

Fictions of Identity in Medieval France

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The specular encounter in fictions of reciprocity:
the *Lais* of Marie de France

After more than eight centuries, the *Lais* of Marie de France still occupy scholars and enjoy a sizable reading public. Their longevity no doubt stems in large part from Marie's acute sensitivity to the dynamic of desire that lends shape, substance, and a degree of closure to each *lai*, yet also from a certain enigmatic quality that prevails throughout, awakening intense readerly curiosity without ever fully satisfying it. Also apparent is another predominant characteristic, thus far unexamined, one that fosters both the overall coherence of each *lai*, as well as a unique blend of limpidity and inscrutability characteristic of the collection as a whole: the privileged moments of specular encounter that bring sudden illumination concerning the self. We find at least one occurrence in each of the twelve *lais* attributed to Marie's authorship.

In this chapter, we shall see that, as it is consistently implemented in the *Lais*, the specular encounter ensures their perception as homogeneous tales that cohere as a collection. The *Lais* have received critical attention from two distinct perspectives. A majority of scholars have examined them individually or in subsets, and this substantial body of scholarship is laced with many rich veins.¹ Indeed, the abundance of commentary and the diversity of interpretive positions with regard to any given text attest to the kind of active, hermeneutically constructive reception envisaged in the general prologue as constitutive of the perdurable longevity of the *Lais* among successive generations of readers.² On the other hand, a few scholars have – often only in passing – entertained the possibility that the *Lais* may in some important way cohere as an ensemble.³ This line of inquiry is readily prompted by dozens of resonances that echo throughout the collection and create that uncanny effect of thematic marbling so immediately seductive to

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most readers.⁴ More importantly, the general prologue offers a powerful hint that an architectural principle did indeed govern their construction: the authorial voice affirms that “M’entremis des lais *assembler*” (47) [I undertook to *assemble* the *lais*].⁵ Some scholars have wondered if this suggestive exordial glimpse of a specific process of authorial “assemblage,” or amalgamation, might allow us to assume that the Harley manuscript containing the general prologue and the twelve known *lais* attributed to Marie’s authorship is the product of some profoundly meaningful comprehensive design.⁶

In this chapter we entertain that possibility in terms of the specular encounter and its narrative contextualization, both in each *lai* individually and within the collection as a whole. It will be apparent that, in every one of these poems, the specular encounter provides the crucial locus of transition essential to the story’s resolution. More specifically, we shall see how this schema is consistently the vital accessory to establishment of a relation of *reciprocity* that is variously thematized at the close of each poem. A second type of analysis will show how the schema is operative throughout the collection in complementarity with one fundamental variety of narrative that acquired considerable prominence during the later twelfth century, Marie de France being one of its most systematic early practitioners. Our objective is to bring to light the highly normative properties of the *lai* as it is so uniquely conceptualized in this collection, in order to show that the *Lais*, by virtue of the way in which each text displays the same complementary principles of narrative and discursive organization, comprise an organized ensemble, one that was among the earliest – if not the earliest – transtextually unified *recueils* of vernacular brief narratives in medieval literature.

THE SPECULAR ENCOUNTER IN *GUIGEMAR*

Let us begin with *Guigemar*, the first of the *lais* in Harley 978, which alone among extant manuscripts contains the general prologue and all twelve *lais* usually attributed to Marie de France.⁷ The way in which the specular encounter functions in this initial *lai* is programmatic, anticipating quite precisely the highly specialized development our schema receives throughout the balance of the collection.

Its first occurrence, near the beginning of the *lai*, is Guigemar’s

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dramatic confrontation by the speaking hind, a segment that has counterparts in medieval hagiography, among them the episode from the life of Eustace discussed in the Introduction.⁸ As in the latter biography, this moment brings about a quantum change in the hero's convictions and orientation; in both texts the specular schema marks the principal turning point of the biography. Important contrasts do set the two passages apart: in *Guigemar* the creature's message is devoid of religious doctrine; it lacks the quasi-allegorical quality of its counterpart in *Eustace*; and the enigmatic animal never clarifies its nature or provenance. The schema's initial occurrence in *Guigemar* nonetheless functions as it does in *Eustace*. The creature's midchase revelation effects the hunter's crucial reorientation in midcareer, in a manner suggestive of the dynamics of conversion. Resonating with the moment of spiritual awakening in the saintly *vita*, this passage invites consideration as the primary locus of Guigemar's heroic individuation.

Prior to this deeply unsettling encounter, Guigemar's youth had been auspicious; his father, a Breton nobleman, had sent him to serve the king, and after the latter had knighted him, his exploits had begun to earn him widespread renown (27–56). Like Placidus, however, a blemish mars his otherwise impeccable profile. At issue is not erroneous religious conviction, but rather a lack of affective inclinations: “De tant i out mespris Nature / Ke unc de nule amur n'out cure” (57–58) [Nature had erred in making him indifferent to any sort of love]. Guigemar had always shunned the attentions of eligible noble women (59–62) “il n'aveit de ceo talent” (64) [he had no desire for that]. His indifference was unanimously criticized: “Pur ceo le tienent a peri / E li estrange e si ami” (63–68). [Because of that both friends and strangers considered his case irremediable.] Apart from a vague reference to “Nature” (57), the source of his disinclination is not specified.⁹ It clearly sets him apart from his peers and leaves him unable to reciprocate love. Although devoid of amatory desire (“talent,” v. 64), he is fully responsive to the dark allure of the forest: “Talent li prist d'aler chacier . . . / Kar cil deduiz forment li plest” (76; 80) [He was taken by a desire to go hunting . . . for that pastime pleased him immensely]. The enticement of cynegetic pleasures offers a seductive threshold, beyond which the unanticipated occurs.

As in the *Vie de Saint Eustace* and Flaubert's tale, we move from a

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full-scale chase to the hunter's isolation with one specific quarry. When he mortally wounds the animal, Guigemar suffers both a thigh wound from his rebounding arrow and, far more acutely, the quarry's malediction. Like the stag pursued by Eustace, it initially signals the failure of the hunt, then utters a prophecy:

Oï! Lase! Jo sui ocise!
E tu, vassal, ki m'as nafree,
Tel seit la tue destinee:
Jamais n'aies tu medecine,
Ne par herbe ne par racine!
Ne par mire, ne par poisun
N'avras tu jamés garisun
De la plaie k'as en la quisse,
De si ke cele te guarisse
Ki souffera pur tue amur
Issi grant peine e tel dolur
K'unkes femme taunt ne suffri,
E tu referas taunt pur li . . .
(106–18)

[Oh! Alas! I am slain! But you, vassal, who wounded me, may this be your fate: never shall you find remedy in herb or root, or be healed by physician or potion, and never shall the wound in your thigh be cured, lest she who heals you suffer for love of you more pain and agony than any woman ever endured, and you for her in equal measure . . .]

Once again, the animal encounter conveys a message addressed exclusively to this specific hunter. The preliminary verdict is vital, and Guigemar is now at last compelled to affirm his indifference to love: "*Il set assez e bien le dit / K'unke femme nule ne vit / A ki il aturnast s'amur / Ne kil guaresist de dolur*" (129–32) [*He is well aware, and even says so, that he never met a woman he could love or who or who could remedy his agony*]. While drawing his attention outward, the vision also directs him to the locus of discovery within himself. This inward descent in turn directs him outward, toward the one being capable of healing him, whereupon a second type of specularity comes to the fore: love, heretofore lacking in Guigemar's otherwise sterling profile, must henceforth compel him, but only toward the lady whose suffering in love for him equals his own for her. Only the mutual agony of *reciprocal*

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love can engender the capacity to effect mutual healing. He must in effect find his feminine double, his mirror-image in terms of suffering occasioned by desire. The hind's malediction thus offers the hunter a reflexive reorientation, toward the previously unrecognized quarry within himself.

Here we see contrasts with the life of Eustace, where the stag's didacticism overshadows the hunter's state of mind. Guigemar's subjective state is heightened by certain descriptive details that emblemize his situation and attitude and awaken hermeneutic interest in his potential inner life and psychic states. For example, he is drawn to a most unlikely quarry: no solitary stag, such as that pursued by Placidus, but "une bise od un foün" [a hind with a fawn] (90). This "familial" pairing would seemingly rule out imminent carnage while also implying some special symbolic significance. This impression is reinforced when our expectations are defied as Guigemar undertakes to slay the hind:

Il tent sun arc, si trait a li!
En l'esclot la feri devaunt;
Ele chaï demeintenaunt;
La seete resort ariere,
Guigemar fiert en tel maniere,
En la quisse desk'al cheval,
Ke tost l'estuet descendre aval:
Ariere chiet sur l'erbe drue
Delez la bise k'out ferue!
(94–102)

[He drew his bow taut and fired, striking it in the temple; it slumped straightaway to the ground. The arrow bounced back and so struck Guigemar in the thigh, right down to the horse's hide, that he had to dismount; he fell backward onto the grassy carpet, right beside the very hind he had wounded!]

This reflexive doubling of the trauma seems highly significant. Guigemar anticipates Flaubert's Julian, whose encounter with a cervine "family" is also suggestive of a psychic disorder. Like Julian, Guigemar has long possessed latent self-knowledge that only now becomes accessible, through an independent informant, hence a type of specular encounter that contrasts with the stag's revelation to Placidus of verities that were previously foreign to his own cognitive sphere. For Guigemar,

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the moment of *anagnorisis* is in effect a *re-cognition*.¹⁰ Despite this evidence of a symbolic enactment of profound psychic adjustments, any latent aggressive attitude toward his own mother seems unlikely; about her we know only that “A merveille l’amot sa mere” (39) [His mother loved him deeply]. More compelling is a sense that the incident exteriorizes a moment of affective transition: the violent separation of the faun and hind would thus be an objective correlative of the severance of an infantile bond. The symbolization of the hind passes from the maternal sphere to that of a prophetess enjoining the hero to find reciprocal love.¹¹ The informant’s metamorphosis from *mater* to *mediatrix* of the hero’s relation to the feminine sphere would thus betoken his move into the sphere of heterosexual love.

Although a reading of descriptive details as signifiers of affect might seem anachronistically “psychoanalytic,” works from remote periods do at times convey remarkably “analytic” insights. Here, indeed, the text subsequently endorses such a reading, in the gradual move from wounding as a physically specular event to its eventual reconfiguration as metaphor.¹² The wound inflicted upon the hind dissipates its maternal image and elicits its naming of the hero’s lack in the feminine sphere. Then the rebounding arrow that wounds Guigemar necessitates his quest for the reciprocal love that alone can heal him.¹³ Thus the literal trauma is gradually reconfigured as a psychic ordeal metaphorically conflating love and suffering, and culminating in explicit thematization of the compound figure: “Amur est plaie dedenz cors / E si ne piert nient defors” (483–84) [Love is a wound within the body, yet nothing shows on the outside].¹⁴ The double wounding is seen retrospectively as prefigurative of the double amatory wound suffered equally by hero and lady.

In addition, the hind’s antlers alloy the feminine and maternal image of the hind and faun with masculine overtones:

Tute fu blanche cele beste,
Perches de cerf out en la teste.
(91–92)

[The beast was all white, with the antlers of a stag.]

It is an “androgynous” beast¹⁵ and thus, not unlike the stag in *Eustace*, offers an iconographically dense image: the maternal and

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paternal figures are fused, so that a familial triad is replicated within the natural landscape, independent of the protagonist. Consequently, the symbolic injunction to move from infantile to heterosexual love implicitly emanates from both constituents of the parental order, in harmony with a conventional pattern of individuation.¹⁶ The hind's fusion of masculine and feminine features also prefigures the story's primary concern with uniting the couple. This proves difficult because various obstacles render two successive meetings abortive before their definitive union can be realized.

In this enterprise, the most important narrative function is once again that of wounding, which opens and closes the quest for love: it begins with Guigemar's wound and culminates in the mortal wound he finally inflicts upon his rival for the lady, Lord Meriaduc, thus abruptly ending the story. The inverse specularity between the wound sustained and the wound inflicted is significant in terms of the series of male figures in Guigemar's experience. With no apparent resistance on his part, his father had sent him away from the familial foyer and from the mother who loved him "a merveille" (39).¹⁷ Although this detail offers only a fleeting hint of father/son rivalry for the attentions of the mother, it assumes more importance retrospectively, when echoed in a context suggestive of a dream.¹⁸ Carried abroad while asleep on an enchanted ship, Guigemar finally fulfills the hind's injunction. The land of his ideal lady is a countervailing realm, somewhat reminiscent of an otherworldly venue in folk narrative – a country where, according to convention, the protagonist's lack is liquidated, and where, as in a dream, archaic, sometimes infantile material is remanifested in modified form. In this exotic setting the familial triad is reconfigured in terms more appropriate to Guigemar's psychic needs: once again, though with far greater negative intensity, a prohibitive male stands between him and the affectively valorized feminine figure. Yet this obstacle replicating the tensions implicit in the initial familial triad is now offset positively: while the masculine rival – the counterpart of the prohibitive paternal figure – is a superannuated, obsessively jealous husband who imprisons his young wife, she much prefers Guigemar to her rebarbative captor. This idyll, suggestive of oneiric fulfillment of a thinly disguised Oedipal wish, eventually turns to nightmare when the vicious husband, having discovered the couple *in flagrante delicto*,

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banishes Guigemar. Again, he offers no apparent resistance to being sent away from a woman who loves him “a merveille.”¹⁹ In sum, the original severance from the maternal sphere at the initiative of the father is here transposed into a dreamlike realm and replayed in a traumatic key, and once again Guigemar acquiesces before an authoritative male who poses an obstacle between himself and the devoted female figure.²⁰

Unresolved in this oneiric setting, the problem shifts back to the thorny world of feudal circumstantiality, a world of hunting, combat, and siege – a world of wounds. In this setting, the lovers are eventually reunited, though again they are confronted by an authoritarian figure manifesting yet another replica of paternal prohibition: Meriaduc, the feudal lord whose own designs on the *mal mariée* prompt him to forbid Guigemar to depart with the lady, despite their resolve to do so after finding the love tokens they had exchanged prior to their earlier separation.²¹ Hence the second remanifestation of a triad that places a masculine rival between Guigemar and the desired female. Yet this time instead of acquiescing, Guigemar slays his rival, and this, his first act of aggression since he attempted to slay the hind, also marks, in remarkably terse fashion, the end of the narrative:

Le chastel ad destruit e pris
E le seigneur dedenz ocis.
(879–80)

[He seized and destroyed the castle and killed the lord within.]

Guigemar has wrested the castle, that emblem *par excellence* of patriarchal authority, away from his rival and then summarily dispatched him, whereupon all interest in the hero's story appears to have been exhausted.

This abrupt ending obviously leaves certain questions unresolved, such as potential reprisals by the jealous husband, or the juridical implications of Guigemar's homicide, or the future social status of this hastily united couple, and so on.²² Loose threads of this sort occur throughout the *Lais*, however, and while such frequent inconsequentiality would be distressing in a novel by a Balzac or a Flaubert, there is a certain risk involved if we read – as some readers tend to do, perhaps unwittingly – a collection like the *Lais* from the horizon of

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expectations of, say, realist or naturalist fiction. For by dwelling on inconsistent or unresolved details, we may perceive them anachronistically, as instances of deliberate “ironic play” with conventions, which they might well be in the hands of a practitioner of realism or a Borges; or else we may solicit the text unduly, with interpretive subtleties that these tales cannot sustain. In so doing, we risk imposing the standards of modern narrative types on a genre that represents very few of them among its resources. Marie’s *Lais*, like their anonymous counterparts, frequently show little or no concern for unresolved questions pertaining to literal events. Despite such indeterminacy, however, the *lai*, like the types of the folktale to which it is frequently related, characteristically culminates in a sense that the fundamental objectives of the story have been met. Regardless of unresolved questions, the sense of an economy of completion ultimately prevails. These *lais* from the Harley manuscript consistently signify the attainment of a satisfactory sense of closure despite circumstances or issues that remain unresolved.²³ An important objective later in this chapter will in fact be to show how in each of these *lais* a sense of completion stems from a highly characteristic configuration that effects the closing symbolic synthesis.

As we have perceived it thus far, *Guigemar* would be a tale of heroic individuation that dramatizes a conflict and then resolves it in a series of symbolically charged phases. The ultimate liquidation of the rival suggests that Guigemar has finally supplanted the masculine obstacle and reappropriated his authoritative role, and all that remains is to celebrate euphorically the definitive union of the couple:

A grant joie s’amie en meine:
Ore ad trespasee sa peine.
(881–82)

[Joyfully he leads his beloved away; his ordeal is now over.]

According to this remarkably succinct view of narrative adequation, Guigemar has transcended his anguish – “trespasee sa peine” – which in retrospect could, from this perspective, be perceived in terms of an initial oedipal predicament, the need to transcend the “problem of the mother,” by initiating sexual maturation beyond the mother/infant dyad.²⁴ Then, in a transitional stage, the remote idyllic love effectively

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veiled the underlying replication of the oedipal dyad while intensifying the threatening demeanor of the prohibitive paternal figure. Deferred until the third “act,” this “problem of the father” is finally resolved when Guigemar kills the third configuration of a rival who would remove him from the presence of the desired feminine other. According to this view, the abortive and self-damaging gesture of wounding that marked the onset of Guigemar’s specular encounter and opened the way to heroic maturation would also logically require its ultimate counterpart at the culmination of the process: the elimination and displacement of a replica of the paternal rival. Hence a functional symmetry, between the problem emblemized by Guigemar’s specular encounter with the hind and the ultimate resolution of that problem: the symbolic representation of his transcendence of an oedipal fixation. While the hero’s specular encounter in *Guigemar* would thus be the anchor of a feudal fiction of love won, then lost, then regained, it would also be the symbolic nucleus of an Oedipal dynamic woven into a narrative enactment of masculine individuation. In such a reading of *Guigemar*, the cynegetic specular encounter assumes the dimensions of a powerful condensation of affect that nourishes the symbolic registers of the ensuing fiction, dramatizing in the hero’s experience a “working through” toward resolution of fundamental conflicts.²⁵ The hero’s “case study” would thus be seen as unfolding in a series of progressive displacements of the intersubjective triad comprised of the self and its masculine and feminine imagoes.

However interesting the foregoing analysis of *Guigemar* along the lines of a fiction of heroic individuation may appear, it must ultimately be deemed unsatisfactory, either as a reading of the work as a whole or of the specular encounter’s significance within it. Here, as in certain other *lais* in the collection, individuation is not the overriding concern. An interpretation of *Guigemar* based on the maturation of the male protagonist seems all the more reductive in that – rare suggestions to the contrary notwithstanding – the work was authored by a woman.²⁶ With regard to the significant paradigm of masculine development, the hero’s specular encounter is indeed the pivotal center, but only of his own biography.²⁷ Yet *Guigemar* is much more than a vehicle of heroic biography, as we see when his dramatic specular encounter with the hind is later complemented by two equally significant recurrences of

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this same schema, which together subordinate the project of masculine individuation to a much more important concern, one that is also profoundly marked by specularity: for if Guigemar's ventry in the cynegetic sense provides him, in the form of a specular encounter, with the language and symbolization necessary to awaken his receptivity to ventry in the amorous sense, this will be possible exclusively with his feminine double, the one being who suffers from an amatory deficit virtually identical – and in reflexive symmetry – to his own. Further analysis is therefore necessary, in order to account for other highly significant occurrences of the specular encounter, in the presentation of the lady, then in the union of the couple.

Upon Guigemar's arrival in the remote realm, the lady's situation is depicted as similar to his. Her existence – as a cloistered *mal mariée*, has remained bereft of all amatory engagement (209–32). Moreover, as if to heighten the reciprocity created by the similarities between Guigemar's circumstances and her own, her affective lack is symbolized in a manner reminiscent of his earlier encounter with the hind. The fundamental problem is signified reflexively back to her, by means of a symbolic configuration external to herself. This specular confrontation, an instructive “mirror of the *mal mariée*,” as it were,²⁸ she finds depicted in the incendiary drama adorning her bedchamber:

La chaumbre ert peinte tut entour;
Venus, la deuesse d'amur,
Fu tres bien mise en la peinture;
Les traiz mustrount e la nature
Cument hom deit amur tenir
E lealment e bien servir.
Le livre Ovide, ou il enseine
Comment chascuns s'amur estreine,
En un fu ardant le gettout,
E tuz iceus escumengout
Ki jamais cel livre lirreient
Ne sun enseignement fereient.
La fu la dame enclose e mise.
(233–45)

[There were paintings around the bedchamber; there was a fine portrait of Venus, the goddess of love, illustrating her features and likeness, and how one should maintain love and serve it loyally and

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well. She was casting Ovid's book, in which he instructs us on how to restrain love, into a conflagration and excommunicating all who would read it and heed its advice.]

Although this vivid, animated bonfire is in some respects as violent as Guigemar's hunting accident, the medium conveying the specular message is of a wholly different nature. Not the apostrophe of an informant but, as in other instances examined later in this study, a figural representation.²⁹ The mural portrays the militant eroticism of an impassioned Venus, as she casts Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, and with it all amatory reserve, into the flames and "excommunicates" its adherents.³⁰ Although each of these two instances of the specular schema is unique in terms of subject matter, the semantic substratum is virtually the same in each case, though contrastive in terms of gender. Just as the symbolic metamorphosis of the hind from nurturant parent to prophetess moves Guigemar from excessive allegiance to the prohibited maternal figure to a search for his feminine amatory "other," the mural signifies the lady's imminent move from the nefarious constraints of a prohibitive, authoritarian paternal figure, her jealous husband, to union with her masculine amatory "other."³¹ In both cases, then, the specular representation prescribes the same type of psychic transition: a shift of affective allegiance and liberation from bondage to a symbol of the parental figure of the opposite sex. Each in its own way carries the same injunction, to abrogate this sterile servitude, and to effect a reciprocal amatory bond.³²

Thus, like Eustace and his spouse, whose separate specular encounters soon bring them to a common purpose, Guigemar and his lady behold specular configurations of their own circumstances; these motivate their encounter and, eventually, their reciprocation of love. Before this mutual relation can be crystallized, however, they, not unlike Eustace and his wife, must exchange essential information about themselves and then act in unison, despite foreseen tribulations. Thus on their first meeting Guigemar and the lady exchange autobiographical accounts featuring reminiscences of their respective illuminations (311–58). After evoking his youth in a single phrase, Guigemar recapitulates at length his wounding, the hind's prophecy, his voyage, and his quest for the lady who can heal him. Lamenting her loveless marriage and the rigors of her imprisonment, the lady curses the

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emasculated priest set to guard her door, in terms that recall the fire kindled by Venus to destroy the *Remedia amoris*, the handbook of those who would impede love's service – “Ceo doinse Deus que mals feus l'arde!” (348) [May God let him perish in hellish blaze!]. Each self-representation also mirrors thematically the other's bondage. Together they mark the inception of a new, and increasingly prevalent, concern with the achievement of intersubjective *reciprocity*.

Subsequently, each suffers alone the agony of nascent love, and in reminiscence of the specular trauma: Guigemar's anguish recalls his physical wound and its metaphorical displacement – “Mes Amur l'ot feru al vif; / Ja ert sis quors en grant estrif, / Kar la dame l'ad si nafré, / Tut ad sun païs ublié. / De sa plaie nul mal ne sent. / Mut suspire anguisement” (379–84) [But Love had struck him to the quick; he was already so distraught at heart, so deeply had the lady smitten him, that he no longer thought of his homeland. He felt no pain from his wound, though many an anguished sigh escaped him.] Meanwhile, her awakening passion recalls the Venusian conflagration that now begins to consume them both; she “esteit reschaufée / Del feu dont Guigemar se sent / Que sun queor alume e esprent” (390–92) [was heated by the same fire that warmed Guigemar, the one her heart sparked and kindled]. Both are in the throes of love sickness occasioned by love experienced in solitude, unavowed, and therefore incurable except through mutual avowal and consummation.³³ To achieve this, the original specular message requires reiteration, here effected by a mediatory go-between, the jealous husband's niece, who is the lady's companion and confidante. Easily recognizing her mistress's hidden passion and surmising the same in Guigemar, she boldly persuades him to avow his feelings (445–53) and brings the couple together for that purpose. He implores her to heal him – “si vus ne me volez guarir, / Dunc m'estuet il en fin murir” (503–04) [if you do not wish to heal me, then I must ultimately die] – and fervently requests her *druërie* – “Jo vus requeor de *druërie*” (505) [I beseech you to reciprocate my love] – that is, for *reciprocal* love, the only kind of love capable of fulfilling the hind's injunction.³⁴

Following their sojourn in the lady's realm for more than a year, another kind of specularly comes into prominence. This one is material in nature, capable of tangibly commemorating their love and thus, eventually, of validating it at the moment of recognition. Aware

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that discovery of their trysts will lead to their being separated, the couple exchange material *drueries*, tokens of mutual fidelity to emblemize their love as an exclusive bond. The knot she devises in Guigemar's shirt only she can undo: "Cungié vus doins, u ke ceo seit, / D'amer cele kil defferat / E ki despleier le savrat" (560–62) [You have my permission, wherever it may be, to love the woman able to loosen and undo it]. The belt he affixes to her body he alone can remove: "Ki la bucle purrat ovrir / Sanz despecier e sanz partir, / Il li prie que celui aint" (573–75) [Whoever can open the clasp, without taking it apart or breaking it away, he asks her to love that man]. These objects are eventually the components of a poignant recognition scene (743–836).³⁵ They also furnish the intrigue with a literally double "dénouement," while introducing a new type of mirroring, one capable of transcending separation and discontinuity. This is accomplished by the love tokens: self and other are related across time and space by what could be called a reflexivity of artifice, whereby each devises a means of authenticating the other's identity when (s)/he eventually encounters the product of his or her own craftsmanship. Each artisan creates the conditions of a virtual agency – "cele kil defferat"; "Ki la bucle purrat ovrir" – that only he or she can fulfill. In so doing, each bestows upon the other an emblem of his or her own selfhood, fashioning a means of self-recognition tailored upon the material body of the beloved.

Consequently, the specular schema that had twice served to signify a problematic individual selfhood through an encounter with its own depths and corrective designs has by now become instead a means of mirroring the self in the image of the other. Fulfilled thereby is the hind's prescription that Guigemar's quest lead to the kind of love relation that Marie designates throughout the collection as *druërie*, reciprocal love. "Amis, menez en vostre *druë*!" (836) [My darling, take your beloved away!] is the lady's exhortation at the conclusion of their mutual verbal and vestimentary recognition.³⁶ Thus, at the end of its successive metamorphoses throughout the narrative, the specular encounter achieves a symbolic crystallization of the union idealized earlier, that would constitute for all time a story "Dunt tuit cil s'esmerveillerunt / Ki aiment e amé avrunt / U ki pois amerunt après" (119–21) [about which all who love, as well as lovers past and future, will marvel]. Ultimately, Guigemar and his lady are thereby doubly

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valorized, as discrete selves, yet also as individuals conjoined in a union exemplary of the mystery of love founded on optimal reciprocity.

In this respect *Guigemar* is a model for the *lais* that follow in Marie's collection, in all of which the specular encounter effects the crucial shift toward a relation configured in terms of some type of reciprocity.³⁷ We have seen how crucial mediations are effected by a series of *revelations*, as the specular encounter is successively reconfigured according to three different revelatory types: discursive (the hind's injunction); visual (the mural in the lady's bedchamber); and vestimentary (the tokens of recognition exchanged by the lovers). To varying degrees, all three enrich the communicative exchanges with symbolic details that mediate a protagonist's shift from one cognitive or situational register to another by indirect means, and in each case special emphasis falls on transformations of psychic or affective states. As we now make our way through the other *lais* in the collection, we shall see that this powerful conjugation of specular encounter and reciprocity is a vital factor in binding these twelve texts into a unified ensemble. It will be apparent, however, that the major moments of specular encounter are by no means predictable junctures: there is a broad spectrum of variance, especially as regards the schema's fundamental mediatory principle, according to which the specular message typically mediates the recipient's former level of awareness or achievement and a significantly new orientation engendered by its contents. In addition to the mediatory function of *revelation* in *Guigemar*, we find four other types of mediation elsewhere in the collection. These four types, *communication*, *counsel*, *judgment*, and *disclosure of personal and lineal identity*, will serve as convenient rubrics as we consider briefly the *lais* that fall under each one. After looking at how the specular encounter functions in each of the *lais*, we shall broach the larger issue of how its repeated contextualizations achieve a comprehensive architecture unifying the twelve *Lais* in the Harley manuscript.

MEDIATORY COMMUNICATION: *LAUSTIC* AND *CHIEVREFOIL*

The specular encounter characteristically brings two beings into a fundamentally communicative exchange of information. Although in

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most instances this communication is further identifiable in terms of speech acts, such as revelation, counsel, judgment, delineation, and so forth, occasionally the processes of communication themselves are featured. Thus, both *Laüstic* and *Chievrefoil* foreground the intricate communicative strategies involved in exchanges of specular information. Paradoxically, the two briefest *lais* in the collection (160 and 118 verses, respectively) also offer the most intricate and subtle means of communication, thanks to the ways in which brevity and implication serve to increase their signifying density.

Laüstic, like *Guigemar*, turns on the triangle of lady, lover, and jealous husband. All three of its major divisions emphasize communicative processes. The initial situation is one of felicitous communication between the lady and her neighbor with whom she shares a secret passion, facilitated by the proximity of their dwellings. Although a stone wall and the fact that she is kept under surveillance by her husband create insurmountable obstacles to the consummation of their love, they can at least converse. Spatial obstacles notwithstanding, their communication at this stage is relatively uncomplicated, not unlike their playful exchange of the little tokens of affection they toss to one another.

In the middle segment, this euphorically communicative interchange is abruptly truncated by the jealous husband, whose vindictive machinations entail other types of communication, based on metaphor and innuendo. The couple's cryptically understated sparring acquires the special prominence afforded by direct discourse. In reply to her husband's query concerning her nocturnal absences from the marital bed, the lady warily couches the truth in metaphor:

Sire, la dame li respunt,
Il nen ad joië en cest mund
Ki n'ot le laüstic chanter.
Pur ceo me vois ici ester.
Tant ducement l'i oi la nuit
Que mut me semble grant deduit;
Tant m'i delit e tant le voil
Que jeo ne puis dormir de l'oïl.
(83–90)

[Sire, the lady replied, anyone who doesn't hear the nightingale sing has no earthly joy. I come here and stand for that very reason. I hear it

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sing so sweetly at night that it delights me greatly. I take such pleasure in it and so desire it that I can't sleep a wink.]

Her effort to eclipse her nocturnal interlocutor behind the mellifluous nightingale fails miserably: “Quant li sire ot que ele dist, / D'ire e de maltalent en rist” (91–92) [When her husband heard what she said, he laughed in wrathful contempt]. To her dismay she discovers her husband's predilection for dark humor as he literalizes her metaphor.³⁸ Having had a nightingale ensnared, he announces his successful venture: “J'ai le laüstic enginnié / Pur quei vus avez tant veillié. / Des or poëz gisir en peis: / Il ne vus esveillerat meis.” (107–110). [I've caught the nightingale that's kept you awake so much. From now on you can rest in peace: it'll awaken you no more.]

Here the specular encounter effects a dramatic mid-course reversal, as she becomes entangled in her own poetic veil. Her fraudulent complaint of insomnia is reflected back to her in a reply bristling with sarcasm, along with a tangible remedy for her sleeplessness, the inert corpse of the bird. Suddenly bereft of her metaphor when the object it signified materializes, she is henceforth deprived of the idyll her poetic figure had failed to conceal. The husband leaves unaddressed the underlying cause of his jealousy – her suspected lover – but hints ominously at his homicidal inclinations – “Des or poëz gisir en peis” – which he unleashes on the avian surrogate of her lover. Seizing it, he wrings its neck and flings the bleeding carcass onto her chemise. With grisly vengeance, metaphor returns literally upon the lady, doubling the specular message with a crimson index of his unspoken rage and her ineffable grief. In this grotesque interlude of domestic violence, as in numerous other scenes of private life in the *Lais*, the specular encounter acquires particular intensity in an intimate or secluded setting.³⁹

In the third panel of the triptych, the specular encounter hosts an even more intricate stratagem, combining communication with commemoration. Fearful her lover will assume she has forsaken him, she devises a means of dispatching both corpus and writ: “Le laüstic li trametrai, / L'aventure li manderai” (133–34) [I shall send him the nightingale, and have him informed of what's transpired]. Previously unsuccessful at figural embroidery of a falsehood to deceive her

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husband, she now resorts to literal embroidery of the truth: “En une piece de samit / A or brusdé e tut escrit / Ad l’oiselet envelopé; / Un suen vaslet ad apelé, / Sun message li ad chargié, / A sun ami l’ad enveié” (135–40). [In a length of samite embroidered in gold with ornamental inscriptions she enveloped the little bird, summoned one of her servants, gave him her message to deliver, sent him to her lover]. Thus, as at the end of *Guigemar*, the specular encounter is reconfigured in association with a tangible artifact. Previously the figural veil of the truth, a metaphor *in absentia*, the avian creature now becomes a centerpiece *in praesentia* of the autobiographical emblem cleverly devised to enshroud it.

Mediating the lovers, this specular encounter is itself enacted through multiple mediations. The inert testimony of spousal violence is lovingly enveloped as an elegiac emblem of reciprocal love and dutifully delivered, along with an explanatory gloss, by her valet. This carefully crafted *involucrum* doubly specularizes the lover, mirroring his loss, but also locating him within their common story of communication interrupted then restored, on a new, mediated basis. The lady compensates for the tragic reversal in the middle segment by embroidering the couple, along with the enshrined nightingale, into the specular *abyme* of their own story. What they, defying the distance between them, may now venerate is a shared awareness.⁴⁰ For they are now united in a common consciousness, and by a bond of reciprocity founded on suffering, in equal measure, of unrequited love.⁴¹

Whereas in *Laüstic* the jealous husband foils the lovers’ search for intimacy, in *Chievrefoil* Tristan – “Tristram” in the Harley manuscript, – and the queen enjoy a clandestine meeting. At the heart of this brief anecdote lies the most fundamental of all the motifs in the legend of Tristan and Iseut, encounter itself. Their tryst here recalls many others in narratives about them, as the narrator’s passing mention of oral and written accounts seems to emphasize (5–10).⁴² After a year’s exile in Wales, Tristan has returned to Cornwall to see the queen; learning from peasants of her imminent passage through the forest, he arranges a meeting.⁴³ When the anticipated reunion finally occurs, however, it is singularly anticlimactic. The emphasis instead falls on Tristan’s preliminary communicative behavior.⁴⁴

Yet between the mode, or modes, of communication and the

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message itself the relationship is unclear. Like Guigemar and his lady and the lady in *Laüstic*, Tristan deftly crafts a communicative object: “Une codre trencha par mi, / Tute quarreie la fendi. / Quant il ad paré le bastun, / De sun custel escrit sun nun” (51–54) [He split a hazel branch down the middle and cut its sides foursquare. After hewing the stick, he carved his name into it with his knife]. Like the enshrined “laüstic,” this contrived signifier summons into consciousness a vast universe of memory and affect. The narrator notes that such a stratagem for convening the couple had served on an earlier occasion, so there is little doubt that the encounter will indeed occur. Our uncertainty concerns the message itself: “Ceo fu la summe de l’escrit / Qu’il li aveit mandé e dit . . .” (61–62) [He wrote no more than that, for he had notified her . . .]. Was the “summe de l’escrit” encapsulated in fifteen lines as the essence of the message (63–78); was it inscribed on the hazel branch, perhaps in ogamic script, or rather in a message Tristan had already sent to the queen (“mandé e dit,” v. 62)?⁴⁵

The abundant critical commentary these obscure passages continue to elicit illustrates the poetics of enigma evoked in the prologue, whereby authors of antiquity, according to Priscian, wrote obscurely to ensure their active reception later on, by those who would be able to “gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre” (15–16) [prepare a gloss of the text and supply their (antecedent: “livres,” v. 11) latent meaning].⁴⁶ The precise mode of the message’s transmission will necessarily remain an irresolvable issue.⁴⁷ Its substance is in contrast relatively apparent: Tristan has long awaited an appropriate opportunity to see the queen, and this is a matter of life or death – “Kar ne poeit vivre sanz li” (67) [For he could not live without her]. Here the profound significance of their relationship emerges from the complementary perspectives of the narrator and Tristan himself. A poetic gloss distils the precariousness of their circumstances:

D’euls deus fu il tut autresi
Cume del chievrefoil esteit
Ki a la codre se perneit:
Quant il s’i est laciez e pris
E tut entur le fust s’est mis,
Ensemble poënt bien durer,
Mes ki puis les voelt desevrer,

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Li codres muert hastivement
E li chievrefoilz ensement.
(68–76)

[The two of them were like the honeysuckle that grasps the hazel branch: when it has taken hold and enlaced itself around the wood, they can both endure together, but when someone undertakes to separate them, the hazel suddenly expires, and so does the honeysuckle.]

This botanical simile specularizes the couple in terms of a crucial reciprocity, one that thrives on material presence, in the form of a corporeal relationship unmediated by messages, but also one that is exceedingly fragile, in that it will immediately expire if the two intertwined lives are ever definitively disentangled. For the queen, Tristan synthesizes this vital symbiosis of hazel branch and honeysuckle in terms of the necessary conditions of their common survival: “Bele amie, si est de nus: / Ne vus sanz mei, ne jeo sanz vus” (77–78) [Fair beloved, thus are we: neither you without me, nor I without you].

Like the lady’s hermeneutically dense message at the end of *Laüstic*, Tristan’s synthesis specularizes its addressee by means of a rememorative emblem of their own story. More so than at any other moment in the *Lais*, the succinctness of this specular encounter partakes of the sublime, as it distils the very essence of Marie’s concept of *druërie* as reciprocal love.⁴⁸ However – and this is an issue to which we must return – it also idealizes amatory reciprocity in terms of a state of nature impossible to replicate amidst the contingencies of human existence. Hence an essentially pessimistic image of reciprocal relations.

MEDIATION BY COUNSEL: *DEUS AMANZ*, *EQUITAN*,
BISCLAVRET, AND *CHAITIVEL*

While many types of mediation effected by the specular encounter concern important aspects of the past, four of Marie’s *lais* feature a mediatory *counsel* with respect to possible worlds that have yet to come to pass. All four illustrate the same formula: an unfortunate couple is finally separated permanently, either by death or irreconcilable differences, in the aftermath of some counsel that had specified a strategy for achieving a specific objective. In each case, the specular counsel emerges