
Bisclavret: Marie de France's Manipulation and Why We Hate the Wife

Bisclavret is the only lai of Marie de France's that deals with a couple falling out of love (Creamer 259). The lycanthropic theme is used by the poet as a test of love and respect for one's husband, as the baron's wife doesn't approve of his lupine nature. The central issue seen throughout is the baron's wife's refusal to accept and understand. The wife's situation and power is slowly degraded from the very beginning in the interrogation scene (he was honest, yet she didn't respect that), and to the very end when she becomes a vanished criminal. Marie de France builds off this story with an aim in deteriorating the wife and defaming her presence by making her disloyal and not accepting of her husband's nature. From the way she writes the verses, and the wife's absence for the majority of the poem, it is clear that Marie de France's goal is for the reader to dislike the wife. "Marie creates an insidious woman-hating universe in her text." (Creamer 259).

Betrayal is one of the first themes we encounter with Bisclavret, one that remains the reason for the baron's misfortune. The wife's first betrayal derives from simple trickery, she asks him whether he goes dressed or nude (when in werewolf form), also a form of foreshadowing for her ongoing query. The location of his clothing signifies her next betrayal. She now knows of the location. To the husband, the revealing doesn't appear as dangerous, as it is coming from an honest place. "We readers are to understand that her husband's revelation of his humiliating secret should have been sufficient" (Creamer 265). In addition to the context of the story, Marie de France's stylistic choices reveal her disdain for the wife.

In the entire story we can see that the baron is genuine and down to earth, while his wife is manipulative and even commits adultery. The description of the wife is one fifth the length of the werewolf and one third of that of the baron. This demonstrates the sneaky and unfaithful nature of the wife by the narrator (Creamer 264). The description of the wife is only two verses long (in the actual poem). This demonstrates that she isn't very important in the story, not only that, but that she is negligible. Very slowly she starts becoming more and more disparaged by the narrator. Marie's way of writing unveils the scenario for us, the way she writes the verses and the style in which she phrases the narrative. "All his love was set on her, and all her love was given again to him. One only grief had this lady". We know something bad is in the surface, as both wife and baron are introduced as almost perfect for one another, and with her grief we can see what might occurred. This line indicates that things will no longer be as mentioned in the beginning. "Verse 62 'he hid nothing from her' and again in verse 67 'he had told her everything' (in the actual poem) -these two verses are another hint of the narrator abandoning

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objectivity by choosing the husband over the wife” (Creamer 264).

From the commencement of the story we are aware that the werewolf is harmless. He goes out in the deep woods and does nothing but hunt (for animals, not man) and wander around in solitude. He cannot really hurt anyone. The wife should not have a reason to be wary around him. They have been married for some time and he has yet to frighten her. This makes the wife even more loathsome to the reader, as she knows that he will not harm her, as he has not done so, and when answering her questions he delivers humbling and sincere answers. “He is not a man eater and so is not a danger to his wife, especially when coupled with the baron’s claim that the creature does not venture out from the depths of the forest” (Creamer 265). This, however, doesn’t dictate the baron’s only example of his harmless nature.

When lost in the depths of the woods for almost a year, the baron encounters a pack. The king and his men discover him when hunting in the woods. Very intimidated and afraid by this creature, the king wants him gone. The werewolf pleads for his life and reveals his clever side to the king. The king brings him along to his castle, as the men and himself noticed that the werewolf wasn’t harmful, but rather kind and frank. He shows no signs of violence and even sleeps alongside the king’s royal entourage. We can see once more that the baron’s claims in the beginning are sincere. He does nothing but roam the woods and hunt for animals, a practice that even humans, not just werewolves, perform. The king and his men serve as a perfect illustration of how the baron would have been harmless to his wife. “That the men eagerly sleep alongside the werewolf is a tactic job from Marie at the intolerant wife, who categorically refuses to lie with her lycanthropic husband” (Creamer 166). This underscores the gentle nature of the werewolf. It is another way for Marie to abase the wife.

Marie de France creates this woman hating universe, step by step in her stylistic choice of writing. We are allowed to see how she degrades the wife more and more throughout the story. The wife’s final betrayal is committed when she decides to marry another man after her husband leaves, a man whom she does not truly love. After almost a year of being out of the picture, the baron returns to his human form with the help of the king. He meets his wife again, only to confront her about her grand betrayal and ending with a violent note by tearing her nose off as a form of revenge. “Marie suggests that the violence committed in this lay is intellectual in nature: the wife refuses to rationalize or compartmentalize her husband’s condition” (Creamer 266). The last form in which the wife is degraded by Marie de France is when the king banishes her (along with her now husband), due to the corruptness she had caused her now ex-husband. The wife and her new husband end up having a few daughters, which are all born without noses. As Creamer concludes, “Bisclavret ends with forward looking glance at how one woman’s treachery would later impact the lives of several future generations of woman. Like Eve before her, this woman’s lack of obedience dooms her” (266).

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Works Cited

Creamer, P. "Woman-Hating in Marie De France's Bisclavret." ROMANIC REVIEW 93 (2002): 259-74. Print.

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