for societal norms and expectations to be subverted, challenged, and played with. Fantasy in the medieval tradition, rather than merely a frivolous form of escapism, enriches and critiques the mundane.

The Otherworld in the *Lais* of Marie de France

Lanval

Marie de France's *Lanval* is the story of a neglected knight in the court of King Arthur who becomes the paramour of an Otherworldly creature. The poem follows the titular character Lanval, the son of a foreign king, who serves King Arthur faithfully despite being undermined by the court and ignored in the gift giving indicative of a chivalric court. Spurned by the queen, forgotten by the king, and unsupported by the other knights, the impoverished Lanval retreats to a meadow to contemplate his situation. During this retreat, two mysterious women appear and

lead him to an isolated glade. There, a fairy maiden of great wealth and beauty offers herself as his lover and patron, on the condition that he keeps her, and their love, a secret. Granted new wealth and power by his magical benefactor, Lanval becomes the embodiment of proper courtliness and chivalry, generous and charitable to friends, strangers, and comrades alike. Unfortunately, his altered appearance and reputation draws the eye of Arthur's queen, who propositions him to become her lover instead. In rejecting her advances and claiming that his lover is the most beautiful in the world, Lanval reveals the existence of his faerie love and inadvertently betrays her, gaining the queen's wrath and losing access to his lover and her generosity. However, though Lanval is accused of treason and standing on trial before Arthur's court, his mistress arrives to defend him, proving Lanval both honest and innocent. The fae woman is deemed worthy of the praise Lanval gave her, and she whisks the redeemed knight away to her kingdom, Avalon, on the back of her palfrey.

To the casual reader, the gender subversions in this story may not be readily obvious. The lai can be easily dismissed as a typical expression of a male fantasy where an ordinary man is lavished upon by a fairy princess. However, the lai is very clearly a reverse of the damsel-in-distress narrative, where the male figure is instead dependant on and indebted to the female figure, who ultimately rescues him and carries him off to his happily-ever-after ending. In this regard, the story portrays a strong, empowered female protagonist who uses her power to redeem a knight through the very actions and values King Arthur himself failed to uphold. This female gift-giver and ruler wields her power and position far more nobly than the mundane monarchs in the lai, undermining the patriarchal ideals and gendered power dynamics of medieval society. *Lanval* thus offers an alternative vision of society and depicts a vision of perfect chivalry is impossible to fulfil without the intervention of the Otherworld.

Before the Otherworld can interact with reality, a liminal space must be established. In *Lanval*, these liminal spaces appear in two physical iterations. The first of these, the meadow Lanval retreats to in the beginning of the lai, acts as a border space between the mundane and the Lady's pavilion, our second space, which acts as a pocket of the Otherworld. These spaces allow Lanval both to escape from his impoverished reality and to return enriched. As he becomes disillusioned with his less-than-ideal state of service, Lanval retreats into nature to contemplate his situation.

Fors de la vile es eissuz,	<i>He went out of the town;</i>
Tut sul est en un pre venuz ;	<i>all alone, he came to a meadow;</i>
Sur une ewe currant descent—	<i>he dismounts beside running water—</i>
Mes sis cheval tremble forment.	<i>but his horse trembles terribly.</i>
(ll. 43-6)	(ll.43-6)

The footnotes in this edition explain, “The Celtic Otherworld is often reached by crossing a stream or other body of water, so the implication is that the horse can sense its proximity here” (Waters 165). The running water, whether a stream or a river, marks a physical boundary point between the two worlds. This meadow is thus part of this liminal space, not entirely mundane but nonetheless rooted in reality. The uneasy horse, sensing the instability his human master cannot, is an indicator of this liminality. With its border of running water, the meadow marks the entrance to the magic circle (Sprouse 169).

When Lanval is approached by the women and led to the pavilion, the subsequent imagery and language distinguishes the calibre of the Otherworld as far superior to the mundane. The space and its furnishings are pristine and luxurious, beyond the value of anything this world has to offer. Marie describes the approach to the Lady's encampment:

Treskë al tref l'unt amené,	<i>They led him up to the tent,</i>
Que mut fut beaus e bien asis. [...]	<i>which was very beautiful and well situated.</i>
De cel ne sai dire le pris,	<i>[...] I can't tell its value,</i>
Ne des cordes ne des pissuns	<i>nor of the cords nor the stakes</i>
Que del tref tienent les giruns;	<i>that held the sides of the tent</i>
Suz ciel n'ad rei ki[s] esligast	<i>no king under heaven could buy them</i>
Pur nul aver k'ill i donast. (ll.80-92)	<i>for any wealth he might offer. (ll.80-92)</i>

Immediately, the Otherworld is set apart as a far richer place than reality, with inhabitants far wealthier than the rulers of this world. The language in this passage is vague, a pattern that continues to emerge whenever the Otherworld and its inhabitants are described—the space is beyond mortal words, marked with uncertainty. Marie's assertion that she can't tell the price of an item is a common motif in her descriptions of the Otherworld, one that reappears throughout her *lais*. Nevertheless, the important key here is that the Otherworld possesses a level of wealth that citizens of the mundane cannot hope to obtain. Even this temporary encampment boasts more wealth than Lanval's king possesses, immediately setting up a juxtaposition between the two rulers.

The *lai* is bookended by two, solidly Otherworld spaces—the pavilion and Avalon. Avalon, as completely Otherworld, is beyond Marie's scope in this *lai*. While described in passing as “a very beautiful island,” it is neither described in detail nor used as an actual setting in the poem. It is the space-in-between—both spatially and in plot—that is significant in the *lai*. Through the intervention of the Lady and her purse, anywhere Lanval travels becomes a liminal space with direct access to the Otherworld and its wealth, recalling the luxury of the pavilion and its inhabitant's generosity. Lanval can call the Lady to him, and she brings the Otherworld with

her through her very presence; in other words, she is the embodiment of the Otherworld.

Lanval's demonstration of chivalry as supported by the Lady's patronage is, thus, only possible within the context of this liminality. In *Lanval*, then, physical and liminal space is created for the purpose of being breached; this permeability allows Lanval to use the Otherworld as an additive element to his reality rather than separate from it. Accessing this liminal space, however, is only possible through the presence of the Lady.

In *Lanval*, this Otherworldly figure who inhabits this liminal space is the fae Lady. While her handmaidens are also fae and appear throughout the lai to signal progression in the narrative, the Lady is the most subversive and fantastic figure in this lai. She appears humanoid in shape, but is far too beautiful to be entirely human. Natural language is used to depict her unnatural beauty, recalling the Otherworld's scenic environments. Marie de France writes,

Flur de lis, ros nuvele,	<i>she surpassed in beauty</i>
Quant ele pert al tens d'esté,	<i>the lily or the new rose</i>
Trespasot ele de beauté. (ll. 93-6)	<i>when it appears in summer. (ll.93-6)</i>

Her appearance is flawless, transcending all mortal imperfections as well as the beauty of nature itself. Further descriptions only emphasize this Otherworldly beauty:

Ele iert vestue en itel guise:	<i>She was dressed in this manner:</i>
De chainsil blanc e de chemise,	<i>in a shift of white linen,</i>
Que tus les costex li pareint,	<i>which let her sides be seen,</i>
Que de deus parz laciez esteient.	<i>as it was laced on either side.</i>
Le cors ot gen, basse la hanche,	<i>She had a lovely body, a long waist,</i>
Le col plus blanc que neif sur branche,	<i>a neck whiter than snow on a branch,</i>

Les oilz ot vairs e blanc le vis,	<i>sparkling eyes and white skin,</i>
Bele buche, neis bien asis,	<i>a beautiful mouth, a well-formed nose,</i>
Les survilz bruns e bel le frunt	<i>dark eyebrows and a lovely forehead</i>
E le chef cresp e aukes blunt;	<i>and curling golden hair;</i>
Fil d'or ne gette tel lurr	<i>no golden thread casts such a gleam</i>
Cum s[i] chev[e]l cunte le jur.	<i>as did her hair in the sun.</i>
Sis manteus fu de purpre bis ;	<i>Her mantle was dark purple;</i>
Les pans e not entour li mis.	<i>she had wrapped its ends around her.</i>
Un espervier sur sun poin tient,	<i>She had a sparrowhawk on her fist,</i>
E un leverer après [li] vient.	<i>and a greyhound ran behind her.</i>
(ll. 559-74)	<i>(ll.559-74).</i>

The Lady radiates wealth and beauty, much like her pavilion earlier in the lai, and natural descriptions are once again evoked to separate her from the other figures in the lai. She is placed in the company of noble animals, the sparrowhawk and a greyhound, both significant symbols in medieval depictions of royalty and nobility, and even her palfrey is described as being more handsome and expensive than any mortal ruler could possibly afford (ll. 555-558). In any other scenario, she would perfectly fit the image of a model noblewoman. However, she far surpasses the standards of reality. When she enters King Arthur's castle, it is said that "Unc si bele n'i vient mais" ("*such a beauty had never come there*") (l.602). Earlier descriptions echo similar statements, declaring that "En tut le secle n'ot plus bele" ("*in all the world there was none more beautiful*") (l.550). The descriptions of this kind are vague, as if at a certain point, the Lady's beauty is beyond description except in the distinguishing of it from the mundane. Despite the lack of specificity, the Lady nonetheless represents a superior way of being. Although she

portrays an ideal—if supernaturally amplified—picture of noble beauty, her behaviour and actions challenge both the realities and the descriptions of feudal, societal, and gendered values of Arthurian—and medieval—society.

The Lady, in title and appearance, appears female, but in her actions reveals herself to be a gender-fluid entity that challenges traditional gender roles and exists outside of societal stereotypes. Her presence and actions set her in direct contrast to both King Arthur and his queen, as she fully embodies the ideal roles and actions of both a male and female ruler. As Cassidy Leventhal elaborates in her article “Finding Avalon: The Place and Meaning of the Otherworld in Marie de France’s *Lanval*,” the Lady as an Otherworldly creature is crucial to Lanval’s encounter:

She functions both as Avalon/Otherworld’s representative in Arthurian reality and its embodiment within this reality. She *is* Lanval’s encounter with Otherworld; it is to her that he dedicates himself (eventually more than to reality), and it is she who ‘carries him off’ to Avalon, a place we know only in that it provides some sort of just resolution to her and Lanval’s love. Our knowledge therefore of Avalon is only through extrapolation from the Lady herself. (197)

The Lady, as an Otherworldly creature, *becomes* the Otherworld, and thereby embodies the alternative to Arthurian society. Her generous and limitless patronage of the poverty-stricken knight recalls the culture of gift-giving so crucial to the homo-social bonds among knights. In feudal society, lords would give gifts and resources to their vassals, who would in turn fight for them. This reciprocity formed the foundation of chivalric society. By supporting Lanval, the

Lady thus fulfils her lordly duties more completely than King Arthur does at the beginning of the lai. While the Lady “est a sun sun comandement” (“*is entirely at [Lanval’s] command,*”) it is she who first summons him and dictates the terms for their relationship (l.218). She is the one responsible for saving Lanval, both physically and financially. Marie writes,

Ore est Lanval en dreite veie!	<i>Now Lanval is on the right path!</i>
Un dun li ad duné après:	<i>She gave him still one more gift:</i>
Jae le rien ne vudra mes	<i>he will never again want for anything</i>
Quë il nen air a sun talent;	<i>but that he will have as much of it as he likes;</i>
Doinst e despende largement,	<i>let him give and spend generously,</i>
Ele li troverat asez. (ll. 134-9)	<i>she will provide him with enough. (ll.134-9)</i>

Where the king neglects, the Lady fulfils her chivalric and courtly duties to her vassal, gaining Lanval’s love and loyalty in all senses of the word. The Lady, while generous and accommodating to Lanval, is still entirely in control. The terms and conditions of her patronage are hers to set, and in return she takes care of the knight as his benefactor and friend. The Lady appears when he needs her, grants him wealth he can use generously, and graces him with an allure that eventually draws the eye of Arthur’s queen. This creates the opportunity for an expression of chivalry and ruler-vassal dynamics that is not sustainable without magical intervention and sets Lanval “en dreite veie” (“*on the right path*”) (l. 134) Through these actions, the Lady displaces Arthur as Lanval’s new and more effective king, and inhabits the traditionally masculine-labelled roles of suitor, patron, and ruler (McLoone 8).

This patronage and chivalric embodiment, however, does not reduce the Lady to a solely masculine figure. As a female ruler and lover, the Lady is also placed in juxtaposition with Arthur’s queen. Throughout the lai, the Lady maintains her femininity as a beauty who rivals

and surpasses the queen. Not only does she court and seduce Lanval as a woman, but she is acknowledged during Lanval's trial by all the male members of the court as "la plus bele de mund,/De tutes celes kë I sunt" ("the loveliest in the world,/of all the women who live") (ll.591-2). Even as a king-like figure, the Lady cannot be separated from her femininity, and she plays this to her advantage:

Devant le rei est descendue	<i>She dismounted before the king</i>
Si qui de tuz iert bien ve[ü]e.	<i>so that she could easily be seen by all.</i>
Sun mantel ad laissié chier,	<i>She let the mantle fall</i>
Que meuz la puissent veer.	<i>so that they could see her better.</i>
(ll. 603-6)	<i>(ll.603-6)</i>

She is comfortable in her body and sexuality and not afraid to show it, whether in her private pavilion as Lanval approaches or in full display of an entire court. Her presence and appearance far outshines the angry queen, who does not reappear during the remainder of the lai. To reduce the Lady to a mere noblewoman or object, however, dismisses her function within this lai. She is a powerful ruler, embodying both male and female societal roles in an ideal but nevertheless queer way. The Lady disrupts heteronormative society and structures radically, overturning the authority of both Arthur and his queen, and fulfilling ideal chivalric values completely as a genderfluid and inhuman entity. Thus, the Lady's appearance is politically significant and subversive, but these subversions can only be created in contrast with the alternatives presented in the Arthurian courts. Though inhuman and disruptive, the Lady nonetheless is more chivalrous and courteous than her mundane counterparts, who themselves demonstrate their own monstrosity in their actions towards Lanval. However, the Lady is not the only queered figure in this narrative: Lanval, transformed into a link between the two ways of being, becomes a queered

figure within his chivalric society, the embodiment of Otherworldly subversion within the mundane.

The Lady has entered the playing space, but these two elements alone do not create an encounter. An encounter necessitates an interaction between the two worlds, which requires an ordinary mortal to interact with—and react to—the Otherworld. In this particular lai, the mantle of human representative is taken up by the titular Sir Lanval, who associates quite closely with his Otherworldly counterpart. Lanval starts the lai essentially destitute—he is forgotten in Arthur’s gift-giving and can’t even pay his entourage, let alone exhibit generosity with the common folk he comes across in his travels. As Marie writes,

De la meisné le rei fu.	<i>He was part of the king's household.</i>
Tut sun avoir ad despendu,	<i>He has spent all his wealth,</i>
Kar li reis rien ne li dona	<i>for the king gave him nothing,</i>
Ne Lanval rein ne li demanda.	<i>nor did Lanval ask him for anything.</i>
(ll. 29-32)	(ll. 29-32)

As I explained previously, the lord-vassal relationship in the medieval period was one of reciprocity: nobles would pledge service to the king and in turn the king would grant them political and financial benefits. However, we don’t see this mutual respect playing out here, despite Marie’s assertion that Lanval has all the chivalric qualities knights should possess and serves his king to the best of his ability (ll. 21-22 and l. 40). Lanval’s money is gone, but he has no support system to fall back on, making the completion of his duties to both the king and his own vassals utterly impossible. As part of the king’s court, he should be in a stable position, but this is clearly not the case; his king has forgotten him, and the support supposedly offered by chivalric conventions is out of his reach.

Lanval's situation only improves when the Otherworld bleeds into his reality. His first encounter with the Lady leaves Lanval not only with a lover but also with a new feudal lord, replacing the king who consistently fails him. Lanval is then able to fully embody chivalric values that are otherwise impossible to fulfil—values of compassion, generosity, and service. As a knight without resources and reliable income, Lanval was in danger of losing his ability to be a chivalric figure. The Lady's patronage saves him from this fate. Marie writes that after this newfound wealth is granted to him,

Lanval donout les riches duns,	<i>Lanval gave rich gifts,</i>
Lanval quitout les prisuns,	<i>Lanval ransomed prisoners,</i>
Lanval vesteit les juleürs,	<i>Lanval clothed minstrels,</i>
Lanval feseit les granz honors:	<i>Lanval did great honor:</i>
N'I ot estrange ne privé	<i>there was no stranger or dear friend</i>
A ki Lanval nen [e]üst doné.	<i>to whom Lanval would not give.</i>
(ll. 209-14)	<i>(ll.209-14)</i>

As per both his previous habits of behaviour and his lady's detailed instructions (ll.134-9), Lanval exudes generosity, creating an ideal chivalric figure who could not have existed without magical intervention. While the mundane is limited by resources and human selfishness, the Otherworld boasts of treasures and resources beyond imagining; with access to this unlimited wealth, Lanval has an unprecedented opportunity to embody a chivalric code and the conduct other knights fail to uphold. He is newly dressed and invested by the Otherworld, relieving him of the disillusionment that threatened to swallow him at the beginning of the lai. Rather than replacing the medieval world he lives in, Lanval's encounter with the Otherworld only deepens his connection to the mundane. He becomes handsomer, happier, and is able to hold himself

more completely to the conventions of chivalry, even if his reasons for doing so are, in part, selfish. The Lady, through the wealth and beauty granted to her by the Otherworld become the king Arthur could not be, in turn allowing Lanval to become the knight society alone could not create. Once Lanval is in possession of the wealth Arthur failed to provide, he is respected, even revered, by those who previously envied him and wished him ill (ll.19-26). While Lanval is proven right and given his own happy ending eventually, the lai does not shy away from illuminating the hypocrisy of the Arthurian court, as well as the limits of the patriarchal structure it is founded on. When the king fails to uphold his chivalric code, the Lady offers herself as an alternative method to pursue chivalry, taking on the role of patron and gift-giver far more effectively than Arthur ever could. The Lady's intervention in Lanval's life highlights the failings of the Arthurian court and the inadequacy of traditional chivalry and patriarchy. In this regard, gender and the conventions that govern it are rendered unnecessary through the participation of the Otherworld. *Lanval* puts a female in a position of ideal power, creating a subverted scenario through the mechanics of the Otherworld. This in turn queers Lanval, putting him in a feminized position within his relationship and within the Arthurian court.

While Lanval, as a "Hume estrange descunseillez" ("*a foreign man without support*"), was already an outcast in the court, his association with the Lady and her Otherworld queers him even further (l.36). Lanval is supported by a new vassal-lord relationship, but indebted to his Lady, his lover, instead of a king. This alternative to traditional masculine power puts Lanval in a position previously reserved for the female lover in courtly romance, and yet Lanval is the better knight for it. He is more chivalrous and virtuous than his more 'masculine' compatriots, and the Lady imbues him with a queerness that others are drawn to. His new attire, wealth, and chivalric virtue stand out from the knights around him, even drawing the gaze of Arthur's queen.

The queen becomes infatuated with Lanval, offering to make him her lover. When Lanval turns down her advances, however, she becomes enraged, and accuses him of homosexuality:

“Lanval,” fete le, “bien le quit,	<i>“Lanval,” she says, “it’s quite clear to me</i>
Vuz n’amex gueres cel delit.	<i>you have no interest in that pleasure.</i>
Asez le m’ad humme dit sovent	<i>People have often told me</i>
Que des femmez n’avez talent.	<i>that you have no desire for women.</i>
Vallez avez bien afeitiez;	<i>You have shapely young men</i>
Ensemble od eus vus deduiez.	<i>And you take your pleasure with them.</i>
Viliens cüarz, mauveis failliz,	<i>Base coward, infamous wretch,</i>
Mut est mi sires maubailliz	<i>my lord is greatly harmed</i>
Que pres de lui vus ad suffert ;	<i>by having allowed you near him;</i>
Mun escient que Deus en pert!”	<i>I believe that he will lose God by it!”</i>
(ll.277-86)	<i>(ll.277-86)</i>

The queen’s accusation, reflective of the homophobic attitudes of the time period, nevertheless highlights Lanval’s queerness within the Arthurian court. Lanval is an outsider within heteronormative power structures, and this places him in a difficult position from the start. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that Lanval is not actually harmed by this accusation, nor by his feminization. This accusation is never publicly used against Lanval; his trial instead focuses on his alleged slander of the queen.

The final set of in-text interactions between the mundane and the Otherworld occurs during Lanval’s trial, where Lanval, once again penniless and powerless, is accused of slander. When he breaks his promise to the Lady, revealing her existence to the queen in a moment of prideful boasting, he loses access to both his Lady and her resources. Immediately, Lanval is

stripped of all ability to fulfil his chivalric duty and his will to live. Leventhal writes, “Lanval has nothing—indeed, it is as if he has been again unmade—but suddenly, it is all too clear what he desires. His life on Earth is meaningless not in and of itself but without the Otherworld” (202). Although Lanval and the reader can both agree that, intentionally or no, he acted wrongly in betraying his Lady, the queen’s deceitful accusations and the subsequent trial by Arthur and his court are inherently unjust. This injustice becomes even more obvious in light of the consistent failure of the court to support and empower Lanval to adequately fulfil his duties to the court. The respect in lord-vassal relationships is even more absent here; the fact that Lanval is a vassal, regardless of his lack of support from his court, is all that Arthur cares about. Now, Lanval finally has his king’s attention and recognition as his vassal, but he is going to be punished rather than given the gifts he is owed (l. 363). Marie writes that “Encumbrer le veulent plusur/Pur la volenté sun seigneur” (“*Some want to find him guilty/according to their lord’s wishes*”) (ll. 431-2), and the language throughout this episode of the lai reinforces the pressure exerted by the king to pass the judgment he wants. The arrival of the Lady, preceded by her handmaidens, to interrupt the trial and present her case, only reinforces the hypocrisy and problems evident in courtly conventions. Many of Arthur’s knights feel compelled to pledge their service to her instead, and Arthur himself wants to retain her within his own court. Marie writes,

Li reis, que mut fu enseigniez,	<i>The king, who was very well-bred,</i>
Il s’est encuntre [i] dresciez,	<i>got up to meet her,</i>
E tuit li autre l’enurerent,	<i>and all the others honored her</i>
De li servir se presenterent.	<i>and offered themselves to serve her.</i>
(ll.607-10)	<i>(ll. 607-10)</i>

However, the Lady has no time for them. She gets straight to the point, asking the court to acquit Lanval of the accusations levied against him, and asserting “que la reïne ad tort eü:/Unc nul jur ne la requist” (“*that the queen was wrong:/he never asked for her love*”) (ll. 620-1). The Lady’s arrival dismisses any argument the queen could make; she not only supports Lanval’s claim but physically embodies it. Marie writes,

N’i ad un sul que n’ait jugié	<i>There is not one who does not judge</i>
Que Lanval ad tut desrainié.	<i>that Lanval has completely won his case.</i>
Deliveres est par lur esgart,	<i>He is freed by their decision,</i>
E la pucele s’en depart.	<i>and the maiden takes her leave.</i>
Ne la peot li reis retenir;	<i>The king could not keep her;</i>
Asez gent ot a li servir. [f. 138v]	<i>she had enough people to serve her.</i>
(ll.627-32)	(ll.627-32)

The trial creates a juxtaposition between Arthur and the Lady, which ends with the Lady’s outright rejection of both Arthur and his knights—she has enough *men* to serve her, a significant claim since the only male-identifying figure we’ve seen in service to the Lady in the text is Lanval, the ostracized and abandoned member of the Arthurian court. Even despite his failings, his mistakes, and his inability to perfectly hold to what his Lady requests of him, he has still reached a pinnacle of chivalry far beyond anything the other knights can even hope to reach, and is thus beyond the reach of Arthurian conventions. His embodiment of chivalry alone is enough for the Otherworld.

When the Lady takes her leave, her exit further flips gender conventions on their heads. Both the Lady and Lanval take positions that are queer within the heteronormative world of the Arthurian court, but the overturning of patriarchal structures is nevertheless positively framed in

the lai. The climax of the lai, the Lady's departure from Arthur's court, reads as a fairytale-like happy ending for both Lanval and his lover. Marie writes,

Quant la pucele ist fors a l'us,	<i>When the maiden came through the gate,</i>
Sur le palefrei, detriers li,	<i>with one leap Lanval</i>
De plain eslais Lanval sailli.	<i>jumped on the palfrey, behind her.</i>
Od li s'en vait en Avalun,	<i>With her he went to Avalon,</i>
Ceo nus recuntent li Bretun,	<i>so the Bretons tell us,</i>
En un isle que mut est beus;	<i>to a very beautiful island:</i>
La fu ravi li dameiseaus.	<i>the young man was carried off there.</i>
Nul humme n'en oï plus parler,	<i>No one ever heard another word of him,</i>
Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter.	<i>and I can tell no more.</i>
(ll.638-46)	(ll.638-46)

The Lady whisks the knight away from the failings of the Arthurian court, with Lanval occupying the seat typically reserved for the damsel-in-distress at the back of the horse. The specification of the Lady's horse as a white palfrey, a mount often ridden by women during the Middle Ages, further emphasizes Lanval's feminization. As Katherine McLoone writes in her own analysis of Lanval's exit, "Lanval's removal to [Avalon], through which he is now connected both by name and by spouse, then makes the otherworld a mirror image of the 'real' world by Arthur, where women occupy the kingly position and men are the subordinate spouses" (12). Throughout the lai, the Lady is established as the dominant figure in the relationship and occupies a dual role in her traditionally male social status and female form. She cannot be reduced to one gender role nor the other, but instead occupies both at once, overturning and subverting the heteronormative gender ideals cemented in medieval society. Lanval, on the other

hand, is feminized and queered, yet is also recognized as the winner, one to be envied and respected. Even within the normative, heterosexual world of the court, the queered Lanval maintains his identity as a knight and as an embodiment of chivalry. The lai thus offer societal critiques of the Arthurian court, chivalric code, and medieval society in general through the intervention of the fae.

Lanval and his Lady overturn gender conventions in a fascinating way, playing with and subverting narrative and societal expectations. New possibilities for gender are presented through the lens of fantasy, allowing these alternatives to be explored in an Otherworldly, and thus safe, space, a strategy still used in nonconventional forms of storytelling in the modern era. The invocation of a liminal game space in physical settings allows these alternatives to affect the mundane while staying separate from it, setting the Otherworld in direct contrast with the ‘real.’ The meadow and the pavilion establish these Otherworldly spaces as far more valuable and enriching than the realities of the Arthurian court. This magically touched space then bleeds into the mundane, allowing Lanval, with the help of the Lady, to create a new vision of chivalry. The Lady, as fae representative of the Otherworld and patron to Lanval, transcends societal expectations and gender stereotypes, perfectly embodying the role of gift-giver as a fantastically powerful and gender-fluid entity. This Otherworldly creature succeeds where both King Arthur and his queen fail, possessing generosity, nobility, and virtue that clashes with the realities and hypocrisy of the Arthurian court. The subsequent interactions between the Otherworld and Arthurian reality illuminate both Otherworldly alternatives to the status quo and the problems cemented within this society, queering Lanval but still recognizing him as a true and exemplary knight. The Lady, in herself and through Lanval, reveals the failures of King Arthur’s court, the inadequacy of traditional chivalry, and overturns patriarchal notions of power and gender. In

writing *Lanval*, Marie de France has created a subversive picture of gender and power dynamics, presenting alternative visions of society within the liminal space of the Otherworld.

Yonec

Yonec, is, at first glance, a traditional damsel-in-distress story, complete with an unhappy mortal maiden trapped in a tower. The poem tells the story of a young woman married off to a jealous lord, who locks her away in a high tower to prevent her from being seen by any other men. Despite her captivity, the lady draws the gaze of a fae king, whose name, Marie tells us, is Muldumarec. When the lady, alone and depressed, expresses her desire for adventure, he visits her tower in the form of a goshawk. With some convincing, appealing to her religious inclinations, and lots of shapeshifting, the lady accepts Muldumarec's proposition and the two begin a secretive affair. However, the young woman's elderly caretaker alerts the lord of this illicit development and he puts traps in place to prevent the relationship from continuing. He succeeds; the goshawk is fatally wounded on the razor-sharp spikes placed at the window and he retreats, bleeding and dying, to his own kingdom. The young woman jumps out the high window and pursues him, following the trail of her lover's blood to his kingdom beneath a fairy hill. When she is reunited with Muldumarec, he tells the lady that she is pregnant with his child. After giving her a magic ring, his sword, and tasking her with passing on both his weapon and his story to their future son, the hawk king dies and the young woman returns to her husband, thankfully been made to forget through Muldumarec's magic. Eventually their son, the title character and half-fae knight Yonec, is told of his parentage and his father's untimely death and, immediately after his mother's passing, uses his father's sword to kill his stepfather. The young knight inherits both his stepfather's land and Muldumarec's kingdom, while the young woman and Muldumarec are buried together in a splendid tomb, finally united in death.

While traditional gender roles and expectations appear to be adhered to in this lai, *Yonec* nevertheless grants our female heroine an active and subversive role in the pursuit of a relationship and her future. She speaks her own adventure into being, instigates her own story, dictates the terms of her own relationship, and even jumps out a window to chase down love. The plot puts a sword in her hand, and while she doesn't wield it herself in the text, she nevertheless uses it to take control of her own destiny. However, she remains trapped by the patriarchal structures of her reality until she actively calls the Otherworld to her, at which point the story can begin. The text ultimately uses the mechanics of the faerie world to empower its female protagonist through subversions of traditional gender and power dynamics.

In *Yonec*, there are three liminal spaces in which the confrontations between the Otherworld and the 'real' occur. The first of these is the tower, in which the lai's plot begins and from which much of the conflict originates. A prison for the lady of this lai, the tower is cut off from both the mundane and the Otherworld, making the lady feel alone and miserable:

Dedenz sa tur l'ad enserre[e]	<i>he closed her up in his tower</i>
En une grant chambre pavee. [...]	<i>in a great stone-floored chamber. [...]</i>
Issi la tient plus de set anz.	<i>He kept her like that for more than seven</i>
Unques entre eus n'eurent enfanz	<i>years.</i>
Ne fors de cele tur ne eissi	<i>They never had any children</i>
Ne pur parent ne pur ami.	<i>nor did she ever come out of that tower</i>
(ll. 27-8, 37-40)	<i>for either relative or friend. (ll. 27-8, 37-40)</i>

Her husband isolates the lady completely, cutting her off from any meaningful relationships she might have and keeping her far above the outside world. This is a far cry from the peaceful and warm pavilion of *Lanval*; the tower is cold and unfeeling, an unnatural and constructed space of

captivity and loneliness. The one independent action she could undertake is suicide, but, fortunately, the little hope and religious belief she holds on to prevents her from taking that drastic step. In this prison, the young woman cannot be helped, cannot be saved, and cannot escape. This liminal space exists on a separate plane than reality, timeless and hopeless, but is still inescapably grounded in it. Despite this, the tower cannot be entirely separated from the mundane— with the door guarded by her husband and his elderly sister, the window is both her only connection to the outside world and her only means of escape. This window, a porous boundary between the world outside and the world within, ultimately causes this space to bleed into other realities and allows the Otherworld to intervene. This liminal space, thus, is where the lady and Muldumarec can conduct their affair.

The next Otherworldly space the lady encounters is the fairy hill and the spectacular city it contains, which she stumbles into as she follows the trail of Muldumarec's blood. Marie writes that after finally leaping out the window of her tower,

Icel senti[e]r errat e tient,	<i>She continues on and holds to this path,</i>
Deque a une hoge vient.	<i>until she comes to a hill.</i>
En cele hoge ot une entree,	<i>The hill had an entry into it</i>
De cel sanc fu tute arusee; (ll. 345-8)	<i>all wet with blood; (ll. 345-8)</i>

In Celtic folklore, hills or mounds are often indications of fae presence and activity, and it was often thought that the fae made their homes beneath or within these hills. Patch writes, “The underground realm is perfectly familiar in Celtic folklore, and when it appears in romance it seems easily recognizable” (612). The lady's entrance into the tunnel, then, is already grounded in a mythological tradition. Her discovery of the city, existing in a flexible space inexplicably both beyond and within this fairy hill, only strengthens the text's connection to Celtic myths.

As the young woman breaches this Otherworldly space, one can see many parallels with the meadow and pavilion of *Lanval*, including ornaments of precious metals beyond human value, such as the golden eagle atop the pavilion described in line 87, and the inclusion of clearly defined water barriers like the stream in line 43 of *Lanval*. Marie writes,

Tant ad le dreit chemin erré	<i>She followed the path straight along</i>
Que fors de la hoge [est] issue	<i>until she came out of the hill</i>
E en un mut bel pre venue ;	<i>and into a beautiful meadow;</i>
La trace en siut par mi le pre.	<i>she follows the trail through the meadow.</i>
Asez pre sot une cité;	<i>There was a city quite close;</i>
De mur fu close tut entour ;	<i>it was enclosed all around by a wall.</i>
N'i ot mesun, sale ne tur,	<i>There was no house, hall or tower</i>
Que ne parust tute d'argent;	<i>that did not seem entirely made of silver;</i>
Mut sunt riche le mandement.	<i>the battlements were very grand.</i>
Devers le burc sunt li mareis	<i>Towards the town were marshes</i>
E les forez e les difeis.	<i>and forests and reserves.</i>
De l'autre part vers le dunjun	<i>On the other side, towards the keep,</i>
Curt une ewe tut environ ;	<i>a stream ran all around;</i>
Illeoc arivoënt les nefz,	<i>ships were arriving there,</i>
Plus I aveir e treis cent tres.	<i>there were more than three hundred masts.</i>
(ll. 354-68)	<i>(ll.354-368)</i>

This liminal space is marked by similar indicators of the Otherworld: the water barrier of the stream, the grand natural space that surrounds it, and the demonstrations of wealth and beauty found in the structures and embellishments of the city. The splendor of the city and its

adornments, as well as the presence of hundreds of ships, gestures to the vast resources of the Otherworld. Descriptions of wealth are surprisingly absent from descriptions of the mundane, despite the lady's husband being the ruler of Caerwent, and reality is thus set in contrast to the bright and colourful Otherworld. This richness becomes even more apparent when the lady enters the keep and crosses the threshold of Muldumarec's room:

Li pueçon sunt de or esmeré ;	<i>The bedposts were of pure gold;</i>
Ne sai mie les dras preisier ;	<i>I do not know how to value the sheets;</i>
Les cirges ne les chandeliers,	<i>the tapers and the candelabra,</i>
Que nuit e jur sunt alumé,	<i>which were lit night and day,</i>
Valent tu l'or de une cité. (ll. 386-90)	<i>were worth all the gold of a city. (ll. 386-90)</i>

Muldumarec's home contains unimaginable wealth, contrasting a rich and warm Otherworld with the harsh and barren mundane. Without the continued existence of her lover, however, the lady cannot find solace in the Otherworld; Muldumarec insists that she leave him and return to her own world for her own safety (ll.448-450). Thanks to Muldumarec's ring, she can leave the tower, released by her newly forgetful husband. To end her story, however, she must return to a final liminal space.

The lai's final liminal space is a multivalent layering of Muldumarec's faerie kingdom and the mundane world: the abbey and the tomb Yonec and his family visit at the conclusion of the lai. Here there is a repeated focus on precious metals and the indescribability of the value of these items like line 88 of *Lanval*. This space, once again, cannot be properly described. The lai states of the castle that contains the abbey, "En tut le mund n'ot plus bel" ("*there was none more beautiful in all the world*") (l.478). This phrase echoes similarly vague sentiments expressed in *Lanval*, and simultaneously indicates the superiority of the Otherworld and the inability of the

mundane to find a basis of comparison. The Otherworld has no mundane equivalent, and the language confirms this. Further descriptions of the tomb function in much the same way, recalling the wealth of the city under the hill. Marie writes,

Al chapitre vindrent avant;	<i>They came before the chapterhouse;</i>
Une tumber troverent grant	<i>they found a great tomb</i>
Covert[e] de une palie roé[e],	<i>covered with silken cloth with circles</i>
De un chier orfreis par mi bendé.	<i>of rich golden embroidery from end to end.</i>
Al bhief, as piex e as costez	<i>At the head, at the feet and at the sides</i>
Aveit vint cirgess alum ez.	<i>there were twenty tapers lit.</i>
De or fin erent li chandelier,	<i>The candleholders were of pure gold,</i>
E de argent li encensier,	<i>the censers of silver,</i>
Dunt il encensuent le jur	<i>with which every day they censed</i>
Cele tumber pur grant honor.	<i>the tomb with great honor.</i>
(ll.495-504)	<i>(ll.495-504)</i>

Both the labor and material resources that would allow these ornaments and tapers to be displayed and stay lit at all hours is significant here, once again calling attention to the Otherworld's luxury. The repetition of the wealth motif is striking here, but it is not the only significant factor in classifying the tomb as a liminal space. The tomb marks the place where the mundane and the Otherworld are reconciled and reclaimed. As his coronation occurs in this space, both the mundane and the Otherworld are united under the rule of the half-fae Yonec, while the lady and Muldumarec are laid in the tomb, finally together for eternity. In both instances, the castle and abbey become spaces where the Otherworld and the mundane coexist. Liminal spaces in *Yonec* are flexible and shifting, with characters breaching them separately and

moving in between and through them. The simultaneous instability and rigidity of these liminal spaces are embodied in this lai's fae representative, Muldumarec.

The Otherworldly creature who comes and goes from the liminal space in this lai is Muldumarec, the humanoid shapeshifter who favors a goshawk form. Avian disguises and bird motifs are common in legends of the Otherworld as well as fae lore, grounding this figure in a long folklore tradition. Patch mentions the significance of birds to conceptions of the Otherworld several times throughout his article (cf. 604, 626, 631). Clearly inhuman and inseparable from the animal, Muldumarec embodies the instability of the lai's liminal spaces, carrying the Otherworld in his very being. The hawk appears at the invocation of the lady, who wishes that she could find a lover like those in the old stories (ll.91-104). Immediately after she makes her wish, "L'umbre d'un grant oisel choisi/Par mi une estreite fenestre" (*she saw the shadow of a great bird/through a narrow window*) (ll.106-7). The goshawk uses the window as his entry point into the liminal space and quickly demonstrates his physical instability:

...ostur sembla,	<i>...It looked like a goshawk,</i>
De cinc mues fu u de sis.	<i>it was of five or six moltings.</i>
Il s'est devant la dame asis.	<i>It landed in front of the lady.</i>
Quant il i ot un poi esté	<i>When it had stood there for a bit</i>
E ele l'ot bien esgarde,	<i>and she had looked at it carefully,</i>
Chevaler bel e gent devint.	<i>it turned into a handsome, noble knight.</i>
(ll. 110-5)	<i>(ll. 110-5)</i>

This is only one of many instances where Muldumarec shifts form. However, this avian form in particular links Muldumarec permanently to the animal. As Emma Campbell writes in her essay "Political Animals: Human/Animal Life in *Bisclavret* and *Yonec*," the goshawk knight

“embodies the coexistence of human and animal” (101). Even as he attempts to garner the trust of his human love interest, he neither explains his origins nor attempts to pass as a stable human being, keeping both his species and his identity a secret.

“Dame,” fet il, “n’eiez poür!	“Lady,” he said, “do not be afraid!
Gentil oisel ad en ostur;	<i>In the goshawk you have a noble bird;</i>
Si li segrei [vus] sunt oscur,	<i>even if its secrets are obscure to you,</i>
Gardez ke seiez a seür,	<i>see that you are safe,</i>
Si fetes de mei vostre ami! (ll. 121-5)	<i>and make me your beloved! (ll. 121-5)</i>

However, this animalistic and inhuman figure is clearly a much kinder and more respectful suitor than the lady’s own human husband. Even with his flexible form, Muldumarec as a fae entity is courteous, polite, and chivalrous, with an appearance described in a similarly vague way to *Lanval’s Lady*. As the lady observes,

Kar mut esteir de grant beauté:	<i>For he was very beautiful:</i>
Unkes nul jur de sun eé	<i>never once in her life</i>
Si beals chevaler ne esgarda	<i>had she seen so handsome a knight</i>
Ne jamés si bel ne verra.	<i>nor will she ever see one so handsome.</i>
(ll.141-4)	<i>(ll. 141-4)</i>

Once again, there’s a lack of specificity in this description that connotes an inability to properly link this figure to the mundane. Muldumarec is set apart as physically and mentally superior to reality’s male representatives and proves himself much better suited to fulfil the needs of his lady love. As his subjects affirm later in the lai, “Unc ne fu nul si curteis” (“*there was never anyone so courtly*”) (l. 516). This fulfilment of courtliness by an inhuman shapeshifter with a penchant

for animal disguises is politically significant, perhaps even more so than Lanval's own embodiment of chivalry.

Much like the Lady, Muldumarec also becomes a gender- and species-fluid entity by means of his shapeshifting ability. When the lady expresses concern about taking a lover who is not a Christian, Muldumarec has a solution:

Le semblant de vus prendrai,	<i>I will take on your appearance,</i>
Le cors Deu receverai,	<i>I will receive the body of God,</i>
Ma creance vus dirai tute;	<i>I will say my whole creed for you;</i>
James de ceo ne seez en dute!"	<i>never be afraid on this account!</i>
(ll. 161-4)	(ll.161-4)

His sincerity and subsequent shift to fulfil this declaration convinces the lady and she accepts him as her new lover. However, Muldumarec's ability to become physically female challenges the traditional gender binary as well as the human/inhuman binary. Emma Campbell writes,

Thus, the final step in establishing Muldumarec as a human lover, rather than attaching a stable human shape to Christian belief, instead troubles the stability of physical form even further. What emerges from this troubling is an emphasis of qualities of nobility, courtliness, and faith that come into focus in the transition between forms, and emphasis that depends on an ability to read beyond superficial humanity to something which has equal—if not superior—value. (102)

Muldumarec is comfortable in his body and fluidity, taking on the forms of animals, males, and females alike. His shapeshifting subverts gender ideals as well as traditionally medieval hierarchies of humanity and bodily stability. Muldumarec is a queer creature, disrupting the societally sanctioned and heteronormative structure of marriage specifically through his intervention in the narrative. This animalistic and unstable physicality troubles strict classifications; the relationship between the lady and Muldumarec is neither traditionally lawful nor entirely heterosexual. But, as Campbell suggests, Muldumarec is superior not despite his instability, but because of his instability. His inhumanity is what allows him to subvert expectations and provide an alternative to and enrichment of the young woman's reality. Muldumarec also takes on the gift-giving role of the chivalric code, opening up opportunities for the lady to grow beyond the tower walls and have more control over her life. In the moments before his death, he gives the lady a ring that will stop her husband from mistreating her and makes him forget all the events that previously transpired (ll. 412-418). Muldumarec, as a figure, becomes an alternative to the realities of the lady's life and the failings of her society. His intervention in her world enables the young woman to take an active role in her own story, giving her the power and control reality would not give her. This unconventional relationship is positively framed by Marie and provides the health and happiness that the lady failed to receive from her societally acceptable marriage. He brings her back from the brink of death, makes her happy for the first time in at least seven years, and gives her the strength and willpower to take back control of her destiny. Muldumarec, while a monstrous and animalistic figure, provides a healthier alternative to patriarchal power.

In *Yonec*, through the engagement between the mundane and the Otherworld, the lady is granted the power, with Muldumarec acting as a conduit for her to take control. Despite the

temptation to read *Yonec* as a typical ‘male saviour’ narrative, analysis of this lai disproves this reading. The power in *Yonec* is not Muldumarec’s, but the lady’s. The lady begins this lai trapped in a tower, abandoned by her family, and abused by her husband. However, it is she who summons Muldumarec into her space, dictates the terms of her relationship, and begins her affair with him. Despite Muldumarec’s monstrous appearance and power, he demonstrates nobility and compassion not possessed by humans in the mundane; the lady’s husband, by comparison, is revealed to be the real monster. While the mundane monster traps and abuses her, the Otherworld gives her the power to make her own decisions and independently pursue a relationship she wants. This will to pursue even compels her to jump out a window and follow the wounded Muldumarec back to his kingdom “esteit nue en sa chemise” (“*wearing only a chemise*”) no less (ll.336-341). The interaction with and intervention of the Otherworld gives the lady the ability to become an active shaper of and “bearer of story” (Campbell 104). Mundane reality has failed her and continues to fail her: her first word in the poem, “Lasse” (“*wretched me*”) begin a long lamentation against her imprisoned and unjust circumstances (ll.67-86). Despite the releasing allure of death she feels, she retains enough hope to imagine alternative possibilities and to invoke a wish in speech:

Mut ai sovent oï cunter	<i>I have often heard tell</i>
Que l’em suleit jadis trover	<i>that once one was accustomed to find</i>
Aventures en cest païs	<i>adventures in this country</i>
Ki rechatouent les pensis: [141r]	<i>that gave hope to the sorrowful:</i>
Chevalers trovoënt puceles	<i>knights would find maidens</i>
A lur talent gentes e beles,	<i>to their liking, noble and beautiful,</i>
E dames truvoënt amanz	<i>and ladies found lovers</i>

Beaus e curteis e vaillanz,	<i>who were handsome and courtly and valiant,</i>
Si que blamez n'en esteient,	<i>so that they were not blamed for it,</i>
Ne nul fors eus nes veinent.	<i>nor could anyone else see them.</i>
Si ceo peot estrë e ceo fu,	<i>If this could be and was so,</i>
Si unc a nul est avenu,	<i>if this ever happened to anyone,</i>
Deu, ki de tut ad poësté,	<i>may God, who has power over all things,</i>
Il en face ma volenté!”	<i>do my will in this regard!</i>
(ll.91-104)	<i>(ll.91-104)</i>

It is only at this request that the Otherworld enters her life. Muldumarec, despite his own power, waits until she calls for him to come to her. While she does accept his proposition and the chance to change her life, she is also cautious and intelligent, framing her needs clearly and directly. While on the receiving end rather than the proposing end of this deal, she nonetheless takes control of her contract much like *Lanval's* Lady. She speaks this new part of her life into being, invoking her own salvation. Though this new development doesn't remove her from her situation, it drastically improves her quality of life. Marie writes,

Al demain lieve tute seine;	<i>The next day she gets up quite cured;</i>
Mut fu haitie la semeine.	<i>she was very happy all that week.</i>
Sun cors teneit a grant chierté,	<i>She looked after her body with great care,</i>
Tute recovre sa beauté. (ll. 213-6)	<i>she entirely recovers her beauty. (ll.213-6)</i>

Her first touch of the Otherworld, brought upon by the initiation of her affair, improves her mood and mental state dramatically. She begins to take care of herself again, and, like her lover, undergoes her own kind of shapeshifting. Marie writes,

Pur la grant joie u ele fu,	<i>From the great joy she felt,</i>
Que ot suvent pur veer sun dru,	<i>that she often had from seeing her lover,</i>
Esteit tut sis semblanz changez.	<i>her appearance was quite changed.</i>
(ll.225-7)	(ll.225-7)

This change in physicality is noticeable enough that it catches the attention of the lady's caretaker, leading to the discovery of the lovers and ultimately to Muldumarec's death. This change in appearance is not the only physical alteration the lady undergoes, however. As he lies bleeding in the tower, Muldumarec reveals the physical product of their affair:

De lui est enceinte d'enfant,	<i>she is pregnant with a child by him,</i>
Un fiz avera pruz e vaillant:	<i>she will have a worthy and valiant son:</i>
Icil [la] recunforterat ;	<i>he will bring her comfort.</i>
Yonec numer le frat,	<i>She should name him Yonec:</i>
Il vengerat lui e li,	<i>he will avenge him and her,</i>
Il oscirat sun enemi. (ll.327-32)	<i>he will kill his enemy. (ll. 327-32)</i>

The interaction between the Otherworld and the mundane, then, imbues and physically changes the lady's body with her own liminal instability. Through physically creating and carrying her half-fae son Yonec, she combines the mundane and the Otherworld into a single entity who ascends his father's throne (ll.547-548). The lady, embodying the flexibility and instability of her former lover, literally carries this liminality inside herself. In this moment, she becomes the true caretaker of the story—this responsibility is not bestowed on Yonec, but on the lady herself.

However, Muldumarec's death does not nullify the lady's newfound power. In fact, her power and responsibility only increase in her lover's absence. In addition to the ring, which

allows her to regain a modicum of control in her married life, Muldumarec also entrusts the lady with his sword, transferring the role of warrior and protector to her.

L'espee li cumande e rent,	<i>He commends and gives to her his sword,</i>
Puis la cunjurë e defent	<i>then forbids her and makes her swear</i>
Que ja nul humme n'e[n] seit saisiz,	<i>that no man will ever take possession of it,</i>
Mes bien la gart a oés sun fiz.	<i>but she will keep it well for his son.</i>
(ll. 419-22)	(ll. 419-422)

The implications of this charge are significant and far reaching. Rather than entrusting it to one of his subjects until his son's arrival, Muldumarec trusts the care of his sword to his lover. The fae quite literally puts the sword in the lady's hand, giving her both a means of protection and a responsibility to continue his legacy. While the text never indicates if the lady herself wielded this fairy weapon, I would assume that the sword of a knight, even a faerie one, requires some degree of maintenance and care. Muldumarec's command to "keep it well" confirms this, and grants this noblewoman the role of protector.

The lady is also granted the power to end the story and avenge her lover. The lady, as "bearer of story", incites her son's action (Campbell 104). When the lady reveals to Yonec his story and fae heritage, the mundane Caerwent and Muldumarec's Otherworldly kingdom are united under the progeny of both worlds. Yonec kills his stepfather, thus inheriting the kingdoms of both his stepfather and his fae sire and creating a new land where both the Otherworld and the mundane coexist. While her son deals the killing blow, it is important to recognize that none of this would be possible without the lady. It is she, through her words and action, who initiates the climax of the story; without her, reconciliation and justice ceases to be

possible. She has the sword on hand to physically transfer her lover's legacy, and even uses the same words Muldumarec used when granting the sword to her (l.419).

Ore vus comant e rent s'espee:	<i>"Now I commend and give to you his sword:</i>
Jeo l'ai asez lung tens gardee."	<i>I have kept it for a long time."</i>
Oianz tuz, li ad coneü	<i>In the hearing of everyone, she made known</i>
Que l'engendrat e sis fiz fu,	<i>to him</i>
Cum il suleit venir a li	<i>who fathered him and whose son he was,</i>
E cum si sires le trahi;	<i>how he used to come to her,</i>
La verité li ad cuntee.	<i>and how her husband betrayed him;</i>
Sur la tumbe chëi pasmee,	<i>she told him the truth.</i>
En la paumeisun devia;	<i>She fell fainting upon the tomb,</i>
Unc puis a humme ne parla.	<i>and in her faint she died;</i>
(ll. 531-8)	<i>never again did she speak to anyone.</i>
	<i>(ll. 531-8)</i>

Surrounded by male clerics, knights, and lords, the lady is nonetheless in control, only releasing her grip on life when she has fulfilled her promise to Muldumarec. The lady's story, passed on to her son, allows the narrative to come to a just conclusion. She bridges the gap between father and son, passing on his heritage and his birthright to him. This final reconciliation, while resulting in the lady's death, is honoured and rewarded. In her struggle and death, she succeeds in uniting the two worlds, with the fae-human Yonec made king in his father's stead and new lord of Caerwent.

Yonec uses its fantastic and Otherworldly elements to empower its female protagonist and challenge heteronormative and anthropocentric ideals of being. The construction of liminal

spaces in the tower, the city, and the abbey allows the Otherworld to bleed into the mundane and enter the lady's life. The richness and nobility of the Otherworld is contrasted with the stark and lonely mundane, revealing the harshness of the lady's situation. Muldumarec, as an animalistic but noble creature, highlights the monstrosity of the mundane by giving the lady what the mundane fails to provide: love, respect, power, and control. Challenging ideals of gender and heteronormative power dynamics, Muldumarec fulfils the lady's needs and overturns the patriarchal structures that kept her trapped. The interactions between the two worlds imbue the lady with her own liminality, allowing her to drive the narrative forward and avenge her lover. Marie de France uses the mechanics of the Otherworld to subvert traditional gender ideals and empower *Yonec's* lady.

Bisclavret

Bisclavret, the least concerned with traditionally romantic relationships among the three lais in this analysis, nevertheless uses fantasy and Otherworldly creatures to subvert the status quo. This poem traces the story of the titular knight Bisclavret who, despite being noble, popular, and happily married, disappears mysteriously for three days of each week. His wife, understandably curious and concerned, finally presses him to tell her where he goes. After a great deal of convincing, Bisclavret reveals that he is a werewolf and goes to the woods to live as a beast each week. He further reveals that without his clothing, he will remain a werewolf permanently. Unlike *Yonec's* lady, Bisclavret's wife is not sympathetic to the plights of animalistic shapeshifters; she enlists the help of a long-time suitor to steal her husband's clothes and trap him in his animal form. The plot succeeds, and the wife, having betrayed Bisclavret, marries the new suitor. A year passes, and the king goes hunting in the very same woods, where his party stumbles upon a werewolf. The beast, begging for mercy, endears itself to the king and

accompanies him back to the castle. It appears gentle and tame, behaving quite nobly up until the moment when the new husband of Bisclavret's wife shows up. It is at this point that it becomes enraged and attacks the knight, though it relents at the command of the king. The court, having seen the werewolf's more docile temperament, is concerned, but thinks that the werewolf must be justified for some unknown reason. Later, when the king returns to the woods with the werewolf, Bisclavret's wife comes to greet them. When she arrives, the werewolf attacks her and tears off her nose, disfiguring her noble appearance. This time, the court is much less lenient at an attack on a noblewoman, and move to kill the beast on the spot. The king, angry and disturbed at the beast's violent behavior, is nonetheless convinced by his advisor to press Bisclavret's wife for information. Under torture, Bisclavret's wife confesses that she betrayed her husband and her belief that the werewolf is indeed Bisclavret. They find Bisclavret's old clothes and return them to him. Bisclavret returns to his human form and is embraced and reinstated by the king, while his wife is banished.

Bisclavret is a narrative of monsters, appearance, and seeming. The transformation of Bisclavret removes the possibility of a traditional heteronormative relationship and replaces it with a vassal-monarch relationship with homo-erotic overtones (and undertones). While not linked as explicitly to the fae or a clearly defined Otherworld, *Bisclavret's* fantasy elements draw upon the same Otherworldly tradition. These elements allow gender subversions to be revealed, creating alternatives to and alterations of reality. Like the other *lais*, it uses shapeshifting, gender-bending, and subversions to trouble societal norms and critique the mundane. While not usually classified as a 'fairy lai,' I would argue that this monster narrative utilizes the same Otherworldly structure as *Yonec* and *Lanval* and should be studied within a similar category.

While not as distinctly fae-related as the previous lais, *Bisclavret* nevertheless requires the invocation of liminal spaces. The space that most clearly bridges this “Otherworld” and the mundane in this narrative is the forest. While this lai lacks the flowery descriptions of natural spaces employed by the previous lais, I still want to address the forest’s liminality within the text. Marie introduces the border of this space at the very beginning of the lai, writing,

Jadis le poeit hume oïr, [col. b]	<i>There was a time when one would hear,</i>
E sovent suleit avenir,	<i>and it often used to happen,</i>
Humes plusurs garual devindrent	<i>that many people became werewolves</i>
E es boscages meisun tindrent.	<i>and kept house in the woods.</i>
Garualf, c’est beste salvage :	<i>The werewolf is wild beast:</i>
Tant cum il est en cele rage,	<i>when it is in that frenzy,</i>
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,	<i>it devours people and does great harm.</i>
Es granz foré[s] converse e vait.	<i>It lives in and roams the great forests.</i>
(ll. 5-12)	(ll. 5-12)

This space is set aside as a home for the monstrous, a dangerous place where the werewolves of the world live and hunt in their animal forms. The text only ever references the werewolves in connection with this natural space. *Bisclavret* himself confirms Marie’s premise, telling his wife,

“Dame, jeo devience bisclaveret:	<i>“Lady, I become a werewolf:</i>
En cele grant forest me met,	<i>I go into that great forest,</i>
Al plus espés de la gaudine,	<i>to the deepest part of the woods,</i>
Si vif de preie e de ravine.” (ll.63-6)	<i>and live on prey and plunder.” (ll.63-6)</i>

This natural, dangerous space is grounded in the mundane but kept separate from it. The woods are deep, dark, and inhabited by the inhuman and bloodthirsty. However, like other liminal

spaces, the boundary surrounding this space is created to be breached. The suitor is able to follow Bisclavret to the chapel at its edge and take the werewolf's clothes to his deceitful wife, preventing Bisclavret from returning to the human world and trapping him within the forest space. Following this betrayal and subsequent disappearance of Bisclavret, another representative of the mundane, the king of Bisclavret's land, breaches the border of the liminal space:

Issi remist un an entire,	<i>Things remained this way for a whole year,</i>
Tant que li reis ala chacier ;	<i>until the king went hunting;</i>
A la fores tala tut dreit,	<i>he went straight to the forest</i>
La u li bisclaveret esteit. (ll.135-8)	<i>where the werewolf was. (ll.135-8)</i>

Much of the plot is initiated within or adjacent to this forest, making it a significant element of any analysis tied to physical space. The natural is allied closely with the seemingly monstrous Other, much like it is allied with the fae. The forest thus constitutes a liminal space, full of Otherworldly, bestial creatures who interact with mundane figures. The werewolves, as both human and beast, are able to cross over into civilized spaces and back again, making them creatures who breach borders and subvert clearly defined expectations on what it means to be animal or human.

The most supernatural element within this lai is found in its Otherworldly creature, the baron and titular werewolf Bisclavret. Even before she introduces her protagonist, Marie is very deliberate in her introduction of the werewolf as an entity. She uses her description to subvert expectations surrounding nobility, appearance, and seeming. After her preliminary introduction to werewolves in lines 5 to 12, Marie writes, “Cest afere les ore ester;/Del bisclaveret voil cunter” (“*Now I let this matter be;/I want to tell of the bisclavret*”) (ll.13-14). The phrasing and

language in Marie's premise are clever: she sets the audience's expectation, separating the werewolf from the rest of humanity as a monstrous, animalistic Other. Lines 13 and 14, however, read somewhat dismissively, as if Marie, in explaining the appearance of the werewolf, is setting herself up to be immediately proven wrong by Bisclavret himself. As Campbell writes,

By contrast, the *bisclavret*—which is presented as the Breton translation of *garuulf* as well as the name of the transforming knight—seems to differ from this animal in name and nature, proving an altogether less vicious and more human creature than this initial description suggests. The threatening animality associated with the werewolf is nonetheless displaced from Bisclavret to the duplicitous wife, who becomes associated with the disturbing cohabitation of humanity and animality with which Marie begins. (98)

While the *bisclavret* is shown to have this capacity for violence and animalistic brutality, the lai is set up to challenge this assumption, showing the distinction between capacity and action in both humans and monsters.

Our first introduction to Bisclavret is to his human persona, and his character does not recall the villainous figure found in medieval conceptions of lycanthropy. In his book, *The White Devil: The Werewolf in European Culture*, Matthew Beresford indicates that conceptions of the werewolf myth transformed during the medieval period as the predominant religion moved from paganism to Christianity. He writes, “What was once, as we have seen, a highly revered and worshipped beast, emerges in the medieval period as a savage creature, poisonous, destructive, and wholly evil; a beast to be feared and not imitated” (88). Though wolves and by

extension werewolves, have a reputation in the medieval period as demonic and monstrous entities, a reputation Marie alludes to in her introduction, Bisclavret does not seem to be an entirely immoral being, especially in his existence as a human baron. Marie writes,

En Bretagne maneit un ber,	<i>In Brittany there lived a baron</i>
Merveille l'ai oï loër;	<i>whom I have heard marvellously praised;</i>
Beaus chevalers e bons esteit	<i>he was a handsome, good knight</i>
E noblemen se cunteneit.	<i>and conducted himself nobly.</i>
De sun seinur esteir privez	<i>He was dear to his lord</i>
E de tuz ses veisins amez. (ll. 15-20)	<i>and beloved by all his neighbors. (ll.15-20)</i>

At first glance, Bisclavret appears to be a well liked and well-behaved figure who just so happens to spend three days a week as a werewolf in the woods. Both Bisclavret's wife and certain critics of this lai are understandably skeptical that 'human' characteristics like nobility and honour can be found inside a bestial creature like a werewolf, a skepticism firmly held by medieval society. David B. Leshock, in his essay "The Knight of the Werewolf," argues that Bisclavret should not be considered a sympathetic figure. He suggests that since Bisclavret is neither "unhappy [nor] condemned" to be a werewolf, Bisclavret is therefore happily existing in a monstrous state (157). He writes,

Most critics have ignored that the text states that the werewolf is a beast who preys on men. Before Bisclavret is discovered by his wife, we must assume from this explicit textual evidence that he has been eating human beings in his part-time status as werewolf. We can not assume that Bisclavret ate only berries and small creatures of the forest; Marie tells us what werewolves eat. The

reader can have little affection for a beast that devours humans.

Only by avoiding this section of text and its direct implications can one argue that Bisclavret serves as an exemplum for the reader who has, as Bruckner suggests, our ‘unqualified sympathy.’ (158)

While I agree with Leshock’s assessment that Bisclavret is not necessarily an unwilling werewolf, I find his argument unconvincing and illogical. Firstly, Leshock calls Bisclavret “a man who is sometimes a werewolf” (155). By very definition, a werewolf is a creature who, willingly or not, can take on the forms of a wolf, a human, or a combination of the two. Bisclavret is neither entirely human nor entirely beast; he is both at once, with his time split between the two. By Leshock’s logic, Muldumarec would be a knight who is sometimes a bird, which dismisses a huge part of how Muldumarec functions as a character. It is the same for Bisclavret; Bisclavret *is* a werewolf, so Leshock’s intent to distinguish between Bisclavret and the werewolf makes little sense and undermines what Marie’s lai sets out to teach. Secondly, Leshock jumps to the conclusion that because werewolves are known to eat human beings, that Bisclavret is undoubtedly doing the same. However, Marie only indicated that “Tant cum il est en cele rage,/Hummes devure, grant mal fait” (“*when it is in that frenzy/it devours people and does great harm*”) (ll.10-11). There is no necessary assumption to draw from that statement. We see Bisclavret enter a frenzied state in the text, yet no humans are devoured—there is at least some ability on the part of the werewolf to choose. It does not follow, based on Bisclavret’s behaviour, that he spent an entire year eating and murdering humans. The alternatives for Bisclavret’s diet Leshock offers on pages 158, small animals and berries, are also illogical. Bisclavret himself says that he lives in the deepest part of the woods, already established as a dangerous place people would usually avoid, and lives on prey. Deer, elk, bears, and other large

mammals could provide an alternative food source, something Leshock fails to consider. Though the negative implications to Bisclavret's status as a werewolf are not entirely invalid—he does commit violent acts within the confines of the narrative—Marie's portrayal of the character purposefully highlights and subverts expectations. Assuming that problematic appearances completely strip an individual character of any sympathy, regardless of their actions, puts Leshock in a very similar position to Bisclavret's judgmental wife, a position he claims to be above (158). Bisclavret's animal "capacity for eating humans and creating much harm," therefore, does not reflect his actual character (159). Capacity is not synonymous with action; this is a crucial argument of the lai, especially in light of medieval conceptions of werewolves discussed previously. In this lai, as well as *Lanval* and *Yonec*, the capacity for monstrosity is also possessed by human characters, who tend to act on their bestial impulses far more often than the 'monsters' themselves.

Despite maintaining a monstrous appearance throughout the majority of the lai, Bisclavret demonstrates a nobility and honour that frequently surpasses the human figures he interacts with. He also maintains an understanding of the chivalric code, honouring his human loyalties by humbling himself before his king. When the werewolf encounters the king and his hunting party in the woods, Bisclavret recognizes his sovereign and petitions him for mercy:

A lui current tute jur	<i>The hounds and hunters</i>
E li chien e li veneür,	<i>chased it all day,</i>
Tant que pur poi ne l'eurent pris	<i>so that they very nearly caught it</i>
E tut deciré e maumis,	<i>and completely tore it to shreds and destroyed</i>
De si qu'il ad le rei choisi: [col. b]	<i>it,</i>

Vers lui curut quere merci.	<i>until it saw the king:</i>
Il l'aveit pris par sun estrié,	<i>it ran to him to ask mercy.</i>
La jambe li baise e le pié. (ll. 141-8)	<i>It had taken him by the stirrup,</i> <i>It kisses his leg and his foot. (ll.141-8)</i>

Bisclavret demonstrates humility, nobility, and considerable restraint in his actions. Rather than violently attacking his pursuers, he humbles himself before his king, respecting his commands and demonstrating subservient behaviour proper to a knight of the court. After following the king out of the forest, he even forms bonds with his human comrades in service of his lord.

Maire, as narrator, provides some insight into his interior motives when she writes,

Tuz jurs entre les chevalers	<i>Every day it went to bed</i>
E pres del rei se alout cuchier.	<i>among the knights and close to the king.</i>
N'i ad celui que ne l'ad chier;	<i>There is no one who does not hold it dear;</i>
Tant esteir franc e deboneire,	<i>it was so noble and kind,</i>
Unc ne volt a rien mesfeire. [f. 133r]	<i>it never wished to do wrong in any way.</i>
(ll. 176-80)	<i>(ll.176-80)</i>

This 'beast,' rather than ravenous and bloodthirsty, is chivalrous, consistently humbling himself before his human king and acquiescing to his commands. Even in his frenzied rage against his wife's new lover, Bisclavret backs down at the king's insistence (ll. 196-206).

Regardless of his ability to do harm, Bisclavret consistently chooses not to indulge his thirst for blood, or does not possess the thirst for blood werewolves were thought to have. This is a consistent pattern throughout the story up until Bisclavret's wife reveals herself. The resulting confrontation is brutal and violent, but even at this moment, faced with the woman who betrayed him, the werewolf shows some degree of restraint. Marie writes,

Quant Bisclaveret la veit venir,	<i>When Bisclavret sees her coming,</i>
Nul hume nel poeit retenir;	<i>no one could hold him back;</i>
Vers li curut cum enragiez.	<i>he ran toward her as though he were mad.</i>
Oiez cum il est bien vengiez:	<i>Hear how well he avenged himself:</i>
Le neis li esracha del vis!	<i>he tore the nose from her face!</i>
Quei li p[e]üst il faire pis?"	<i>What worse could he have done to her?</i>
(ll. 231-6)	(ll.231-6)

Instead of killing or devouring her as Marie described werewolves doing at the beginning of the lai, Bisclavret leaves his wife with a facial deformity, a ‘monstrous’ appearance reminiscent of his own. Within this narrative, where appearance and beauty are valued, this is the worst thing Bisclavret could have done, the most just punishment he could enact. By tearing off her nose, Bisclavret takes away any semblance of a noble appearance she has physically; her beauty as a noblewoman can no longer speak for her, as it does for *Lanval*’s Lady. The act of violence is far-reaching, sending the wife into exile and passing the same deformity onto her female descendants. Despite this horrific act of gendered violence, however, Bisclavret is still in control, deliberate in his punishment rather than slaughtering those who did him wrong.

As an Otherworldly creature, Bisclavret occupies a fluid space much like the Lady and Muldumarec in *Lanval* and *Yonec*. His shifting between human and animal forms marks his body as flexible and inhuman. The shifting of the words referring to him throughout the lai also work to indicate this instability, in both the French and the English. The werewolf, while mostly called ‘bisclaveret,’ is often referred to as “ceste beste” or “la beste,” a word labelled with feminine case articles (la, ceste) in the original Old French (l. 159). Bisclavret’s wife herself

confesses “*Que la beste Bisclaveret seit*” (“*that the beast must be Bisclavret*”) (l. 274, emphasis mine). Claire Waters explains,

Although the noun ‘bisclavret’ is masculine, here the werewolf is referred to in English as ‘it’ when it is in wolf form; the human protagonist Bisclavret, who is of course the same ‘person,’ is ‘he.’ This both helps to distinguish the wolf from the king and other masculine characters and conveys his dual nature; it also helps to account for the term ‘beast,’ which is several times applied to the wolf, and which is feminine in Old French. (Waters 153)

Bisclavret’s status as beast, then, links him to the animal and human, and well as the masculine and the feminine, all at once. As an entity, he cannot be reduced to one or any single classification, especially since the end of the poem does not indicate that his lycanthropy is over, merely that he has regained control over his shape-shifting. He maintains his instability in both gender and form throughout the story and beyond its conclusion because of his status as a supernatural creature. He becomes a figure of power, nobility, and control, subverting expectations of both traditional romance and monster tales through his interactions with the mundane.

The status of Bisclavret as a werewolf also challenges the hierarchy that places humanity as superior to the animal. Bisclavret is a noble character, even in his animal form, and tends to act just as courtly and chivalrous as his human comrades. Humanity is neither a prerequisite for nobility nor for knighthood—the king accepts Bisclavret’s service as a wolf just as readily as he accepted and reaccepted his service as a human knight. Marie’s description of the werewolf’s savagery, contrasted with Bisclavret’s behaviour in his animal form, further destabilizes the

notion that humanity is superior. While Bisclavret is presented as equal to, if not superior to, the mundane, he consistently humbles himself, relinquishing his power in deference to his king. Even his violent actions subvert expectations and Marie's preliminary descriptions. Marie was likely well aware of the medieval views on lycanthropy, but chooses to use her werewolf tale to subvert these expectations. While Bisclavret does enact harm, he neither devours nor fatally injures those who wronged him, instead exacting revenge in a controlled but deeply impactful way. Stereotypes and expectations surrounding the savagery and brutality of werewolves are instead displaced onto the human characters, troubling any accusations of monstrosity they make in the story. The seemingly savage monster is a respectful and noble creature, while humans often enact the brutal actions they simultaneously condemn.

The interactions between the mundane characters and the Otherworldly werewolf drastically alter traditional medieval narratives of both horror and romance. The initial interaction between Bisclavret and his wife entirely overturns the romance convention of other medieval narratives. When Bisclavret reluctantly reveals his lycanthropy to his spouse, his trust in her fails to be returned.

De l'aventure se esfrea,	<i>She was terrified by this adventure,</i>
E maint endroit se purpensa,	<i>and she thought hard concerning her</i>
Cum ele s'en puïst parir;	<i>situation,</i>
Ne voleit mes lez lui gisir.	<i>how she could get away;</i>
(ll.99-102)	<i>she did not want to lie beside him any more.</i>
	<i>(ll.99-102)</i>

While her fear is understandable, her reaction runs counter to the lady's reaction in *Yonec*. Rather than being intrigued by adventure, this lady is horrified by it, looking for any opportunity

to escape her loving husband. Bisclavret's wife does not think logically or allow her husband to prove his integrity, instead taking the reputation of werewolves as an indicator of his future behaviour towards her. This exchange compels Bisclavret's wife to betray him, confirming the concern Bisclavret had in revealing his secret. With her new lover, she conspires to trap Bisclavret in his animal form, releasing her from her horrific predicament.

Puis li cunta cumfaitement	<i>Then she told him exactly how</i>
Ses sires ala e k'il devint;	<i>her lord went away and what become of him;</i>
Tute la veie kë il tint	<i>she taught him the whole path</i>
Vers la forest l[i] enseigna;	<i>he took to the forest;</i>
Pur sa despuille l'enveia.	<i>she sent him for the discarded clothes.</i>
Issi fu Bisclaveret trahiz	<i>Thus Bisclavret was betrayed</i>
E par sa femme maubailiz.	<i>and brought to ruin by his wife.</i>
(ll. 120-6)	<i>(ll.120-6)</i>

If this lai intended to portray Bisclavret as a monstrous villain, this scene would be where the lai would end; Bisclavret's wife would marry her new lover and they'd live happily ever after.

However, this is not a standard monster narrative. Ironically, the wife's betrayal of Bisclavret acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, bringing her straight to the violent attack she took such drastic measures to avoid. Bisclavret, rather than his wife, is the protagonist and entrapped figure. His wife takes away the physical objects that give Bisclavret control over his unstable form, putting both the man and the monster into a position of powerlessness.

His bestial interactions with his wife and her new lover, violent as they seem to be, further subvert monster and romance narratives. As I demonstrated earlier, while Bisclavret acts with understandable anger and rage at the appearance of the cheating couple, he does not allow

his animalistic frenzy to completely overtake him. He intends to execute his version of justice, not to kill. At the attack of the knight, the people of the court affirm that this violent behaviour is rare in their wolf companion:

Mut s'esmerveillent li plusur,	<i>Everyone is astonished,</i>
Kar unkes tel semblant ne fist	<i>for it had never acted like this</i>
Vers nul hume k'il veïst. (ll. 204-6)	<i>toward anyone it saw. (ll.204-6)</i>

It is not long after this that Bisclavret extracts his violent revenge upon his wife; this time, the court is much less understanding.

De tutes parz l'unt manacié ;	<i>They threatened him from all sides;</i>
Ja l'eüssent tut despecié, (ll. 237-8)	<i>They would surely have torn him all to pieces, (ll.237-8)</i>

Here, it is not a human who is in danger of dismemberment by a werewolf, but the werewolf by the humans, subverting the monster narrative even further. It is only at the intervention of a counselor to the king that Bisclavret is spared a brutal and bloody death.

The final interaction we see in *Bisclavret* is the return of the clothes and the private transformation of the wolf back into a man. Here, Bisclavret again demonstrates subservience.

Le reis demande la despoille;	<i>The king asks for the discarded clothes;</i>
U bel li seit u pas nel voille,	<i>whether she likes it or not,</i>
Ariere la feta porter.	<i>she has them brought back.</i>
Al bisclaveret la fist doner.	<i>He had them given to the werewolf.</i>
Quant il les urent devant li mise,	<i>When they had put them in front of it,</i>
Ne se prit garde en nule guise.	<i>It did not take any notice at all.</i>

(ll. 273-80)

(ll.273-80)

It is almost as if the wolf is waiting to be released from his duties as wolf to return to his humanoid form, refusing to take back control. The wise man, again, explains to the king,

“Sire, ne fetes mi bien:

“Sire, you are not doing this properly:

Cist nel fereit pur nule rien,

he wouldn't, for anything,

Que devant vus ses dras reveste

put his clothing back on in front of you

Ne muet la semblance de beste.

nor change his animal appearance.

Ne savez mie que ceo munte :

You have no idea how important this is:

Mut durement en ad grant hunte.

He feels terrible shame about it.

En tes chambres le fai mener

Have him led into your rooms

E la despoille od li porter;

And take the clothing with him;

Une grant piece l'i laissums.

We'll leave him there for a good while.

S'il deviant hume, bien le verums.”

We shall see if he becomes a man.”

(ll.283-92)

(ll.283-92)

There is clearly protocol surrounding this transformation, conventions that echo courtly engagements, despite the wildness of Bisclavret's form. There's also an uncertainty about the result, one that is resolved when Bisclavret reappears in his humanoid form.

Bisclavret as an entity is a shapeshifter failed by a traditional heterosexual relationship and given back control by his king. The physical nature of this lord-vassal relationship, with its inherent homoeroticism and queerness, further challenges traditional societal ideals. While a prominent element of medieval society, the replacement of marriage by a feudal dynamic evokes ideas of a same-sex, physically charged relationship, one between a human ruler and a werewolf.

Sur le demeine lit al rei	<i>On the king's own bed</i>
Trova il dormant le chevaler.	<i>he found the knight sleeping.</i>
Li reis le curut embracier;	<i>The king ran to embrace him;</i>
Plus de cent feiz l'acole e baise.	<i>more than a hundred times he hugs and kisses</i>
Si tost cum il pot aver aise,	<i>him.</i>
Tute sat ere li rendi;	<i>As soon as he could get an opportunity,</i>
Plus li duna ke jeo ne di. (ll.298-304)	<i>he returned all his land to him;</i>
	<i>he gave him more than I say. (ll.298-304)</i>

While the king's familiarity with Bisclavret and his service is noted in lines 251 to 253, this reaction to his knight's reappearance appears erotically charged—the reunion takes place in the king's bed with the king lavishing physical affection on the werewolf, whose permanent gender remains shaky if not completely indeterminable. The heterosexual relationship that opened this lai is thus replaced by a queer, erotically charged vassal-lord relationship. Despite Bisclavret being an animal very recently and still maintaining his werewolf status, the king embraces him, quite literally, with open arms. This animalistic creature is allowed to continue his service within the court and is given back the life his wife had temporarily taken from him, while the noblewoman, now monstrous, is exiled.

Bisclavret uses Otherworldly elements of monsters, appearance, and liminal spaces to subvert expectations and challenge societal norms. The creation of natural and liminal spaces highlights the separateness of the Otherworld and the mundane while allowing the two to co-mingle and interact. In this lai, the forest is a home for the monstrous werewolves, yet can still be entered by the human characters. This lai's Otherworldly creature, the werewolf Bisclavret, appears to be a savage monster but consistently demonstrates nobility, chivalry, and control. As

a shapeshifter with an unstable form, Bisclavret challenges the hierarchy of the human and subverts gendered and societal expectations in both the text and within the medieval literary tradition. The interactions between the werewolf and the mundane further subvert expectations, displacing the savagery expected of the wolf onto the human characters. Bisclavret, meanwhile, is humble and subservient, and his cooperation with the king replaces his failed marriage with a queer lord-vassal relationship, overturning heterosexual ideals of romantic relationships. Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, through the invocation of a monstrous, Otherworldly werewolf, plays with appearance and expectations to create societal and literary subversions.

Summary

The Otherworldly and fantasy elements present in the *lais* of Marie de France subvert societal expectations and highlight the problems in medieval society by creating a space outside of the mundane where those issues can be addressed and critiqued. The intervention of the Lady in *Lanval* allows Lanval to become the most chivalrous version of himself, the epitome of the chivalric code, while the Lady acts as the perfect gift-giver and sovereign ruler King Arthur failed to be. The interactions and actions of both the Lady and Lanval offer alternatives to traditional gender roles and societal structures through a fantastical lens, and expose the limits of chivalric and courtly ideals in terms of gender, patriarchy, and feudalism. In *Yonec*, the engagement between the mundane lady and the Otherworldly Muldumarec puts the power into the hands of a trapped and mistreated woman, allowing her to take control of her destiny and enabling her to pursue her desires. The subversions of gendered power granted by the hawk-knight Muldumarec expose the violence inherent in patrilineal societies and resulting heteronormative relationships and give the female protagonist agency in a society that fails to empower women on its own. *Bisclavret's* shape-shifting and juxtaposition of appearance and

action challenges medieval conceptions of the monstrous and human superiority over the animal, highlighting the limits of courtly ideals about nobility, virtue, and beauty. The lai displaces a traditional marriage, replacing it with an erotically charged lord-vassal relationship between a king and a human-wolf shapeshifter. In these lais, the humans are the true monsters, while the Otherworldly monsters act nobly and humanely, fully embodying the standards of courtliness and chivalry so highly valued in medieval society. The fae and similar monsters, thus, allows these works of literature to present subversions of gender norms and create alternatives in a space that exists outside of the mundane, until such a time as it can be welcomed into it.

Larp and Le Duché de Bicolline

Before I launch into my analysis of the Court of Mirages at Le Duché de Bicolline, and how it relates to the literary tradition found in the *Lais* of Marie de France, I first need to answer an essential question: what, exactly, is larp?

Larp is an acronym for live action role play, used as both a noun and a verb. While some academics write it as LARP, some scholars are starting to put it in lower case as a word of its own, like scuba and laser (Stark x). Larp is essentially a game of adult make-believe, created through collaborations among game masters (GMs) who create the rule systems, the plot frame, and the settings; non-player characters (NPCs) who act as supporting characters for the GMs in the world to initiate plots and take on roles needed for the narrative; and player characters (PCs) who act as protagonists embodying the story and driving the narrative. In typical role-playing games, players create or are assigned a character and then take on the appearance and personality of that character through costuming and performance. Players can take on different genders, races (like elves, orcs, or humans in fantasy games), and ages, with the only limits being the boundaries of themselves and the other players. Larp is first and foremost a form of improvised

storytelling. While there is a narrative frame and specific setting, there is no set script and PCs must embody their characters and role play through scenarios moment by moment. Players engage of wide spectrum of playing styles, ranging from performing a setting-specific (in this case, medieval) version of their real-world self to taking on a completely different personality. Larp, unlike literature, allows readers to live, create, and shape stories that are usually confined to the pages of books or manuscripts, performing and embodying the fantasy. In her larp-focused chapter in *Play, Performance and Identity*, Dani-Synder-Young writes,

This particular form of play is unique in that it is fully embodied and takes place in real time and space, creating a highly structured fantasy world overlapping with the real world. (23)

While role play and the larping does not have a singular starting point, formal iterations of larping are generally agreed to have originated in the late 60s in the San Francisco Bay Area with backyard parties and tournaments, which in turn branched into the Society for Creative Anachronism and other similar battle games (Cramer 1). However, the practice of roleplaying has roots much further back in the past ranging from ancient religious ceremonies to medieval dramatic performances like pageants and mummings. In her book *Leaving Mundania*, Lizzie Stark discusses the courtly entertainment tradition in the medieval period, particularly in Tudor England; both Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I participated in elaborate and expensive events that were “similar to larp in terms of structure and presentation” (36). She writes, “The pageantry of sixteenth century Europe is one of larp’s closest ancient analogues and was an activity reserved for the highest echelons of society: the rich, titled, and famous” (31). Even the *lais* themselves originated from an improvised oral tradition, performed by bards without scripts or set lyrics. Larping is thus an evolution of this oral performance tradition in the modern era.

Today, there are countless genres and varieties of larp games, ranging from popular medieval fantasy games to avant-garde Nordic larps. Even within the medieval fantasy genre there is a wide range of game types, but many of the games build male-dominated spaces and privilege combat and “realistic medievalism” over all else. Role-players who enjoy fantasy are often ostracized and shunned; Michael J. Cramer specifically describes vampire, elf, and faerie players being shunned to isolated camps in swamps at SCA events (121). Female-identifying players often receive similar treatment, as most role-players and larpers tend to be middle-aged, straight, and male. Even today, women are not entirely welcome within a role-playing setting, with female characters regarded as little more than sexualized objects or prizes for male characters. The institution of roleplaying, as described by Gary Alan Fine in his book *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, is often grounded in blatant sexism, dismissing or mistreating female players. Fine gives several biased reasons for this, claiming that “Women are typically unfamiliar with the central gaming themes” and “that women who wish to participate must portray male characters” (65, 66). He writes,

Medieval games are structured particularly for male characters, reflecting the contemporary view of the Middle Ages. As a result, women as female characters have little importance. Male players comment that female characters should be treated as property and not as human beings. (65)

While Fine deals primarily with tabletop and pen-and-paper role-playing games, this attitude is unfortunately prevalent in larping communities. The majority of players and GMs are still male, and patriarchal regimes are cemented in larp culture. The women and minorities within the Court of Mirages, however, are seeking to change this dominant regime at Bicolline.

Le Duché de Bicolline is a fantasy influenced medieval larp game based out of Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc, Québec, a small town two hours from Montreal.² The game was created in 1994, referred to as the year 994 in the game’s lore, and has been running elaborate and immersive events since 1996. While it runs events year-round, like balls, tavern nights, and campaign weekends, its biggest and most famous event is Le Grande Bataille, a week-long all-day game that usually runs in August. Le Grande Bataille, like many of Bicolline’s events, takes place in an expansive medieval village surrounded by forests and rivers, and with its own fort and battlefield. This site, owned by Bicolline itself, has been evolving and growing over the last 25 years, and is the largest dedicated larp space in North America to date. The grounds are huge and immersive, decorated with incredible detail, with over 190 buildings and structures built with authentic medieval methods and materials. There are, of course, modern conveniences like porta-potties and parking lots, but these are kept in hidden and out-of-the-way areas to keep the experience immersive. While being “on the ground” in this physical playing space is a huge element of this larp, much of the political and world changing action takes place in a geopolitical realm, a virtual game played with resources and cards. Players collect resources, conquer territory, and make political alliances to further their goals in Bicolline’s world, with mechanisms much like a game of *Risk*. Embodied actions like battles and skirmishes, as well as political negotiations and ceremonies, are usually used to impact this virtual game, and role play and magic are often treated as necessary mechanics to achieve objectives. On the ground, however, this game is given new life. Bicolline is different from many other larps in that it runs somewhat like a Renaissance festival and larp combined—player characters can choose whether

² *Duché de Bicolline—Site de Immersion Médiéval et fantastique*, Duché de Bicolline 2019, <https://www.bicolline.org/public/accueil/>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

to role play or merely observe the chaos as they enjoy a casual life within this medieval setting. Thus, Bicolline can be a larp, an immersive theatre production, and an embodied performance practice all at once, depending upon the attitude of any particular player. For purposes of this project, however, I want to focus on the role-play and fantasy aspects that emerge from this game.

Despite a growing amount of academic interest and published works on the topic, larp is still not a widely recognized or appreciated storytelling format. While there are numerous games and large events similar to Bicolline's Grande Bataille held throughout Europe and North America, larp is considered a niche hobby and looked down upon by fans of more traditional modes of fantasy gaming like Dungeons and Dragons®. In their book *Medievalisms*, Tison Pugh and Jane Weisl have an entire chapter on "Experiential Medievalisms," but devote less than a paragraph to larp, arguably the most experiential and immersive kind of medievalism one can find in the world today. While they acknowledge larp's importance in this field of study and its ability to open up new perspectives, they dismiss the legacy of fantasy in the medieval tradition and its survival in larp:

The medievalism of much LARPing is often overshadowed by its role-playing fantasy element, but this panopoly of trope, while diluting its medieval traditions, instills in the game the endless possibility of new envisionings of the past, including those based in reality, history, fantasy, and individual imagination. (133)

While I agree with their point regarding the endless possibilities of larp, I disagree with Pugh and Weisl's primary sentiment of 'diluting' and 'overshadowing.' As I discussed in the first section of this thesis, fantasy is not at all uncommon in the medieval tradition, particularly in literature.

Fantasy, rather than diluting the medieval tradition, enhances it, opening up space to confront new ideas and providing answers to questions that would not have been considered otherwise. It envisions new possibilities, illuminates alternatives to traditional ways of being, and ultimately writes new stories where there were previously none. Fairy stories and fairy tales are often dismissed in a similar way; the fantastic elements can turn historically inclined readers or larpers away due to a perceived lack of realism. However, like Marie de France's *Lais*, these stories have a historical basis in literary traditions, and much of the subversion and challenging potential emerges from this fantasy. In larps that have a history of privileging realism in a medieval setting, the arrival of fantasy and fae can turn an entire world upside down. Such is the case with Le Duché de Bicolline.

In the fall of 2016, I discovered the newly emerging fae community at Bicolline and began to lend my expertise in fae lore and literature to help found a functioning fae court and cement the fae as a well-rounded and respected species of character for individuals to play. I joined a guild called the Twilights Dawn, home to the founders of the Court of Mirages, and worked closely with its leadership to create the stories and mechanics that would be employed at Le Grande Bataille and other events like Le Bal de Pourpe. As such, I occupy a dual role as both player and creator of sorts, taking part in its organization and planning structures. This gives me a deeper perspective than the average participant and a far more active and immersive role than a GM or NPC. I helped with this planning and community building year-round, and when August came, gathered my kit and plunged headlong into the world of the fae. The most immersive and fascinating element of Bicolline is its players: thousands of individuals from all different walks of life dressed in full medieval regalia, complete with hairstyles and make-up to represent their characters and races. For these past three summers, I walked among them, watching and writing

and enjoying the magical atmosphere. The following analysis is based on my observations and experience at three iterations of the Grande Bataille, from 2017 to 2019, and the evolution and impact of the fae community on the game during that time period. In the interest of personal privacy, I will be conducting my analysis as I would a *lai*. I collected my research through notes onsite and material written prior to the events, so any descriptions come from either personal experience or material prepared and disseminated prior to the event. My observations are of the characters and story that emerged during my experiences at Bicolline, and I will not be referencing the true identities of these players outside of their character names. Like the *Lais*, Bicolline exists in the realm of fantasy, and I want to keep it that way in this thesis.

In this section, I will argue that the fae of Bicolline, specifically in the Court of Mirages, function in a significantly similar way to the fae in the *Lais* of Marie de France. I will examine how the fae community uses space, characters, and interactions to create subversion both in the world of Bicolline and in contemporary society and popular culture. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not be focusing on *how* people RP (as role play is commonly abbreviated) but on my observations of the characters and stories. I structure my observations of the Court of Mirages in the same way I structured my analysis of the *Lais*. I will first examine the use of and creation of physical space by the fae at Bicolline. I will then analyze the actions and personalities of specific fae characters in the Court who exhibit astounding similarities to the fae characters in *Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Bisclavret*. After this, I will describe the encounters of mortal and fae players in the role-playing world of Bicolline. Through this analysis, I offer my thoughts on the subversions the Court of Mirages create within Bicolline and their similarity to the Otherworld found in the *lais*. I argue that the Court of Mirages is a continuation of the medieval literary tradition and creates new and subversive queer spaces much like Marie did in her *Lais*.

As I mentioned in my introduction, this section of my thesis is based heavily in embodied research and performance. It is a radically different experience playing these games as a character versus observing as a detached researcher. As a researcher with no stakes or focus, there is so much one can miss; by immersing myself fully in the narrative, I was able to notice more detail and connections. Like Dinshaw, I am aware of the disconnect between play and study that is blurred in medievalism as a field, and the disapproval of amateurism in traditional academia. However, I wish to take advantage of this liminal position afforded by my role as a player and share the characters and stories I have encountered through these experiences. Like I mentioned previously, this thesis is liminal. While I am an academic, I am also a player, a fan, an amateur. And amateurism, especially amateur medievalism, Dinshaw argues, has queer potential. As she writes, in *How Soon is Now?*,

By shifting the boundaries of knowledge production in this way amateurism shows the potential for shifting the whole system of credentializing, of judging who gets to make knowledge and how. This perception leads to my broad viewpoint in this book: that amateurism's operation outside, or beside, the culture of professionalism provides an opening of potentials otherwise foreclosed. (24)

Dinshaw's own academic work is full of asides and narratives alongside literary analysis; for instance, *How Soon is Now* starts with a personal anecdote describing New York's Medieval Festival in 2008, an event upon which she grounds the rest of her arguments. Dinshaw argues that these types of "Amateur readings [...] can help us to contemplate different ways of being, knowing, and world making" (24). Amateurism has queer potential, and this thesis is all about

queer spaces. It thus seems fitting to begin my analysis with a personal narrative, a small piece of my observations over three years of research. I will begin much like Marie and introduce this world to you with a story.

The Fae of Le Duché de Bicolline

The sun has only just set behind the line of towering pines that frame the edge of the camp. Laughter and music drift from Old Town, echoing in the night air as groups of revelers wander down its dirt roads, singing ballads on their way to their next drink. Scarlet and gold embers dance upward to join the slowly emerging stars, dusting the dark blue of the sky with glints of white and silver. Every breath tastes of campfire smoke, and the air hums with magic. Here in this clearing, however, there is a definite chill, and the only light radiates from a softly glowing river of gossamer fabric, winding its way through the open space and twinkling with fairy lights placed underneath it. An illuminated crowd is gathered on one side, silently facing the river. Otherworldly entities, covered in glowing markings and monstrous features, stand throughout the crowd and at the edges of the circle, pacing back and forth with swords and roving eyes. All eyes are on the small but imposing woman standing calmly at the water's edge.

She is striking, with a long cloak of luna moth wings and a twisting circlet of feathery antennae and flowering branches. Her hair has faded from its usual auburn to a pale gold, though in this light there is a sheen of lilac to it. A shimmering rainbow of freckles covers the bridge of her nose and sweep beneath both of her sparkling blue eyes. A belt of leaf shaped leather pouches hangs from her waist, and her long fur tipped tail swishes back and forth behind her as she leans on a polished wooden cane. A chime rings out in the darkness. Another. Ringing notes of bronze and silver in succession send a melody dancing and bouncing through the packed circle. The woman's lips curl up in a soft smile, her fangs jutting out from her teeth

as she raises a hand. The Lady needs no words; her presence is command enough. The crowd stands, entranced, as the Faerie Godmother, Runa Andlatter, begins to speak.

“Fellows, friends, fae, the circle is set. The magic has been called. The Veil stands before us, a thin membrane between this world and the world of Faerie. In the past, the heritage ceremony has taken you to great heights, it’s taken you to your childhood, it’s taken you to the battlefield, but this time my friends, oh this time we are going down. Deep down into the darkness. Below the Veil, below fear, below hope, below harried thoughts of food and fighting. In a place of cavernous darkness that pulses with possibility, there lies a pool. Still, smooth, serene, it calls out with a gentle yet insistent hunger. A deep consuming need to realize potential and break the surface. The water is a black so deep and so dark that it feels as though one could fall into it forever and be lost to endless potential. Standing at the edge of the pool, you gaze down into the water, darker than the deepest night, and realize anything could be down there.”³

Music begins to drift slowly from the trees, and twinkling lights begin to hover over the water. The Godmother smiles and turns, facing a lithe and slender spirit who has emerged from the darkness on the other side of the river, pacing back and forth like a predator. For the third time, the annual Heritage Ceremony is about to begin. Welcome, my friends, to the Court of Mirages.

Four years ago, in the year of 1016, a group of fae refugees emerged from beyond the Veil into the mundane world of Bicolline, looking for a new home where their dwindling magic could be saved. In this world, where magic is a tool guarded closely by the rich and powerful, the arrival of the fae, whose very being is made of magic, immediately drew attention. The very first Heritage Ceremony in 1017, a celebration of fae heritage and an opportunity for mortals to

³ Speech taken from a script created before the event, written June 2019 by K. Maddox.

cross the Veil and become fae themselves, turned this small phenomenon into a revolution. The first ceremony was packed, and the subsequent events drew bigger and bigger audiences, with dozens of players joining the ranks. In a realm ruled by kings and dukes obsessed with military conquest and personal gain, Runa Andlatter seeks to bring magic and community back to a people who have forgotten it, and to find a home for the fae in the mundane. The Godmother is revered, protected, and powerful, and her work and leadership has changed the world—and game—of Bicolline forever. This is a story that is being written in its very telling. This is the story of the Court of Mirages, and how the fae are changing history.



A critical component of the fae’s existence in the mortal realm is the creation and search for physical spaces, particularly a home for the fae people. The grounds of Bicolline, in a very meta way, function as their own liminal space. Bicolline is a fenced and gated medieval village with its own taverns, homes, towers, and guild halls. Everyone within its walls is costumed in varying degrees of medieval garb, yet people have conversations about contemporary video games and music. Cars pass on the highway outside the fort walls, prompting calls of “oh look, a dragon!” from more relaxed players. The grounds cannot be separated from the mundane or the modern but are inescapably grounded in both. However, when the cars are gone and luggage is hidden within tents, when the cannons boom to signal “game on,” this space becomes a pocket universe where the medieval and the modern collide in a literal playing space.

The lore of the fae is based heavily around the Veil, a permeable border between the Otherworld and the world of Bicolline. The Veil is a marker of the Otherworld and separates the world of Faerie from the world of Bicolline (Patch 604). Where the fae walk, the Veil bleeds thin; in ceremonies, this border becomes permeable. In creating physical spaces, the Court of

Mirages draws magic from beyond the Veil and creates liminal spaces within the mundane world.

The Godmother's guild, the Twilights Dawn, makes its home in a large camp at the forested edge of Bicolline's grounds. The camp itself is elaborately decorated with orange and blue pennants painted with the guild's symbol and pots of glowing flowers hang from metal poles planted beside tent entrances. While it is the camp of a specific guild, the Twilights Dawn camp is often referred to as "The Fae Camp" by Bicolline's players, since most members are fae who pledge their allegiance to Runa and her Court of Mirages. As founder of the fae community, Runa is the figure most closely associated with the fae, and thus her camp has become the physical embodiment of the fae on the grounds. The camp is constantly receiving visitors, whether they be powerful political players seeking an audience with the Godmother or the Court's Steward Aedan Iosson, military allies seeking Sir Colson Tarband, the General of the Twilights Dawn and Master of the Guard, or curious mortals hoping to catch a glimpse of fae creatures. A recent addition to this camp is the Ravencrest Tavern, run by a genderfluid and graceful water spirit named Jakkimo. Over its first week of operation, this tavern quickly garnered a reputation as a safe and welcoming gathering place for members of the LGBTQ2IA+ community and their allies. This camp, inhabited by the fae, is a new and fascinating iteration of Bicolline's camps and gathering places, making it a literal queer space.

The fae also manifest liminal space through ceremony, especially through the Godmother's annual Heritage Ceremony. The ceremony produces a physical manifestation of the Veil, a pocket of the Otherworld, a liminal space contained within a magic circle. It is this space that allows mortals to become fae, an irreversible race change for their characters. While the inaugural ceremony took place in the centre of the camp of the Ordo Cervi guild, which

transformed its central pavilion into a ceremony space, more recent iterations of the ceremony have been much more deliberate in the use and creation of physical spaces. The second ceremony, for example, took place in the centre of the Witches' Circle, a Stonehenge-like monument of tall stones at the bottom of a valley. For one night, the inside of this circle became the Veil itself, as individuals placed glowing stones in a bronze bowl of water to symbolize the surrender of their previous lives. The fae invoked the magic circle through song, manifesting a magical space through performance. Holding the ceremony in this specific space was also politically significant: the Witches' Circle is held by a separate guild with its own religion and allies, and the guild in question is very exclusive with who —and what —they allow into their domain. The fact that this ceremony was held in this space is a physical representation of the respect and trust the Godmother has earned, and such respect was not taken lightly. The Witches entrusted the Godmother and her entourage to take care of this sacred space, and the flowers and lights that grew upon the stones were removed as soon as the ceremony was complete, leaving the monument as it had been before. The third and most recent imagining of the Heritage Ceremony was the most elaborate and most similar to the liminal spaces I examined in the *lais*, especially *Lanval*. In this rendition, we set up in a small, grassy clearing a little way from camp. We draped iridescent fabric across the ground over strings of fairy lights in order to create a river. This represented the Veil, with people crossing over in order to become fae. The Veil became a physical water barrier in a meadow, just like the liminal space encountered by *Lanval*. In creating ceremony spaces, the fae have the power to invoke their own magic circles, playing spaces within the grounds of Bicolline.

For much of the year, Bicolline is an impressive but empty medieval village. However, when players arrive, the grounds come alive, becoming a true playing space. Once everyone has

settled into their costume and character, it becomes a completely different world. Likewise, the fae characters at Bicolline are the true source of the subversive power the Court of Mirages wields over the world. The fae are an inherently queer and Othered species of characters, defying expectations of how people should act and appear. Within the Court of Mirages we have a multitude of creatures grounded both in folklore and personal imagination, all players who attend Bicolline specifically to play fae characters. The individuality and creativity exhibited by fae players is striking; their kits and costumes attract attention everywhere, from startled glances on the battlefield to delighted gasps from the small children who chase the winged creatures along the dirt roads. Bicolline has historically been a fantasy game grounded entirely in realism; while there are role play groups for vampires and werewolves, for example, they are generally elusive and secretive about their activities. Even stereotypical fantasy races like the elves faced resistance by political and historically inclined players, even though they are still one of the oldest founding groups at Bicolline. The fae are similarly regarded by some members of Bicolline; however, they are loud and proud, refusing to hide in the shadows and walking their colourful selves wherever they so please. ‘Snowflaking,’ a role-play term referring to the creation of characters deemed “too unique” or “too special,” is an insult being reclaimed and celebrated by the fae. Instead of being ostracized for letting their imaginations run wild, fae characters in the Court of Mirages are encouraged to embody personas who they believe fully represent them. We have androgynous, genderless nature spirits like the fire-spinning gymnast Jakkimo, folklore creatures like brownies, and amalgamations of figures with wings, tails, horns, or unusually coloured eyes—sometimes all at once. In this group, every character is unique and special, and this encouragement sparks passion that can be clearly seen in the elaborate costumes and make-up the fae are well known for. As Otherworldly creatures, the fae are not restricted by

the boundaries and expectations imposed on other character races like humans, elves, or dwarves. Instead, the fae have the freedom to experiment, to play, and to interact in a safe space where they can truly be themselves. As Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schier write:

larp and tabletop groups often allow for crossplay and other alternative social identity performances. Indeed, players sometimes use these spaces to explore aspects of their own gender and sexuality that are normally suppressed, such as transgender or non-binary gender identities or queer desires (Bowman 2010). Such character performances can lead to players' feeling more emboldened to come out in their everyday lives. (Bowman & Schier *RPG Studies* 406)

In a society where racial, sexual, and gender minorities are marginalized, discriminated against, and pressured to conform to the status quo, the Court of Mirages provides a safe, queer space where these differences are nurtured and celebrated. This queerness is embodied and performed at every event, grounded in communal playing spaces. In this growing community, players of all different backgrounds and identities can embrace—and be embraced for—who they are and who they want to be. Here, in a liminal space outside of reality and time, both the players and characters they embody are welcome and safe to express themselves. This community, built on understanding, acceptance, and trust, continues outside the game. The fae community is active year-round, providing players a support network and family in their real lives as well as in game. I personally engaged in preparation, meetings, and casual hangouts starting in January of 2017; these remote events continued almost weekly throughout all my three years of playing at Bicolline. The kinship and community bonds that emerge from this acceptance is staggering.

Groups of colourful, winged, and horned entities wander the streets, fill the taverns, and swarm together on the battlefield. Back in the mundane, people separated by borders, continents, and even oceans maintain constant communication, bouncing ideas for game off each other and sharing events from their real lives until the next time they can meet on the grounds again.

Despite this, the fae are not always welcome, nor is their existence in game a perfect utopia; the emergence of monstrous creatures, just like in the *lais*, often reveals the ugly and discriminatory sides of the mundane. As I said before, the fae have emerged into a world and a game whose players sometimes privilege realism and tradition over fun and fantasy. There is significant pushback against the community the fae are building, and a lot of hatred that has emerged for fae leadership like Runa. At every ceremony and event, we've had to post guards and perimeter watches for both in game and out-of-game reasons; in-game because the fae have been threatened by other groups and need to be protected, and for the exact same reason out-of-game. In embodied practices like larp, emotions and actions tend to bleed between player and character, so threats of violence are not necessarily harmless. Runa has been physically attacked at more than one ceremony, the first of which led to out-of-game severe injury and a hospital trip just a day after her first Heritage Ceremony. We've received enough threats, attacks, and assaults from guilds like *l'Arrogance*—a fitting name, considering the actions and attitudes of some of their members—and other groups of players that the guild has put systems in place so that no fae or member of *Twilights Dawn* walks anywhere alone. We have ways of asking other fae members for assistance getting out of dangerous situations, and safety briefings and check-ins throughout the week to make sure everyone stays safe. The fae, within the world of *Bicolline*, are incredibly queer, threatening an established patriarchal and discriminatory order.

The queer space of the fae world is not immune to the oppression and violence experienced by queer people in society, and this hostility is frighteningly real.

However, the fae community has also garnered its fair share of allies. Fae attract curious looks and friendly conversations wherever they go. A variety of more friendly guilds, religions, and occult groups offer support and resources to the Court, and sometimes even volunteer to guard the fae from harm. The Game Masters have also become good friends with the Court of Mirages, sending observers to our ceremonies and working closely with leadership to create game-wide stories and narratives. The queer space the fae create, while disruptive and frustrating to some members of the Bicolline community, is clearly doing good and opening much needed space to grow. This is only possible, however, through the work of fae players and leaders.

It is striking how similar some of these characters are to the fae found in Marie de France's *Lais*. As I immersed myself in this community, I found myself examining several characters who possessed direct parallels to Marie's medieval protagonists. In the following pages, I will share my observations and analyze how these characters function like their literary counterparts.

Let me return to Runa Andlatter, the matriarch of the fae at Bicolline and elected leader of the Court of Mirages. Runa led a small band of fae across the Veil in order to escape the quickly dissipating magic in the Otherworld of Faerie, sometimes referred to as Wonderland. In the mundane, she hopes to find new opportunities for her people to live and grow. She has spent the past four years gathering a Court of fae, fae-touched, and human allies. The Godmother, as she is often called, is a political, spiritual, and nurturing leader for the fae, a reputation which has earned her a loyal and tightly-knit community of followers. Like the Lady in *Lanval*, Lady Runa

is a powerful female leader in a male dominated world. The political game of Bicolline is controlled and tightly held by kings, dukes, and barons—even the real-life GMs and writers are predominantly male, with only two women on Bicolline’s seven-person creation team. Bicolline unfortunately does not publish gender statistics of its players; however, a 2014 survey of larpers conducted internationally indicated that approximately “61.8% of larpers identify as male and 35.5% as female, with proportions varying by country” (*RPG Studies* 237). My observations of Bicolline and an examination of its character list indicate that these percentages are similar to Bicolline’s population. Female-identified leaders and creators are exceedingly few and far between, whether in politics, religious groups, or military roles. The Godmother’s role is far from ceremonial; as an official guild leader, titled baroness, and Faerie Godmother, Runa has carved out a space for herself in this elite society, inspiring other female players to do the same in their guilds and nations. She is a strong and well-supported political player, controlling lands, gathering resources, and forging alliances to create a home and political domain the fae can inhabit. As a woman in such a political position, Runa is an outlier. However, she has organized the social structures of the Court of Mirages to support other women and marginalized individuals to find similar opportunities. When the Court and its guild were first created, it was decided that both would exist within a matriarchal structure. In the *Twilights Dawn* and the Court of Mirages, female-identifying individuals are given the first opportunity to accept leadership positions before male-identifying candidates are considered. In this unconventional system, women are given the chance to participate where they might have otherwise not been allowed. Even when male fae act on behalf of the Court, whether by undertaking diplomatic missions or organizing military actions, Runa and other female leaders are always consulted and ultimately make the decisions. Thus, similarly to the socio-political situation in *Lanval*, Lady

Runa wields power in Bicolline, acting as patron and leader for players and overturning patriarchal structures. As a real-life creator and leader in a male-dominated larp community, Runa also demonstrates that women are fully capable of the administration, imagination, and leadership that larp requires out-of-game. The precedent of masculine power and control in story creation and community building is completely circumvented. Like the Lady, Runa is a disruptive force, combatting the gender inequality that exists both in larp and contemporary society as a whole.

Runa's status as an Otherworldly creature is also significant in subverting societal and gender ideals. Runa is a huldra, a fae from Scandinavian folklore with beautiful features, a hollow back, and a cow's tail. In folklore, huldra are very sexual creatures, seducing men into the forest and killing them if they disappoint. Runa, while not a murderer, channels this powerful sexuality into her character. Her performance and embodiment recall both the huldra's folklore tradition and the embodiment of Lanval's Lady—she is alluring and intriguing, and uses her mystique and charm to further the goals of her Court and people, but danger and anger lurks just beneath the surface. She is powerful, beautiful, and undeniably in control. Like the Lady, because Runa is from another world entirely, it is somehow acceptable for her to inhabit this liminal position as a female ruler in a male space. While Runa is indisputably the ruler of the Court of Mirages, it is also important to examine how she herself frames her leadership role. Runa calls herself the Godmother of the fae nation, both because 'queen' is a geopolitical game title as a country's leader, and because the Godmother has literary and emotional connotations she wants to evoke. As Godmother, Runa is the guide, protector, provider, and matriarch for the fae community. Regardless of political or guild affiliations, the fae are a family, and Runa's primary concern is caring for her group as whole. She works in collaboration with her court to

make decisions that will benefit her people and build community. In a game centred around geopolitics, the drive for power and resources can often become more important than individual players or relationships. However, Runa is driven by altruism, compassion, and love for her players, rather than seeking power or prestige. Her playstyle is role-play driven and comes from a love of her community, not the game. Though she and her co-leaders strive to put her lands and guild in the most optimum position and standing in the political world, it is first and foremost for the benefit—and fun—of the participants. As a leader, Runa subverts patriarchal power structures and Bicolline's privileging of politics over community. Her role-play and game-play, much like the actions taken by *Lanval's* Lady, challenge societal and gender norms in Bicolline and beyond.

I found two characters that function much like Muldumarec within the Court of Mirages. Runa has two partners in leadership of the Twilights Dawn and the Court of Mirages: first, her husband and Steward of the Court, fire giant Aedan Iosson; and second, her General and Master of the Guard, the sidhe Sir Colson Tarband. Both these male fae are closely associated with birds: Aedan's symbol is the phoenix, while Sir Colson is often called Kingfisher, both for his style of dress and his prowess in combat. The two men are what the Court of Mirages refer to as Warlord Princes—an archetype of aggressive, loyal, and extremely protective fae who act as warriors or guardians in service to the female heads of their Courts. Within the matriarchal structure of the Court of Mirages, Warlord Princes are second only to their queens, and Aedan and Colson are no exception. In a world that might otherwise attribute the power and authority to them, these Warlord Princes defer their power to Runa, much like Muldumarec defers power to his lady. Aedan and Colson are Runa's sword and shield, fighting for her and protecting her. However, it is she who holds their figurative jesses. Like Muldumarec, they are tied to their

lady; their power and influence is hers to wield. Aedan and Colson represent an alternative to patriarchal power, as they work for and with their Lady rather than controlling her, acting on her behalf but not in her place. As guild leaders, Aedan and Colson also open up new opportunities for members of the Court to play and have fun. As Steward, Aedan deals with the geopolitical game, and recruits other guild members to go on political missions at the event. He mentors and advises these groups of diplomats, teaching them how to properly negotiate, make alliances, and buy resources from other players at Bicolline. Aedan's experience and influence allows newer players the chance to participate in the political game, which is usually exclusively accessible to the senior and elite players of Bicolline. Colson, as Master of the Guard, similarly acts as an access point to the embodied military game. As a skilled fighter and tactician, Colson organizes and helps train the fighters of the Twilights Dawn, leading them in the battle games *Le Grande Bataille* is famous for. Like Muldumarec, Aedan and Colson open up spaces to play and give players the ability to control their own fun and their own stories, even if they might not have experience or seniority. In a game where most of the power and story is controlled by older male players, this alternative is subversive and refreshing.

The Court of Mirages is not without its share of more chaotic and bestial fae. There are two I would like to examine in contrast to Marie's *Bisclavret*, both because they subvert expectations of the monstrous through seeming. Appropriately, the first of these is a werewolf knight. Sir Fiske Ollison is not technically fae, like *Bisclavret*, but has pledged his loyalty to the Court of Mirages as a founding member of the Twilights Dawn. He's a mild and diplomatic knight, an archetype referred to as a Prince by the Court, but in a twist was recently adopted by Bicolline's werewolf pack and 'turned' by their leader. During the *Grande Bataille* in 1019, he spent half his time in a werewolf form with its own name and personality. Despite his alarming

appearance, Grace of the Wind, as it introduced itself, was as gentle and caring as its human counterpart, playing with children who visited the camp and humbling himself before the Godmother and the rest of the Court. It even pledged its own allegiance to the Court separately from Sir Fiske. No longer fully human nor fully animal, Sir Fiske instead straddles a liminal position between the two much like Bisclavret does in his lai. Sir Fiske's turning was also his own choice; he underwent a trial in order to turn, and pursued the path on his own. Lycanthropy for Sir Fiske is neither a curse nor an affliction, but an honour he personally sought and earned to protect his family. This change in embodiment opened up new opportunities and gained the Court new allies in the werewolves, another fringe role-play group at Bicolline. Sir Fiske/Grace of the Wind is also an oddity in the standards of knighthood at Bicolline. Knighthood is another geopolitical tool within the game, essentially a military resource and a signal of status and power. While many knights would have a sense of superiority and arrogance, Sir Fiske has expressed time and time again that his desire is to protect and serve. He is consistently as respectful and chivalrous as the human knights in the game, even as a beast; the animal side of Fiske does not overrule his personal codes of chivalry and honour. On the other hand, he also challenges the conceptions of werewolves. While the werewolf community is known for being ravenous, bloodthirsty animals, Sir Fiske has lost none of his gentleness, nor his desire to keep his family safe. Grace of the Wind is a noble character rather than a monster, subverting both modern and medieval conceptions of werewolves exactly like Bisclavret.

The other 'monster' I'd like to examine is part of a character I've already mentioned—the androgynous and gender-fluid water spirit and founder of the Ravencrest Tavern, Jakkimo. As part of the plot for the Court of Mirages at 1019's Grande Bataille, Jakkimo became the avatar for the Glashtyn, a malicious water spirit seeking vengeance for its subjugation in Faerie. The

Glashtyn first appeared at the latest Heritage Ceremony, pacing back and forth on the other side of the Veil like a caged animal. Predatory and entirely alien, the Glashtyn acted as guardian of the Veil, and struck a deal with the Godmother; it offered its magic to transform willing mortals into fae in exchange for the pasts they were leaving behind. One by one, it dragged candidates across the Veil, taking their pasts and histories in exchange for new ones. However, though the Glashtyn was supposed to stay anchored to the Veil when the ceremony circle was broken, it bled into the mundane along with its magic. Using Jakkimo, the Glashtyn wreaked havoc on the Court, prompting a group of fae to initiate a quest to discover its story and contain it before further damage could be done. As beastly and as monstrous as the Glashtyn behaved, however, the narrative these fae uncovered revealed an entirely different story. The Glashtyn had been chained to the Veil, forced to ferry passengers to and fro in what amounted to a state of slavery under the thumb of Queen Githaine and the fae royalty of the Seelie Court. Like Bisclavret, the Glashtyn was an abused and lonely victim, trapped and lashing out at those it thought did them wrong. The monster itself revealed the monstrous actions of the fae nobility. In response to this revelation, the questing fae changed their tactics—instead of capturing it, they offered the Glashtyn a choice. They proposed the Glashtyn enter the container willingly, to come and find a home with the Court of Mirages, or to be free, to leave the confines of the Veil and pursue its own desires. The interaction changed the Glashtyn; it accepted and became a permanent facet of Jakkimo's character. The Glashtyn is quite similar to Bisclavret; it had been wronged, it is capable of harm, of rage, of violence, and it demonstrates extreme animalistic tendencies. However, when given the chance for redemption, with an offer of kindness and understanding, the monster proves not so monstrous.

Like Marie's fae, the fae of Bicolline interact with their surroundings and neighbours in order to create and encourage new ways of being and playing. Through their appearance and actions, the fae queer the spaces around them. During their time at Bicolline, the fae have radically increased opportunities for and accessibility to role play, regardless of whether the player is fae or not. Events like the Heritage Ceremony I described at the beginning of this section opens space for people to interact with the magic of the Otherworld. As I touched on before, the Heritage Ceremony is an elaborate spectacle taking place annually at Le Grande Bataille, drawing larger and larger crowds each year. It is an opportunity for characters to publicly become fae, relinquishing their pasts and heritages in exchange for new ones. Ceremonies like this one encourage participation. At Bicolline, ceremonies are written into the rules and game mechanics; putting on a ceremony and checking off a list of requirements allows players to complete a process of objectives to gain geopolitical benefits or effects. The Heritage Ceremony is an alternative to this norm, allowing characters to participate and role play to achieve personal and narrative goals rather than political actions. Rather than limiting people to spectating, the fae give the audience a space to join the story and provide the opportunity to take some of the magic with them, whether in a glowing crystal or in an entirely new body. Faerie magic can push stagnant characters to grow in new directions, giving them new scenarios to explore and roleplay and new ideas to confront and discuss. However, consent is a crucial component in these role-playing scenarios; players always have the choice of whether or not to play with the fae, and they personally decide to what extent fae magic will take effect on their characters. If a player wants to role-play being coerced into becoming a fae or a similar scenario, the details are always discussed and agreed upon before the scene even takes place. In order for these varying degrees of participation to function, guild leadership developed three

“classes” of fae entities when we created the fae race: (1) true fae, (2) new fae, and (3) fae-touched. True fae are those who were born or created fae, originating from the other side of the Veil or from some other powerful source of natural magic. Runa and her husband Aedan, as some of the first fae to cross the Veil and settle into the mundane world, are true fae. New fae are those who, through prolonged exposure to fae magic, engagement in fae communities, or simply impulse decisions, trade their mortality at the Heritage Ceremony and permanently become fae. Sir Colson Tarband, for example, was born mortal, but through his relationship with Runa and Aedan decided to become fae at the very first Heritage Ceremony in 1017, making him a new fae. We also developed the concept of fae-touched as the third and final category. Fae-touched is an adjective referring to mortal and non-fae characters who exhibit physical manifestations of fae magic. This often occurs through prolonged exposure to fae creatures or artifacts and can take varying degrees of effect. A young woman given a crystal by a fae friend can grow wings and horns overnight, sending her into a crisis of identity. Or perhaps a young man carelessly takes a sip of wine spiked with a unique elixir and suddenly finds himself with a fox tail and a strange desire to have his ears scratched. Maybe a girl seeking to leave behind a painful past is offered the opportunity to change her life, and wakes with a chunk of memory missing and very fluffy cat ears in exchange. These stories are limitless and entirely optional, but they completely overturn the normative experiences of the larp, transforming stagnant characters into fantastic creatures. Some characters may develop quirks like these that steer their characters down new narrative paths, while others may emerge unscathed. However, experiences in these queer, fantastic spaces are transformative and alluring, dismantling gender norms and social constructs radically; the approximately eighty new fae at 1019’s Heritage Ceremony alone is a testament to this appeal. It is the decision of each player, but the fae

encourage these interactions regardless of the outcomes, granting players the opportunity for growth and new spaces to play.

The dramatic and colourful appearance of the fae, as well as their elaborate ceremonies and affinity for music, dance, and performance, has drawn an unprecedented amount of attention at Bicolline. The welcoming and intriguing atmosphere of fae camp and the Ravencrest Tavern attracted swarms of visitors and guests throughout the week. The creativity and wonder of the Heritage Ceremony attracts curious eyes and creates new opportunities for kinship and alliances with other groups. The encouragement of kinship and community brought the Court of Mirages into alliance with the elves of Irendille, who offered the guild their own domain and home when the Twilights Dawn was violently expelled from their land in the kingdom of Terre de Sud. Shared experience and background, as well as friendship and positivity, allow the fae and the elves to unite under a common banner. Certain religions and magic groups also took interest in the fae—in one Bataille alone the fae were invited and took part in three separate ceremonies. There were constant requests for the fae to attend or perform in ceremonies and events ‘wings up’ — a term referring to the elaborate and true appearances of fae creatures unhindered by disguising ‘glamour magic.’ The Elvish druids, practitioners of Ancestral Magic and our neighbours in Irendille, asked the fae to participate in a ceremony to help create magical resources. The giants of the Court invoked a magic circle of protection around the ceremony space, while other fae sang and hummed to call forth the magic. The ceremony recalled the Heritage Ceremony from the previous year, with people dropping physical representations of their hopes and dreams into a bowl of water. The fae also received an invitation from Le Grande Chasse, a religion worshipping animal spirits and encouraging a lifestyle of hunting tied to the land. The group is a bit feral and animalistic—then again, so are the fae, and their values and

connection to nature resonated with many of the Court's members. At their event, they gave fae representatives the opportunity to participate in a grounding ceremony, with the fae giving a piece of themselves to be tied to the land of Bicolline. As a number of the Court came from beyond the Veil, it was an opportunity to be connected to the land and its people. After this portion a few fae opted to join the hunt and become members of Le Grande Chasse religion themselves. The Circle, another religion, also took an interest in the fae, hypothesizing that the Godmother was an incarnation of one of their main deities, the Maiden. Much of fae culture is embodied and performative, and this performance allows the community to expand outward; it is fitting that the fae have become well known for their presence at ceremonies.

The Court of Mirages, while the original and most well-known fae court, is not the only one at Bicolline. Part of the beauty of the fae community and its style of role play is that fae individuals are free to branch off from the Court of Mirages and create new courts with their own cultures and leaders. Currently, the Elemental Court (a matriarchal group of naturally inclined and good natured fae) and the Chaos Court (a group of darker and more sinister fae entities with fewer morals) are two alternative fae groups, while other fae choose to remain Courtless entirely. This is a far cry from how role play is usually handled at Bicolline. Role-play groups at Bicolline are often highly exclusive and gate kept, only accessible by certain people and requiring extraordinary amount of work in order to reach the stage where they can be a part of the group. The fae community does things differently—anyone can interact and play (as long as they're not ruining the fun of others) and anyone can become fae or fae-touched if they so choose. The Court of Mirages' focus on role play and community has gained them allies and created kinship ties with other communities, giving players a wide variety of new opportunities for growth and play. Role play groups for werewolves and vampires have stepped into the

public eye as well, following the example of the fae. The GMs at Bicolline have taken notice of the space the fae have opened up and are seizing the opportunity to breathe new narrative life into their game. They have rewarded the Court of Mirages with new game-changing plots and narrative hooks in the world, allowing them to continue to build and develop their stories.

Summary

The fae are not the only storytellers and fateweavers at Bicolline. Nor are they perfect people or role players. Problematic situations emerge in all kinds of storytelling mediums, and larp is no different; for example, misogyny and racism are huge problems that have to be continuously addressed in this hobby, and especially at Bicolline. The Court of Mirages is not infallible, nor is it a utopia—that is not my argument here. However, the arrival of the fae and their embodiment of fantasy has given Bicolline new meaning and space to evolve into something queer and subversive. In a game where both role play and magic are treated as optional mechanics, the Godmother and the Court of Mirages create a new precedent for play, prioritizing narrative and community for its player characters. The Otherworldly concepts and elements brought across the Veil produce a liminal space within Bicolline, one where players embrace all they are and all they want to be, without the judgment and ridicule that is so prevalent in modern society. Through ceremony, story, and performance, the fae create physical space to subvert expectations and societal norms. Players in the Court of Mirages also have the freedom to embody characters that truly represent them, whether genderless, monstrous, or magical. These characters then challenge gender norms through their actions, as female characters carve out spaces to wield political power and male characters support and protect them, and gender-fluid characters challenge and bypass these structures entirely. Larp has historically been a heteronormative, male-dominated space, but Runa and the fae are changing

this norm in Bicolline slowly but surely. The Court of Mirages gives mortal players a space to encounter new experiences and characters, challenging and changing them as they wrestle with their own identities, pasts, and uncertain futures. The inhuman become friends, the monstrous become allies, and mundane expectations are disregarded. Prejudiced attitudes change, and people become more confident in expressing their true selves, and when players leave the grounds, they take these experiences with them back into their mundane lives. Continuing the medieval literary tradition found in the Otherworldly *Lais* of Marie de France, Bicolline's Court of Mirages uses the creation of liminal space, the introduction of Otherworldly creatures, and the formation of communities through interaction to subvert expectations and create new ways of being. It's a difficult quest, but the potential is worth fighting for.

Larping functions as a kind of authorship, allowing players to create characters and stories that impact a larger world. Players can fully immerse themselves in a narrative, something few forms of literature can truly offer their readers. While larp is an ephemeral practice, it does create structured and self-contained stories using character development, encounters, and activity to drive plot and create new possibilities in a unique society and world. Fantasy larp is brimming with these possibilities. Critics like Pugh and Weisl are quick to dismiss these elements as extraneous, but I would argue that these elements are crucial. The prevalence of fantasy in larping enhances the possibilities and alternatives that medieval literature also seeks to address. However, rather than diluting its medieval origins, fantasy works as the continuation of a literary tradition that has withstood centuries of change and evolution through the Middle Ages and into the modern era.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I brought the *Lais* of Marie de France and medieval fantasy larps into conversation with each other, using the fae and the Otherworld as unifying literary tools for subversion. I examined how the Otherworld and the fae functioned in Marie's supernatural lais, and how these functions overlapped with the fae Court of Mirages at the live-action role-playing game *Le Duché de Bicolline* in Québec, Canada. In particular, I analyzed how the use of fantasy in these mediums opens up queer spaces and allows societal conventions of gender and patriarchal power to be challenged and subverted.

In the *Lais* of Marie de France, the fae create liminal spaces in which contemporary problems and inequalities in medieval society can be addressed outside reality. I looked at three of Marie's lais, all of which heavily featured supernatural creatures and Otherworldly spaces: *Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Bisclavret*. In *Lanval*, the Lady's Otherworldly presence in the mundane challenges medieval conventions of power and gender roles through the embodiment of female leadership. The Lady acts as both female lover and chivalric gift-giver, embodying the nobility, generosity, and virtue that King Arthur and his queen fail to demonstrate as rulers. Her intervention and Otherworldly magic allow Lanval to become a figure of chivalry and embody the codes of conduct that the Arthurian court cannot fulfil on its own; she thus exposes the failure and limitations of feudalism and courtliness in medieval society. *Yonec* portrays a tragic love affair between mortal and fae that ultimately allows a disempowered woman to take control of her destiny. The behaviour and appearance of Muldumarec radically subverts traditional power dynamics and hierarchies of the human, allowing the lady to have agency in a marriage and society that fails to empower women. Her encounter with the Otherworld allows the lady to reconcile the Otherworld and the mundane through her son, embodying liminality and subverting heteronormative and patriarchal norms. *Bisclavret's* shapeshifting and bestial appearance

overturns medieval conceptions of the animal, the werewolf, and the knight, subverting ideas about what it means to be noble. By focusing on an animalistic knight, the lai destabilizes hierarchies that privilege the human, especially since the wolf is just as loyal and honourable as its human comrades. The lai's displacement of a traditional heterosexual marriage with an erotically charged monarch-vassal relationship disrupts heteronormative expectations, both literary and societal, and plays with appearance to create subversions. The fae and supernatural creatures in the lais of Marie de France highlight the discrepancies present in gender and societal norms, and then subvert these expectations in a liminal and queer space.

The fae of Bicolline function in a similar way, creating a liminal space where norms of both contemporary society and Bicolline as a game can be challenged and critiqued. In their book *Play, Performance and Identity*, Matt Omasta and Drew Chappel write, "While many consider these ludic experiences diversions from 'real' life, we assert that they play an active role in structuring that very 'reality'" (1). I argue that the Court of Mirages is restructuring mundane reality through their intervention in Bicolline. Male power, traditional gender roles, and sexism and discrimination are battled against, and spaces are opened to provide women, sexual and gender minorities, and marginalized populations to play and have fun. Players are allowed to create new stories, embody their identities, and be accepted for who they are both in and out of game. Individuality, in all its colourful and queer expressions, is encouraged rather than condemned. Each player, whether Faerie Godmother, fire giant, or Glashtyn, has the chance to become a co-author in a story that is simultaneously world-shaking and deeply personal. By embodying and performing these characters, the fae manifest alternatives to the status quo into reality. Through drawing upon fae lore and fantasy, the Court of Mirages challenges gender norms, power dynamics, and the patriarchal foundations of larp by creating new opportunities

and reimaginings of both contemporary society and medieval history. Creating an in-game family and an out-of-game community, the Court of Mirages uses fantasy as a foundation to change reality through play. In an already liminal space where past and present intertwine to produce new possibilities, the Court of Mirages is overturning the heteronormative and exclusive structures of Bicolline and building a vibrant, tight-knit community and a new space for play, a queer space that is fantastic and far from mundane.

In the end, why would I make this comparison? Medieval literature is mainly an academic resource, and larp is still a niche and misunderstood pastime. So why does this thesis exist? As I explained previously, I believe that larp is on the same cultural continuum as the *Lais* of Marie de France. As both ephemeral forms of narrative storytelling, the *Lais* and medieval fantasy larp games like Bicolline both have a distinct literary foundation in medieval oral traditions. Larp is often regarded as an escapist and frivolous, a dilution of medieval history, as Pugh and Weisl among many other academics have argued time and time again. What I hope to have demonstrated here is that larp is far from a dilution, but an evolution of a literary tradition and a cultural legacy, one that is used to build community and create subversion to this day. As Bettina Bildhauer writes in *The Middle Ages in the Modern World*, “In their imagination of a pre-historical medieval past, medievalist popular fictions do nothing other than continue similar imaginations of the early medieval past written in the medieval period itself” (17). Therefore, these two types of storytelling are on the same continuum. The *Lais* and the Court of Mirages share many of the same fantasy motifs, settings, and character archetypes, and use these to create subversions of and alternatives to their respective societies. Fantasy does not negate the medievalism of larp, but rather pays homage to medieval literary and performative traditions. In studying medievalisms like larps, we need to move away from preoccupations with escapism or

authenticity and focus more on their conditions and narratives. Fantasy is not a trope, but a tool: a tool for opening queer spaces, creating subversion, and exploring new ways of being.

Medieval fantasy allows people the chance to encounter new ways of thinking and being in subversive spaces; embodying and performing that fantasy can build real-world communities.

Embodiment through practices like larp allows fictional story and real-world people to bleed together, changing attitudes through magical, Otherworldly experiences grounded in the mundane. Fantasy, slowly trickling through time and space, has had a lasting impact on the human imagination, creating queer spaces that we can still play in today. In conversation with each other, medieval literature and fantasy larps can continue to reveal challenges and subversions of societal and cultural norms that have persisted throughout history.

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