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The Un-Human Femme Bisclavret: Monstrous Misuses of the Disunion between Secular and Religious Culture in Marie de France's 'Bisclavret'

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The monster has always been at once intriguing and repulsive, canny and uncanny, compelling and terrifying. What is most fascinating about monsters throughout literary history, however, is their resilience. Even those destroyed, like Grendel in *Beowulf*, haunt the imagination hundreds (sometimes thousands) of years after their inceptions. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, one of the more prolific writers of monster theory, writes:

> ...the monster can function as an alter-ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self, and monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards it expression. They ask us why we have created them (5).

This is the last of seven "theses" that Cohen lays out for conceptualizing the role of the monstrous image, and it captures the essence of the monster's enduring appeal. However, a different kind of monster exists, one that is just as dichotomous as any other monster but which is also treated "sympathetically," or, in other words, recast as noble rather than monstrous.

Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, written in Britain in the late 12th century, exemplifies a powerful use of the sympathetic werewolf motif, a phenomenon that blatantly subverts and critiques both the socio-cultural and religious definitions of humanity and monstrosity. The tensions that result from this subversion intensify in Marie's lai because not only is the monster

recast as a noble and even moral character, but also the werewolf effectively swaps places with the main human character in the lai (the wife) both functionally and linguistically. Thus, while the lai invests the werewolf with moral, human qualities, it simultaneously reduces the wife to a shockingly primal level of evil and animalism. The "monster" that results from the wife's transformation abuses the disjunctions between secular culture and religious mores to advance her own ends. Therefore, she becomes not Other but rather—to use Kristeva's vocabulary—Abject. In other words, this human character descends into her own sort of monstrosity and comes to embody something that the cultural constructs she abuses both subliminally house and openly reject. This descent further develops Marie's critique of society that begins with the inversion of the werewolf archetype.

This startling inversion is not unique to the Middle Ages, resurfacing most recently in the *Twilight* series through the character of Jacob Black, for example. Brent Stypczynski calls this phenomenon of investing admirable qualities in the werewolf archetype a "sympathetic werewolf." The "sympathetic werewolf," he says, is a werewolf character who "retain[s] the rational mind, simultaneously glorifying and resisting the idea of metamorphosis (the outer shell changes, but the core humanity remains intact)" (5). Furthermore, he states that "none of these figures [sympathetic werewolves] overtly exhibits the traits of true wolves, nor do they exhibit fully human traits, yet they display *idealized* characteristics" (18). As Bruckner puts it, "It is almost as if Marie had taken a bet: could she choose the character who is least likely to inspire our love and make him loveable nevertheless?" (251). Set in contrast with this "loveable" beast, the wife's monstrosity seems even more horrifying.

The question is why? What is accomplished through having the character of the wife—the epitome of the courtly woman—turned into a cruel, calculating monster while the werewolf

embodies the exact opposite characteristics? A useful answer to this question involves examining the lai within its late 12th century social and religious context. On the one hand, the lai of *Bisclavret* is in many ways a social commentary, a continuation of the theme of courtly love that is critiqued throughout the twelve lais. In *Bisclavret,* this critique continues through the wife's malicious misuse of social structure and, more broadly, the contradictions between appearance and reality. Meanwhile, by setting up the reader's expectation of a werewolf as anti-human, as something completely contrary to a moral and rational being, Marie also invokes the contemporary theological ideas of the day that often used lycanthropy as a metaphor for what it means to be or not be human. Theologians at the time argued that the beast is not created in the image of God and therefore cannot by definition be human (which is understood by the church to be made in God's likeness); however, at the same time, the beast anthropomorphically reflects human dual nature as both inherently sinful and capable of good (Stypczynski). By channeling these contemporary ideas Marie also comments on them. As Williams puts it, in medieval literature:

> The deformed [monster] functioned...as a complementary, sometimes alternative, vehicle for philosophical and spiritual inquiry... [T]he Middle Ages made deformity into a symbolic tool with which it probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by more orthodox rational approach through dialectics (4).

As with the socio-cultural perspective, the idea of misuse is also seen in the religious perspective through the wife's ironic contortion of morals and biblical undertones in her speeches, which she shapes into a mask to cover her own immoral acts of trapping her husband in bestial form and leaving him for another man.

While the wife significantly misuses courtly and religious ideals, she goes even a step further and sets two against one another, revealing the dangerous gaps between them. Within the social context of the lai, both courtliness and religion were equally significant forces in the medieval world, but glaring points of disunion existed between the two. The wife wields the two in such a way that she makes the disconnections more apparent, forcing the reader to look at the secular and religious culture together and understand the potential dangers that face a society defined by such unresolved dichotomies. Furthermore, Marie shows that, as often spiritual and the secular aspects of life conflict, they are both infected by the same disease. That disease is not lycanthropy, demon possession, or serial killing; it is the small lies, the subcutaneous twisting of things, and the shiny appearances painted over it all that together unchecked can insidiously consume a culture.

The lai of *Bisclavret* starts with an immediate contradiction—presented almost completely without transition—that sets the stage for the tensions to come. Marie begins her lai by setting up her readers to expect a typical bad werewolf, and then she turns those expectations around to tell a story about a werewolf who is in many ways the most noble, rational, and moral character of the lai in spite of the fact that outwardly he looks like a beast. Her brief introduction describes how the werewolf is traditionally perceived as a "savage beast" (9) that "eats men [and] does much harm" (11)[1]. This initial description is unsurprising, but then without pause, Marie jumps from this description to saying, "But that's enough of this for now / I want to tell you about Bisclavret" (12-13). Thus, she quickly dismisses everything she has just said about werewolves and plunges into her own story, which begins with a romantic description of the

[1]I have consulted three different translations of *Bisclavret* for this paper. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are taken from the Hanning and Ferrante verse translation (1978).

knight named Bisclavret. She says that he is "fine, handsome…nobl[e]…and loved by all his neighbors" (16-20). This is the extent of the introduction we get to the character of Bisclavret, and it subverts the reader's expectations built up by the opening lines. This sets up the tension between what the reader expects in the contents of her lai and what is actually there, as well as the tension between the way the characters are perceived by others and who they really are.

After introducing Bisclavret in such an unusual way, Marie shifts her focus to introduce the character of the wife, whose voice is surprisingly much more prominent than that of the title character. What we know of Bisclavret is almost exclusively informed by the way others perceive him rather than through direct narration, but we are made quite aware of the wife's actions and perceptions of the things that transpire. The first line in which the wife appears focuses on two primary aspects of her character: her attractiveness and her apparent worthiness. The line reads, "*femme ot espuse mut vailant / e que mut feseit beu semblant*" or "as his wedded wife he had a woman who was worthy and attractive in appearance[2]" (21-22). "*Semblant,*" the present participle of the Anglo-Norman verb *sembler* (which means to seem or appear), receives the most emphasis of these lines because it comes at the very end of the sentence. After all of the good things said about the wife, these lines end in a word that casts doubt on these sentiments by emphasizing the way the wife acts and appears to the observer. She *seems* good and worthy, but these traits are called immediately into question by the wording. Within the first scene, these appearances are further subverted by the wife's actions.

[2] Burgess and Busby prose translation

The subversion is most blatant in the first dialogue between Bisclavret and his wife, during which the wife manipulatively badgers her husband to tell her his secret using every instrument at her disposal. The tone of this passage is extremely biblical, echoing many of the same motifs found in the narrative of Samson and Delilah. Just as Delilah begs to know the secret behind Samson's superhuman strength, the wife begs to know the secret behind Bisclavret's un-human transformation. In addition to this, Bruckner notes a similarity between this scene and the fall of Adam and Eve, a comparison which would, in a sense, make this a story of a fall from innocence for both of them. While this analogy certainly is limited in its usefulness, it fits well with the consequence of the wife's sin: the absence of a nose. Some have pointed to the lack of a nose as a symbol of leprosy, a very biblical punishment. This also may explain the oddity of this trait being passed down to the wife's daughters.

While the wife consciously or unconsciously models these stories from the biblical narrative, she also abuses biblical and moral reasoning to give herself the appearance of a "Christian" woman while simultaneously working towards her own ends. This abuse is seen most clearly in the way the wife implores Bisclavret to tell her his secret, accuses him of infidelity and ultimately extracts from him the key to his metamorphosis. There are a few examples of just *how* she accomplishes this manipulation of biblical morals which can be seen clearly in this first dialogue between her and Bisclavret. She blatantly accuses him of three main things of which she herself is guilty: fear, dishonesty, and adultery. At this point, she herself is afraid for her own future (and should be at least somewhat afraid of being married to a werewolf), is lying to Bisclavret to his face, and will soon commit adultery with the first man she can think of. Ironically, the very first of the three that she jumps to in her volley of accusations is adultery. She says plainly, "*mun escïent que vus amez / e si si est, vus meserrez*" (51-52). ("I

think you must have a lover / and if that's so, you're doing wrong.") Thus, she is condemning the very sin she will commit only a short time later. Meanwhile, as she plants that seed of doubt in her husband's faithfulness, she also attacks his integrity and masculinity by pleading with him, saying, "*Nel me devez nïent celer / ne [mei] de nule rien duter*" (81-82). ("You mustn't hide anything from me / or fear me in any way.") Utilizing the unassuming nature of a pleading tone, she essentially makes herself the victim of the situation by accusing him of wronging her. *He* is hiding things from her and not having faith in her; *his* actions are immoral. At this point, he has already told her that he becomes a werewolf, but she still persists that he is hiding something from her. Rather than straightforwardly asking the expected question of what he does as a werewolf, the wife instead manipulatively accuses Bisclavret of being both a liar and coward to pressure him into telling her the location of the one thing that allows him to become human again: his clothes.

Her request to know where his clothes are even as she protests that she loves him "*plus que tut le mund*," is key because it indicates that she is already plotting to dispose of him (80). Because Bisclavret has told her the secret of his transformation, the wife knows that taking his clothes will make it impossible for her husband to become a human again. He will be doomed to remain a wolf indefinitely. As noted by Lecouteux, clothing is a key definer of humankind. So, while Bisclavret is in lupine form, he has no clothing, no voice, no weapons, no social status or "name"—no semblance of humanity. In taking his clothes, the wife also takes away all trappings of humanity from him so that he cannot externally be identified as human anymore. Furthermore, as an animal, he is also no longer in the image of God, so his soul is in question as well. Thus, the wife fully knows what she may be taking from her husband, and yet she persists for her own benefit. Meanwhile, her actions are full of hypocrisy. As she accuses him of fear and

dishonesty, she exemplifies these very vices. In a way, it is as though she blames him for all wrong so that she can acquit herself in her mind while simultaneously taking the keen nose of society off of the scent of her own wrongdoing. It seems the perfect cover.

If her conduct were merely the cause of her misinterpreting moral and spiritual authority, her actions might be more understandable and even justifiable. However, there is a difference between misinterpretation and misuse. While misinterpretation often leads to misuse, misuse is possible without misinterpretation. In fact, it would require a very accurate interpretation and understanding of biblical authority and "Christian" morals in order to manipulate them in the way that the wife does in her dealings with Bisclavret. She is not merely twisting the meaning of something, but rather she is abusing moral consciousness to hide her misdeeds while trying to keep its essential exterior intact, effectively covering up her tracks.

These actions are significant considering how they contrast with the actions of Chaucer's character the Wyf of Bath, for example, who misinterprets biblical "autorite." The Wyf of Bath, however, misconstrues the meanings not to intentionally hide aspects of her conduct or character but merely to justify them. Bisclavret's wife does both, which takes a much more conniving, intelligent, and relatively well-informed sort of character. Where the Wyf of Bath openly confesses her actions, the wife of Bisclavret attempts to conceal. She acts much more like the scholar Nicholas in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," a man who twists the biblical story of Noah and thereby abuses the poor carpenter John's trusting and benevolent nature in order to "swyve" John's wife, the fair young Alisoun. While Bisclavret was written a little over 200 years before Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Bisclavret's wife has just this sort of deviousness about her that Nicholas has, suggesting that the misuse of scripture and morals is just as significant an issue in the 1400's as it was in the late 1100's.

Meanwhile, at the same time as this moral manipulation occurs, the wife also tries to look the part of the courtly lady and use courtly ideals to rationalize her manipulation of religious mores and appearances. A contemporary of Marie de France, Andreas Capellanus outlines the "rules" for courtly love in medieval society (seriously or sarcastically) in his treatise *De Amore,* which gives a picture of what might have been running through the wife's mind. Though the greatest concern of the treatise is dedicated to knightly chivalry, the text also describes expectations for the lady to be beautiful, well-spoken, and especially of good character. All of these are qualities which the wife clearly "appears" to have, based on the opening lines. In the idea of courtly love, there is also the expectation that a lady will inspire a knight to noble or heroic deeds. For this reason, it is not unusual for a man to go off to war in order to win the affections of a lover. The lady is an object of desire, a prize that is usually admired from afar and to whom a knight will humbly subject himself by doing great deeds for her sake.

Perhaps this last point is a motivation for the wife of Bisclavret to turn against her husband. For one, he is no longer subjecting himself to her, and he is also not going off to war or being heroic; rather, he turns into a werewolf and does unknown horrors (for all she knows) in the forest. He is not achieving glory or expressing his nobility in battle for her, but rather, at least in her perspective, he is viciously misplacing masculine aggression in a form that is not socially acceptable. It seems as though she knows that his reality reflects poorly on her own role as his wife and that, if the secret were divulged, it would greatly affect her social status because the lady's position in society is directly affected by the man she marries. For example, if a woman marries into a class above that of her birth, she becomes part of the upper class (Capellanus). Thus, her social wellbeing may depend on a volatile creature. Furthermore, if the court discovered Bisclavret's secret, both of them would suffer the consequences based solely on his

nature. Her actions, then, would seem to be focused on her own preservation as a lady in society and would seem to be based initially on her fear that her husband's secret could ruin her. He knows the risk as well, saying, "Harm will come to me if I tell you about this, / because I'd lose your love / and even my very self" (54-56). If anyone learns his secret, he is endangered in more than one way. Even though he specifically addresses his wife, it seems as though in these lines he recognizes the probability that he would lose the good graces of not just her but anyone with whom he shares this secret. In theory, the wife does not want to be pulled down along with him. Thus, the wife makes the choice to manipulate her appearance as an ideal courtly lady in order to mask over her true intentions to get rid of the threat to her status, thus rationalizing her irrational and un-human behavior. She then marries a respectable knight—whom she admits she does not love—in order to maintain her social status without her husband. As Freeman puts it:

> By burying her husband alive in this way, the Lady is effectively able to assume the appearance of a widow and shortly thereafter that of a new bride, convinced that she has forever avoided revealing herself as the wife of a monster. The wife has indeed devoured the human being who was her husband, having made him as well as her lover, prey to her own ambitions and pride. (294)

The new knight thus serves only two purposes for her: helping her dispose of her old husband and marrying her so that she can remain comfortable in society.

Furthermore, not only does the wife try to use courtly ideals to justify her misuse of religious language, but she also manipulates the popular observation of her husband's habitual absences to validate her remarriage in the larger view of society and to release herself from the bonds of commitment to Bisclavret. In other words, she uses his permanent absence and the

suggestion of his infidelity (both of which she herself creates) in order to save her own reputation, a move that eventually leads to her downfall. Others in the neighborhood have noticed that he is regularly missing, expect it, and then quickly accept that he has gone for good of his own accord when he does not return. Since they knew how often he was away from home, the members of the court responded without much surprise or any suspicion:

> All thought
> this time he'd gone away forever.
> They searched for him and made inquiries
> but could never find him,
> so they had to let matters stand. (128-32)

In the process of manufacturing this outcome, the wife, as Buckner puts it, "…has undergone…a transformation as profound as Bisclavret's own repeated metamorphosis, a transformation that takes the narrator's complimentary phrase about her good appearance and turns it into a question" (258). The curious thing is that a form of the same word that was used earlier to describe the wife's appearance (*semblant*) is used again only a few lines later when the wife calls Bisclavret's love for her into question. "*Ne semblereit pas amiste"* or "that would not appear to be true love," she says as she berates him for keeping secrets from her (83). Meanwhile, her own speech drips with hypocrisy as she proclaims that she loves him "*plus que tut le mund*" (80). Notice again that she says this *after* she has learned that he is a werewolf and also after he has told her that he goes without his clothes, the only two provocations provided in the text for her betrayal of him. Given that no other reasons are supported by the text, at this point it is safe to assume that the wife has—by the time she utters this profession of love—already decided that she no longer wants to be with him. Perhaps even as early as this line, the wheels in the wife's

mind are moving in the direction of betrayal. Therefore, her hyperbolic insistence that she loves him, coupled with her accusations, proves duplicitous. Thus, in just a few short lines, the wife goes from having the appearance of a noble and valiant woman, to throwing the question of appearances at Bisclavret, and, in doing so, having the question thrust back upon herself. She still *looks* the same outwardly, but in this dialogue she manipulates the tenuous question of appearances for her own advantage to indict her husband while releasing herself from obligation to actually live up to her own appearances (while still maintaining these appearances for the sake of maintaining her reputation within society).

As readers, we witness a complete metamorphosis revealing her true nature, but at this point, to the rest of the world within the lai, Bisclavret is still the villain who left his wife for no reason. As with the religious expectations, the wife takes hold of courtly ideals of what love looks like and abuses them to both pressure Bisclavret and make way for her own immorality, which the larger society does not perceive because she still upholds the proper appearances. Thus, through this one conversation in the lai, the wife works on two very different but not entirely distinct levels by bending to her own will the identifiers of both courtly society and contemporary religious ideals of morality. It takes some rather ingenious subtlety, and yet to the reader, the contrast between the reality of the wife's actions and the image she projects to disguise and even validate her conduct is as apparent as the nose on her face.

Some have tried to read the wife much more sympathetically than this. Stypczynski, for example, claims that "the wife's horror is understandable on two levels" (57). The first level he supplies is that she may then become a mother to a garwulf, a creature that would in turn cause harm to society. This first suggestion seems improbable since it is difficult to believe that someone so intent on ruining her husband (and marrying someone she does not even love to

achieve that end) would be capable of such altruism. The second level that Stypczynski suggests is that, "by sleeping with the wolf-in-knight's clothing, one could argue that she technically commits the sin of bestiality" (58). Stypczynski argues from this that "she clearly sees adultery as the lesser of two evils, perhaps one that is even cancelled out by her rejection of the monstrous beast" (58). He goes so far as to suggest that legitimate fear for her own soul may propel the wife's actions.

However, it is clear that the wife's actions are not primarily grounded in either concern for society at large or for her soul, the latter especially considering that she does more than just commit adultery. Rather, as has been illustrated previously, she subverts not just morals but also courtly ideals on more than one level in a way that is malicious and carefully calculated. While the fear of continued bestiality and the possibility of werewolf progeny may have crossed her mind and contributed to her choice, fear for her soul does not seem to be a primary motivation for her. If it were, she certainly would not manipulate the two systems of society in the way that she does. As we have seen, the wife is fully conscious that her misuse of courtly ideals to justify her misuse of the religious ideals will succeed in outwardly acquitting her because she is also aware that courtly and religious ideals of the time conflict at a few very crucial points. She knows that, by manipulating the major points of disunion between both cultural constructs, she will be allowed to slip through the cracks and get away with acts that are not endorsed by either church or society. This is her main goal: to preserve herself and her personal comfort by hiding away in the "safe" crevice created between secular and religious society. Thus, she comes to embody the evils of both church and society and highlight the dangers of having these two overlapping and co-dominant cultural constructs at such odds with one another that they can be manipulated to work against each other.

Meanwhile, just as the wife's voice and her manipulations of church and society supply one significant layer to the lai's critique of social and religious constructs, Marie's use of language constitutes an additional layer. While the court perceives the werewolf and wife in terms of unhuman and human that rest solely on the shoulders of external identifiers, Marie provides the reader with a linguistic detail that reveals the popular perception as faulty: the contrast between the named and the unnamed. In spite of having no name apparent to the king and the court members while in bestial form, the werewolf does have a name to the reader: the name of Bisclavret. Meanwhile, the wife is as nameless to the reader as she will be noseless to the rest of the world at the end of the lai.

As the character that embodies the true evils of society and religion, the wife is presented as a common noun, a thing with no identifier other than "wife" (*femme),* and occasionally "lady" (*dame).* Contrast this with the way that Marie changes the common noun Bisclavret into a proper noun. He has a proper identifier, but it is one that—like his wife's generalized appellation—is laden with irony. The werewolf's identifier "Bisclavret" literally means "werewolf" in Anglo Norman; however, by changing it from the common to the proper noun, Marie is forging a different set of associations with the word "Bisclavret," associations that are the exact opposite of those vested in the common noun werewolf. She redefines the word "Bisclavret" to mean something noble, moralizing, and rational: characteristics that are never found in traditional werewolves while they are in the shape of a beast.

In the meantime, the de-identification of the wife (which is accomplished through keeping her nameless) also strips the term "wife" of all the meaning it has accrued within the social and religious context. She is not Woman as named by Adam in Genesis nor is she The Courtly Lady of medieval society; she becomes to the reader something seemingly Other created

in the absence of proper appellation. In her transformation, the wife twists even the language used to describe her so that the common noun "wife" as used within the lai no longer means what it appears to mean. She is no longer wife of Bisclavret in any sense of the word, carrying no obligations towards him and having married another man, and yet she is still referred to as such. Thus, the term "wife" in reference to her means nothing now and therefore is lowered to the status of primal utterance. To call the woman "wife" is to give a bestial grunt that has no real signification, and yet at the same time, in becoming such an unhuman term, the word "wife" now perfectly reflects the reality of who she is. In this way, the seeming humanness of the "wife" is obscured, and the core of her character is revealed to the reader.

Thus, to borrow a term from Derrida and Levi-Strauss, the use of names becomes a form of *bricolage*, an manufacturing of whatever elements may be on hand to serve a particular purpose without regard to their original function, something the wife has been doing this entire time with the instruments of religious and courtly society. The most important aspect of this, however, is not so much the in newness of Marie's (and the wife's) usage but in the difference—the space—between the original and actual usage, especially in the case of the characters' names. This serves its purpose because, as Derrida describes it, "Language bears in itself the necessity of its own critique." The same is true for the names and un-names that Marie uses. Placing the name "Bisclavret" and the-un name "femme" side by side creates a subtle form of linguistic freeplay, a strategy which allows each name to reveal their shifting significations that, in effect, swap places with one another. "Wife" changes twice, in fact. It changes from meaning "married woman" loaded with all its cultural connotations to becoming, much more broadly, a sign of all that *appears* human. At the same time as it does this, however, it moves from appearing human to being metaphorically and then later visibly bestial. Meanwhile, the beast is being

simultaneously redefined as human, to the point that even the bestial act of tearing off the wife's nose at the end is redefined as something that is moralizing and restorative. All of this serves to further accentuate the already rife tensions within the text of *Bisclavret*. The question that remains is: to what end is this tension building?

The crucial twist here is, of course, that to the rest of the world the wife *does* still appear to be Woman and Lady because technically she is still a member of the social and religious spheres that she is simultaneously working against. Thus, she is a terrifying abjection, an object whose image is sublimated by both church and society but who is in reality representative of everything that church and society reject. However, soon it will become apparent to the wife's audience that all is not as it seems. The process towards this realization begins in the forest when the king happens to run across Bisclavret and is astonished by the "humanity" of the thing he perceives as animal. The king exclaims, "*ele ad sen de hume, merci crie…/ este beste ad entente e sen*" or "it has the mind of a man, and it's begging me for mercy…/ this beast is rational—he has a mind!" (154-7). Again, we see the werewolf from someone else's eyes, so there is a sense of distance created between the reader and the werewolf character. This time, we see him through the eyes of the court members, who, for the first time in the lai, experience a shift in interpretation. Previously, interpretation of occurrences has been made solely based on the presence or absence of certain identifiers (as explored earlier through the character of the wife). This is the first instance, however, when someone looks beyond the exterior trappings and realizes something beneath the surface, something that has been concealed in some way or another. It is not a total shift, though, because it is still based on the wolf's human action of prostrating himself before the king. It is, however, a significant step in the right direction.

The pivotal turn that Marie makes that finally brings the true character of the "wife" to the forefront is the scene in which Bisclavret rips the nose from the wife's face, and it is the key to unlocking all that is pent up behind the multiple layers of tension. It does this in two ways: first by its restorative properties and second, paradoxically, by its dissonance. First, the tearing of the wife's nose is the culminating act that restores morality to the lai by providing the necessary restitution for the abhorrent crimes the wife has committed. It also finally produces an exterior symbol for the internal reality that the wife has been attempting to conceal. Marie writes, "*Oiez cu m il est bien vengiez! / le neis li esracha del vis*" or "Now listen how well he avenged himself! / He tore the nose right off her face" (235). This occurs within a rather interesting set of circumstances. The wife has come to the king because it seems she has heard about how Bisclavret attacked her husband, and we can assume that she is probably suspicious at this point about the identity of Bisclavret. So, she again focuses on her appearance, "dress[ing] herself elegantly…/ bringing rich presents for [the king]" (228-30). Thus, she presents herself to the king looking her best, but this time her manipulative strategy fails, and she is publicly denosed by her own former husband. As Freeman describes it, in the most bestial act he performs, "[Bisclavret] is in fact at his most noble and chivalric attacking the enemy as she betrays King, husband, and author — fealty, fidelity in marriage, and feminine courtliness" (296). Suddenly, in front of everyone, she finally looks like the monster she is, and, not long afterwards, the truth is discovered and the wolf-man Bisclavret finally returns to his human appearance that more accurately reflects his moral and social consciousness than did the image of the perpetual werewolf. Things are finally set right, though we may perhaps assume that, having not been cured from his werewolf-ness, Bisclavret will continue the cyclical man-to-beast-to-man transformation.

In the ending, a sense of rightness has been created that “resolves” the tensions in the lai as the now obviously monstrous wife is exiled and Bisclavret is restored physically and socially. At the same time, however, there is still an important dissonance: not all questions are answered in the end. The tale may seem to wrap itself up tightly in a good-triumphs-over-evil happily-ever-after ending, but as we have already seen, things are not always as they seem. Rather than neatly tying up the loose ends, Marie leaves hanging the dual and conflicting nature of the werewolf himself. He is not cured, nor does the larger cultural concept of werewolf change in any way. Furthermore, we are left haunted by the reverberating sound of doubt in the way things appear because throughout the entire lai everything external has been systematically questioned and redefined—from religious and social appearances down to the very names that the characters bear. What is true now that we have deconstructed every semblance?

Apparently, the lai is true. At least, that’s what Marie tells us very pointedly in the very last few lines of the poem: "*l'avenutre ke avez oïe//veraie fu, n'en dutez mie"* (315-16). In other words, the adventure that you just heard is true, so don’t doubt it. What does this mean? In the end, what has this lai accomplished? The trueness of the tale is that it calls into question the cultural constructs being manipulated—the society and the church—by revealing their flaws and severely critiquing their potential for misuse. This is especially important since one of the reasons the wife gets away with everything for so long is because society and the church have different and conflicting standards. The wife’s actions falls into the gap between the two social constructs, a disconnection that can have disastrous results. Thus, in the end, the reversal of the monster motif develops a critique of a society in which two of the most important social standards are often at odds with one another. The spaces that are created between them are dangerous because, as seen through the wife’s character, they can be manipulated for purposes

not intended by either cultural construct. For this reason, the kinds of things that the church and secular society were concerned about at the time (such as lycanthropy) are shown to be less disastrous than the inherent structure of that society with its unresolved tensions between the religious and the secular. The gravest dangers that society faces, therefore, lie not in the obvious monsters but rather in the tenuousness and malleability of a conflicting culture.

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