

MES ORE EST LI NUNS REMÜEZ:
INTRATEXTUAL MISINTERPRETATIONS
AND SHIFTING SYMBOLS
IN MARIE DE FRANCE'S "ELIDUC"

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The weasel episode from "Eliduc" holds the enviable position of being the final marvelous element crowning the last of twelve marvelous tales in Marie de France's collection of Breton *lais*. The weasels' sudden intrusion toward the end of an otherwise un-marvelous story of a knight torn between two women precipitates the unexpected conclusion in which the three characters in this love triangle do not die tragically, but live happily ever after in monastic life: the two women together, the knight off with the monks, and the weasels happily romping about the forest. With this outlandish turn of events Marie bids us take a closer look; in particular, the placement of this episode at the very end of the last *lai* invites special scrutiny.

Anyone who has read Marie's *lais* will have become acquainted in the Prologue with her instructions on how to study them: "*Ki de vice se volt defendre / Estudier deit e entendre / E grevos' ovre comencier: / Par ceo se puet plus esloigner / E de grant dolur delivrer*" (23-27). This is achieved by imitating the interpretive method of the Ancients, who "*assez oscurement diseient / Pur ceus ki a venir esteient / [...] K'i peüssent gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre*" (12-16). This interactive game of reading opens up an endless variety of (morally uplifting) interpretations, but in "Eliduc" in particular, Marie also makes rich use of *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, presenting her audience with characters who must

correct mistaken assumptions, and unexpectedly change their perceptions of the world around them. Guilliadun's ignorance of Eliduc's marriage and Eliduc's misapprehension of Guilliadun's faint as her death, among other illusions, signal corresponding interpretative shifts necessary to the audience's proper understanding of this *lai* and the symbols it contains. The traditional medieval association of weasels, for example, with uncleanness and sexual perversion must give way to a new perspective in which they can embody healing and loving devotion.

The unsettled ground the characters in *Eliduc* walk thus mirrors the shifting sands of literary interpretation upon which Marie sets her audience. The weasel episode marks an irruption of the marvelous which, on the surface at least, results in resurrection of the dead, and ultimately in all three main characters' personal dedication to God. The startling pairing of an unclean animal with the highest Christian virtues, I will argue, aligns Marie with Latin Humanists who posit that marvelous imagery that is more horrible or outlandish better reveals divine truth because it jolts the human imagination out of its carnal complacency and reorients it to spiritual concerns. In her case, we might add, the carnal is not entirely covered up by the spiritual interpretation, and indeed the ambiguity of the mixed messages remains for those studying her texts to sort out.

Guilliadun, daughter of a king across the Channel in England, is thought to have died upon overhearing that her lover Eliduc has a wife in Brittany. In his grief, Eliduc carries her to a hermit's chapel near his home and lays her in front of the altar, returning there regularly, but without revealing to his wife Guildeluec the reason for his absence or his sad demeanor. Curious, Guildeluec has him followed and later arrives herself at the chapel to find the apparently dead maiden. Marie underlines the sensuality of Guildeluec's response to the sight of her youthful body: "*Del covertur la descovri / E vit le cors tant eschevi, / Les bras lungs e blanches les meins / E les deiz greilles, lungs e pleins, / Or seit ele la verité*" (1013-17). Calling her valet to see the "merveille," she intimates both her astonishment at Guilliadun's beauty and her genuine sympathy for her husband's loss: "*Veiz tu, fete ele, ceste femme, / Que de beuté ressemble gemme? / Ceo est l'amie mun seigneur, / Pur quei il meine tel dolur. / Par fei, jeo ne me merveil mie, / Quant si bele femme est perie. / Tant par pité, tant par amur, / Jamés n'avrai joie nul jur*" (1021-28).

While Guildeluec sits weeping over the girl, a weasel (*une musteile*) suddenly runs out from under the altar and over the body of Guilliadun. Because it had desecrated the corpse, the valet beats it to death with a stick and flings it to the floor. Immediately another weasel, likewise identified in the feminine as *sa cumpaine* (1039), runs up, sees the first lying dead, pokes her with her paw but cannot revive her. In distress she runs out into the forest and returns with a bright red flower in her mouth, places it in the mouth of her companion, who quickly springs to life. Guildeluec manages to retrieve the flower from the weasel, and

promptly places it into the mouth of Guilliadun who in turn also awakens. Rather than fight for her husband or even express outrage at his adultery, Guildeluec leads the girl back home and reunites her with Eliduc. She insists that Eliduc allow her to leave to become a nun, which, although it may have been in effect the only viable option for a woman in her situation, she does so not out of religious devotion, but in order to allow all parties to save face, “*Kar n’est pas bien ne avenant / De deus espuses meintenir, / Ne la lei nel deit cunsentir*” (1128-30). After a marriage of indeterminate length and “*parfit’ amur*” between them, Eliduc and Guilliadun likewise dedicate themselves to God. As Eliduc prepares to enter the monastery, Guildeluec assumes the duties of provider for the younger woman: “*Ensemble od sa femme premere / Mist sa femme que tant ot chere. / El la receut cum sa serur / E mut li porta grant honur; / De Deu servir l’amonesta / E sun ordre li enseigna*” (1165-70). Thus the “happily ever after” of this *aventure* has the two women living together and Eliduc as the third man out.

This reunion of the two women, as well as their pre-eminent role, is anticipated at the very beginning of the *lai*, where Marie gives her tale the title of “*Guildeluec ha Guilladun*” (22). She explains the discrepancy thus: “*Elidus fu primes nomez, / Mes ore est li nuns remüez, / Kar des dames est avenue / L’aventure dunt li lais fu*” (23-26). Apparently later editors changed the title back to ‘Eliduc’, since that is how it has been passed down to us. The change in title signals the first of many shifts which Marie forces readers to make, and further causes our allegiances to waver, first to Eliduc, whom she introduces at the outset of the tale as “*pruz e curteis, hardi e fier*” (6), then to the women, to whom she then seems to lend greater importance. Wavering allegiances is, of course, the central problem afflicting Eliduc: politically, between the King of Brittany and the King of Exeter; conjugally, between Guildeluec and Guilliadun; and finally spiritually, between worldly and heavenly love. Although Marie is persuasive in recounting Eliduc’s good will, helpfulness, and generosity toward others, he repeatedly becomes ensnared in situations which lead him to betray those to whom he has pledged loyalty.

Guildeluec’s loyalty, on the other hand, never falters. In effect, her selfless behavior atones for Eliduc’s shortsightedness, in her concern for the stricken girl, her consideration for her husband’s grief, even the sacrifice of her marriage to make way for the true love she sees between Guilliadun and Eliduc. The relationship she ultimately forges with Guilliadun moreover dismantles the patriarchal order and establishes a gender-neutral balance of power, for, as Pam Whitfield observes, the *lai* creates “a space within medieval society for love relationships based on equality and cooperation, rather than hierarchy and competition” (243). If Guilliadun is the key variable who will align herself with the superior partner, then Eliduc’s victory is ephemeral, for in the final reckoning it is Guildeluec whom she joins.

In the first, more politically oriented, half of the *lai*, Marie presents her audience with an example of a mistaken assumption which ends in a reversal of fortune in the guise of the English king whom Eliduc has pledged to help. While Eliduc is off battling his enemies, the king awaits in his tower, fearful that he would abandon him. When he sees a large group of knights racing toward the castle, he orders them fired upon, thinking they are the enemy. His fear turns to joy upon hearing that Eliduc had won the day for him. Ironically Eliduc would later betray the English king by spirited away his daughter under cover of night. The new recognition does not always completely invalidate the old perception.

Certainly the most tragic moment of anagnorisis occurs aboard the boat carrying Eliduc and Guilliadun toward Brittany. As the storm threatens to capsize the vessel, one of Eliduc's sailors is the only person who dares to speak the truth about his lord's wife. He pays dearly for it, for Eliduc kills him on the spot, but Guilliadun had heard, and collapses seemingly dead. The ensuing peripeteia does not, however, serve to correct Eliduc's perception of his actions. Rather than acknowledging his own fault in Guilliadun's death, by neglecting to tell her he was married and allowing the adulterous affair to go forward, he attributes her death to her overwhelming goodness, lamenting "*Bele, ja fuissiez vus reine, / Ne fust l'amur leale e fine / Dunt vus m'amastes leaument*" (943-45). Marie's narrator nevertheless refrains from casting aspersions on Eliduc's character—the counterexample of Guildeluec allows the audience to add the *surplus* and be the judge.

As we have seen, Guildeluec's pivotal moment of recognition comes with the aid of very intelligent weasels. In the symbolic horizon of the twelfth century, weasels hold an ambivalent status. On the one hand, the book of Leviticus classifies them among the unclean animals, which in turn leads to associations with sexual sins in some later Christian writers. In his groundbreaking *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, John Boswell cites the influential if apocryphal early Christian *Epistle of Barnabas*, which on the subject of weasels states, "You shall not [...] become as these, who we hear commit uncleanness with their mouths, nor shall you be joined to those women who have committed illicit acts orally with the unclean. For this animal conceives through its mouth" (qtd. in Boswell 138). (We will recall that the healing flower in *Eliduc* passes from one weasel's mouth to the other's.) Plutarch in *Isis and Osiris*, and Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* likewise have the weasel giving birth orally, the latter tracing the origin of this belief to the birth of Hercules: as punishment for having tricked her into releasing Alcmena from the spell preventing her from giving birth, the goddess Lucina transforms Alcmena's servant into a weasel, "and because her lying mouth helped in childbirth, she gives birth through her mouth" (Ovid 9.322). The popular allegorizing bestiary the *Physiologus* perpetuated the spurious connection between Mosaic prohibitions and repugnant animal sexuality, stating that the

female weasel “receives from the male in her mouth, becomes pregnant, and gives birth through her ears” (qtd. in Boswell 142). Boswell argues that such associations by Christian moralizers, which spawned much commentary and persisted through the Middle Ages, “profoundly affected subsequent attitudes toward homosexual behavior” (142).

Yet alongside these disparaging connotations weasels also possessed positive attributes in medieval belief. Many bestiaries commented approvingly on the weasel’s ability to kill the basilisk and to cure itself or its young with herbs, a tradition with which Marie is clearly familiar. After Marie’s time, the *Ovidius Moralizatus* allegorizes the aforementioned episode in the *Metamorphoses*, in which the servant’s mouth that helped in childbirth becomes the weasel’s mouth through which it gives birth, by aligning the weasel with the Virgin Mary, for whom the Word from God’s mouth in her ear is the agent for the Incarnation (Boer). In “Eliduc” Marie preserves the conflict between the opposite symbolic values of the weasel, but resolves it ultimately in the weasels’ favor: the valet’s violent killing of the animal after it had touched the corpse is justified, but without the death of the first weasel, Guilliadun would never have received the flower which revives her. The two weasels’ scampering off together furthermore serves as a prolepsis for the *lai*’s ending in which Guildeluec and Guilliadun are reunited in monastic life.

In one of the most recent articles to explore the weasel episode in *Eliduc*, Fabienne Pomel leaves unanswered her question, “Marie de France évoquerait-elle ici un possible amour de femmes?” (519) I would argue that, considering the prevalent unstable symbolism of weasels outlined above, together with Pomel’s observations on the *jeux de miroirs* employed in the text, evidence strongly suggests that Marie does indeed propose an amorous relationship initiated by Guildeluec. Pomel regards the brief appearance of the weasels in the chapel as a *mise en abyme* of the situation confronting Guildeluec and Guilliadun: just as the second weasel’s grieving over the body of the first reproduces in miniature that of *Eliduc*’s wife beside his mistress, so also the placing of the flower into one mouth mirrors the other, often using identical expressions (513). Following the course of analogies Marie presents her audience, the flower serves as a metaphor for the life-giving pity and compassion Guildeluec expresses toward the girl. Marie’s allegorical mode here, Pomel posits, places the marvelous in the service of the symbolic, and she concludes, “le jeu de miroir opère donc chez Marie un déplacement du couple des deux amants au couple des deux femmes, tout en haussant la fleur magique au rang de nouvel emblème de l’amour, à la manière des nœuds dans *Guigemar*, du rossignol-relique ou du chèvrefeuille” (514).

While some theories of fictionality in courtly literature limit the role of the marvelous to capturing the audience’s attention and contributing to a dynamic and entertaining exterior, the weasel episode reveals how a marvelous element could

provoke a medieval audience to seek a spiritual meaning beyond the paradox of its strange veneer. Many twelfth-century Latin Humanists, in particular those influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius, focus on the reader's imagination as the crucial channel through which marvelous imagery can uplift the soul. The series of corrected misinterpretations and reversals experienced by the lai's characters parallel those of Marie's audience as they struggle to re-evaluate the unfolding events. What to make of the weasels poses a particular challenge. But Hugo of St. Victor, in his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius, embraces the incongruity of lowly, dissimilar images that represent the highest spiritual ideas, and regards the intellect's decoding of such symbols as a purgative, ennobling exercise:

The beholder would otherwise accept only [the base images] as true, if left to his complacency, and if the baseness of these images did not properly compel him to pass beyond them in search of other, beautiful ones. ... It rather cleanses ... the intellectual power of the soul, which rises up and aims at higher things, purifying us of the foulness of images, so that we might grow accustomed to contemplating the spiritual and incorporeal in pure simplicity. ... The crassness of pairing base with celestial things goads us into the recognition that these images can be neither proper nor true. In this way we understand how, in the shape and image of visible things, spiritual and invisible qualities are demonstrated. (979B-D)¹

Although Marie did not share the theological concerns of the Latin Humanists, this mode of interpretation, albeit in secularized form, makes possible the pairing of the base image of the weasel with the spiritual import of the passage. It may also account for the apparent incompatibility of a sacralized profane love supplanting divine love at the end of *Eliduc* which troubles Pomel (522).

When *Eliduc* vows to build an abbey in which to bury *Guilliadun*, become a monk, and return to grieve over her tomb every day, the reader can sympathize with his loss, yet still see through the triteness of his piety. And indeed, one could view the final "conversions" of *Eliduc* and *Guilliadun* merely as a way out of a guilty conscience over the illegitimate origins of their relationship and *Guilheluc's* suffering. Nevertheless, the dénouement at which we finally arrive supplants the duality of earthly and heavenly love, of *Eliduc's* two relationships, with what Jacques Ribard calls "une sorte de trinité parfaite" in which the three protagonists support each other in mutual prayer (298). According to Philippe Ménard, Marie attempts here to reconcile the aspirations of love with the requirements of religion: "ni une religion de l'amour ardente et absolue, ni un amour de la religion allant jusqu'au sacrifice des inclinations humaines" (147).

If Marie is in fact subtly introducing a positive model for a same-sex couple, then the spiritual dimension is indispensable: the monastic setting would, of course, be the only place in the Middle Ages where such a couple might thrive. Expressing herself ambiguously on the subject, so that only sympathetic readers

could provide the proper gloss would be the only way to escape condemnation. As her audience navigates the choppy waters of the *lais* and, along with her characters, must correct interpretations and adjust their perceptions, Marie, I think, winks.

NOTES:

¹ This English translation is my own.

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