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The Duality of a Monster: The Human-Wolf Dynamic of the Sympathetic Werewolf in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*

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Abstract

Throughout her Lays, Marie de France uses animal imagery and metaphor, and her most intriguing use of the motif of the interaction between man and beast comes in her exploration of human-animal transformations. Bisclavret, however, uses a different human-animal transformation, one that would, perhaps, make the lay's audience question the humanity of the lycanthropic protagonist. Why would Marie de France, in the case of Bisclavret, use a werewolf—normally a monstrous, villainous figure—as the hero of her tale? This essay asserts that Marie uses Bisclavret's lycanthropy to establish a protagonist that addresses the link between the human and the animal forms of his existence, a character that becomes sympathetic because of that link and the nobility that Bisclavret exhibits in both his human and animal forms. Bisclavret is a story where the human and the animal interact together to show the virtue of an afflicted man; the lycanthropic character is not a mindless monster, but a sympathetic being in either human or animal form. Marie de France breaks the human-animal binary and shows that a man who is also an animal can be a sympathetic and friendly character, changing the discourse of what we define as a bestial monster.

Keywords: Marie de France; Bisclavret; Lycanthropy; Werewolf; Nobility;

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Stories of shape-changing monsters and cursed men have been told for countless centuries, living in memory as tragedies and warnings to those who hear them. Such were-creatures were often described as cursed by gods, witches, magic, and—later—the Christian Devil. To those who know of such tales, lycanthropic monsters were hardly heroes; indeed, even a hero of one of the most famous sagas in literature, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, is afflicted with lycanthropy until he can break the curse of temptation laid upon him. Sigmund and his nephew Sinfjotli found wolfskins in a dwelling they had come across, and unbeknownst to them, the wolfskins had been cursed by a spell.

Once donned, "only every tenth day could they shed the skins," trapping them in wolf forms (44). The two men "howled like wolves, both understanding the sounds," effectively *becoming* creatures for the time allotted (44). They each killed many groups of men purely because they could; so fiercely did the two-act that Sigmund and Sinfjotli eventually fought with each other as wolves and "[t]hat day they were not able to come out of the wolfskins" (45). Their violence had cost them the ability to become human again. Eventually, the two hid from the world until they were able to shed the skins and then burned the cursed garments, removing their danger from the world. Such an instance proves that even great heroes can succumb to the will of the werewolf and act in such a manner that can interrupt their humanity. The animal is here proved dangerous and the interaction and change from animal to man are shown as a powerful, evil force, a theme which would continue into the Middle Ages and beyond, securing for the werewolf a sordid and troubled history in the minds of readers and lay-folk.

Marie de France was well-aware of this tradition, but she complicates the old theme of man-to-animal transfiguration. Throughout her *Lays*, Marie de France uses animal imagery and metaphor to great effect, and her most intriguing use of the motif of the interaction between man and beast comes in her exploration of human-animal transformations. The human-animal transformations Marie crafts occur predominantly in two of her lays, *Yonec* and *Bisclavret*. In *Yonec*, a bird transforms into a refined, regal man and becomes the lover of a lady imprisoned by her husband. In this text, no real questions about the hawk-man's identity or honor are raised as Muldumarec explains his nobility and virtues. *Bisclavret*, however, uses a different human-animal transformation, one that would, perhaps, make the lay's audience question the humanity of the lycanthropic protagonist. Why would Marie de France, in the case of *Bisclavret*, use a werewolf—normally a monstrous, villainous figure—as the hero of her tale? I argue that Marie uses Bisclavret's lycanthropy to establish a protagonist that addresses the link between the human and the animal forms of his existence, a character that becomes sympathetic because of that link and the nobility that Bisclavret exhibits in both his human and animal forms.

Marie understands the associations that come with the curse of werewolfism and states that "Werewolves are wild beasts…they wander about in vast forests, devouring men and doing great harm," but she writes that her Bisclavret will not be like those with previous cases of lycanthropy; she writes that Bisclavret "was a goodly knight and handsome and he acted nobly. He was valued by his lord and loved by his neighbors" (29). Through her description of Bisclavret the man, Marie is showing that he is good and noble, a being with the qualities that every good knight should possess. The purpose of this description is not only to introduce *Bisclavret*'s titular hero but to also allow the lay's reader to connect with Bisclavret's good nature, a disposition that the werewolf enjoys in both his human and wolf forms. Instead of becoming the vicious, savage creature of the traditional werewolf, Bisclavret exhibits humanity in wolf form, as is shown when "[Bisclavret] saw the king" and "ran toward him to beg for mercy. He took hold of the king's stirrup, kissed his leg and foot" (31). Bisclavret expresses a human desire for mercy and shows the proper obeisance to his liege lord, an act that would not, nay, could not come from a vicious beast. The king even says that "It has human intelligence … This beast has reason and understanding," proving that Marie's werewolf is meant to be seen as sympathetic, a being that exhibits his human nobility in both of his forms (31). Regardless of the savage tradition that has been attached to lycanthropes, Bisclavret retains his humanity, which allows the reader to see him as the undisputed protagonist of the lay rather than the villain that a werewolf would normally be in such a tale.

Jean Jorgensen explores Marie's use of the werewolf in her article "The Lycanthropy Metaphor in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*," in which she finds that the author's use of a lycanthrope is much different than the use of werewolves in other tales. Jorgensen notes that "The real violence of the transformation [man to wolf]…lies not in the change from man to beast, but rather in a loss of humanity," a loss that makes werewolves the savage, villainous creatures in folklore and myth (24). Instead, Marie's Bisclavret is a shape-changer who is different from most who undergo a similar transformation:

> Bisclavret['s]…human ability to think and to perceive one's humanity…remain[s]. Lost is the ability to communicate that humanity through speech. Yet Marie's rendering of Bisclavret allows him to preserve some dignity and even to communicate that dignity through gestures to his human associates. (25)

This difference allows the reader of the lay to understand that Bisclavret is unlike other werewolves and retains the human qualities that allow him to be "valued by his lord and loved by his neighbors" (de France 29). The retention of Bisclavret's humanity shows the "separation between the werewolf in general and [Marie de France's] werewolf," a key element in determining that Bisclavret is intended as a sympathetic character in the lay rather than a figure to be distrusted and feared (Jorgensen 26). Edith Joyce Benkov agrees with this sentiment, writing, "Bisclavret is not only changed into an ill-treated and betrayed husband but also into a sympathetic character whose 'beastliness' will both serve justice and restore a certain order," justice and order that will occur with the punishment of Bisclavret's wife at the end of the lay (28). I argue that this not only allows the werewolf to be read as sympathetic but also as a character that brings about resolution in the tale. Lucas Wood defines Marie's new werewolf, stating that "a *bisclavret*, a man who sometimes looks like a wolf" is more sympathetic to a medieval audience than "a *garulf*, a man who truly becomes a wolf and so might well be a wolf who spends part of his week as a man" (9). The difference between the two is what Marie wishes to be known to her reader: the former is to be trusted and acknowledged as a sympathetic hero and the latter is a monster, a fiend meant only to frighten and to maim. Marie clearly shows that the man who is only sometimes a wolf is far better than the predator wearing human skin.

Peggy McCracken disagrees with the assertion that Bisclavret retains his human nobility in her article "Translation and Animals in Marie de France's *Lais*." McCracken states that "The werewolf of Marie's story seems to be a fit descendent of his ancestors rather than radically different from them" as Bisclavret, while in his wolf form, lives in the forest and "presumably kill[s] prey for food" making him just as destructive as other werewolves (214-215). While the reader does not see how Bisclavret lives in his animal form—nor does Marie describe it in the lay—he could have been destructive, but killing prey for food is natural not only to an animal but also to humans, as even the king hunts for food in the forest. The link between the human and the animal that this establishes allows the reader to understand that Bisclavret is killing the same animals that the king and his hunting party are after and even those deaths are for the food necessary to survive. Arguably, Bisclavret would likely be hunting with the king in his human form, as he is a vassal knight to the king, so why is the reader supposed to perceive Bisclavret as a monster in such an instance?

McCracken sees this similarity as an assertion that the king is an animal rather than showing that Bisclavret is "like a man because he demonstrates feudal homage"—a sign that would allow Bisclavret to be read as a sympathetic character who is merely trapped in an animal form. McCracken goes on to say that "the scene in which the wolf is taken to appear like a man may also imagine that the king is like an animal" and that the homage shown is an animal bowing down to the more powerful predator (215). Such a point disregards Marie's admission that Bisclavret is not like other werewolves and would not explain why, when the king took the wolf back to court, "There was no one who didn't hold him, dear, for he was so gentle and so tame. He never did anything untoward" (de France 31). It appears that McCracken may not have read *Bisclavret* carefully enough, as Marie de France provides the correct framework for her readers.

At court, it is easy to see that Bisclavret is not a predator; even when he shows obeisance to the king in the forest, it is a human request for mercy, not how a vicious animal like a traditional werewolf would respond. It is, in fact, the reason that the king holds Bisclavret-the-wolf so dear: he

is so unlike an animal that the king treats him as a valued retainer rather than an animal; it is Bisclavret's humanity that sets him apart from other animals and so disrupts readings of Marie's werewolf as a simple-minded, bloodthirsty creature. Seeing Bisclavret as anything other than a courtly being is improbable when one considers the lengths that Marie de France goes to separate her lycanthrope from the dangerous were-beasts of myth and legend.

Emma Campbell describes *Bisclavret* as a tale "suggesting that humanity is not restricted to those in possession of a stable, human shape," a point that would lend credence to the fact that Bisclavret is meant to be seen in a sympathetic light (96). Campbell continues by saying that "The threatening animality associated with the werewolf is…displaced from Bisclavret to the duplicitous wife, who becomes associated with the disturbing cohabitation of humanity and animality with which Marie begins;" essentially what Campbell is saying is that, rather than the werewolf exhibiting the evil nature that is associated with it, it is Bisclavret's wife who takes on the bestial, vicious nature of the villain in the lay (98). This shift in the monstrous is what makes the tale a powerful commentary on who is and who is not a beast. The beastly villain is exposed through the stealing of Bisclavret's clothes by his wife's lover, an act ordered by the wife, that "Bisclavret was betrayed and greatly harmed by his wife," proving the vindictive nature of the human (de France 30). The betrayal of marriage and nobility does not come from the lycanthrope—the usual suspect in such a tale—but rather by his human wife, once again showing Marie's use of Bisclavret as a sympathetic character; Bisclavret has never harmed anyone (that the reader is aware of) and he has not betrayed his wife as she originally suspects. Instead, Bisclavret's wife, though she knows her husband's true and noble nature as both a man and werewolf, is the one to show a lack of gentility, allowing her to assume the duplicitous nature of the true beastly villain in Marie's tale.

Campbell also sees Bisclavret's attack of his wife and her new husband "in terms of human vengeance," not the animalistic cruelty that would guide the actions of a different werewolf (100). A traditional werewolf would indiscriminately attack anyone and anything; they are beasts of wrath, ruin, and rage. Yet, the werewolf presented in the lay is anything but such a beast. After Bisclavret attempts to attack his wife's new husband, Marie herself writes that "Everyone in the household said that the beast had hardly done what he had done without cause. The knight must have mistreated Bisclavret in some way for him to seek such vengeance" (32). Such a passage proves that everyone in the king's court, because they had known Bisclavret-the-wolf for so long, could not imagine that such a noble animal—doted on by the king, no less—would attack the knight without cause. Bisclavret has not only the sympathy of the king but also of everyone in the king's household and court, which serves as evidence that Marie's reader should also have sympathy for Bisclavret, who is portrayed in only the most positive light.

When the king's assembly has ended, Marie admits that "To the best of my knowledge the knight whom Bisclavret had attacked was among the first to leave. It's no surprise that Bisclavret hated him," which shows not only the author's dislike of the knight but also serves to influence the reader in such a way as to call the knight's courage and loyalty into question, making him a less than the positive figure in the lay (32). Honor and nobility are often on display in the lays of Marie de France, specifically *Yonec* and *Bisclavret*, and yet the knight shows neither while the werewolf in this tale shows both on many occasions. Rather than questioning the werewolf, the reader should be questioning the motives of the humans in the lay. Bisclavret, whom the reader knows very well by this point in the tale, possesses the noble qualities that his wife's new husband lacks, proving that Marie intends the werewolf to be the character with whom her reader is to sympathize.

Bisclavret's attack on his wife is perhaps the most difficult part of the tale to make sense of if Bisclavret is meant to be viewed as a sympathetic character. When Bisclavret, traveling with the king, sees his wife, "no man was able to restrain him. He ran toward her as if he was enraged" (de France 32). It is important to notice that Marie does not use language that would be used to describe an animal attack: she gives allows Bisclavret to retain his human motivations for what he is doing by saying that "he was enraged" and that "he took his revenge" rather than simply calling it an attack by a wild and ferocious beast (32). The motives of a wronged human come to the fore in this instance, not the mindless violence of a beast. The language that Marie uses here is crucial if one is to continue to read Bisclavret as sympathetic, as she could have stated that it was purely animalistic violence that

drove Bisclavret's actions rather than giving him the ability to feel the human quality of rage and the need for vengeance. Marie describes Bisclavret's act of revenge when she states that "He ripped the nose off her face," an act that both punishes her with pain and through a separation from her humanity, the very thing she hoisted upon Bisclavret by ordering her lover to steal his clothes, trapping him in his wolf form (32).

Jorgensen states that, in the revenge scene, "It is clear that Bisclavret only intended to main his wife—not to kill her—to reduce her, as he had been reduced, to a savage, less-than-human appearance" (28). Indeed, as a powerful wolf, Bisclavret undeniably could kill his wife, especially since "no man was able to restrain him;" instead, Bisclavret exerts very human restraint in his punishment of the betrayal that he has suffered at his wife's hands—he only removes her nose rather than outright slay her (de France 32). Though McCracken sees this instance of Bisclavret "attack[ing] like an animal," Marie's use of language to establish a cause for the wolf-man's behavior rejects this analysis as he is given very human motivation and shows the restraint that a simple animal would not have shown (217). Indeed, a wise man even tells the king that "Never before has the [Bisclavret] attacked anyone nor shown any hostility toward anyone except toward the woman I see here…his anger is directed only against her, and against her husband as well" (de France 32). This man's defense of Bisclavret and the wolf's actions serve to show the reader that Bisclavret has not, as McCracken points out, acted out of animalistic cruelty but rather out of a human desire for revenge and justice for the wrongs that have been committed against him in his human form. Bisclavret's attack—and the wise man's defense of the wolf's actions—brings about justice for Bisclavret, something that, trapped in his wolf form, he could not ask for from the king; by taking action against his wife, Bisclavret causes the truth to be known when, after she is put "to the question," his wife "confessed the entire story about her husband: how she had betrayed him, how she had taken his clothes" and lied about him so that she could marry her lover (32). In this manner, the truth is exposed and the wife is seen for the villain she is: after Bisclavret's revenge, his wife takes on the visage of her inner beast, cursing her with the same affliction as he suffered for so long: she is the monster of this tale now, and Bisclavret will regain his true form.

Campbell sees the wife's deformity at Bisclavret's hands as a "stark contrast to Bisclavret's transformation from animal to human shape, which, as in other medieval werewolf stories, occurs away from prying eyes" (100). This is indeed true: the public transformation of Bisclavret's wife from human to deformed, inhuman villain is the outward manifestation of the notion that she lacks the humanity that Bisclavret—as a physical animal—still retains. Her deformity, Campbell argues, is the withdrawal of her humanity, which only serves to assert the humanity of Bisclavret, proving yet again that, by retaining his human qualities, his lycanthropy is merely a construct that allows the reader to sympathize with him (101).

> The wife's humanity is more fully called into question at the end of the lay when Marie writes: His [Bisclavret's] wife was driven from the country and sent into exile. The man, for whom she had betrayed her husband, went along with her. She had several children who were quite recognizable by their faces and their resemblance to her: many women descended from her—this is the truth—were born without a nose and so they lived their lives noiselessly. (33)

By asserting that the wife's female descendants were born without noses—even though their father had one and their mother had one before Bisclavret maimed her—Marie is questioning the wife's humanity, a fitting end for one who had previously questioned her husband's humanity even though she was given no reason to doubt it. Bisclavret's wife is cursed to extend her line of monstrous humans for the cruel fate she inflicted on her noble husband. Marie is effectively saying that her lycanthropic hero Bisclavret has retained his humanity throughout the tale while his wife, who started as appearing fully human, has been reduced to the monster that she assumed her husband to be, destroying her claim to humanity. As a result, Bisclavret is seen to be more human than his wife, regardless of his life as a werewolf—which presumably continues after the end of the tale as no cure is mentioned—and is, therefore, in the eyes of Marie de France and her readers, the most sympathetic character in the lay. Campbell sees the wife's fate as "an exclusion from human society that places her on the threshold between humanity and animality just as Bisclavret was previously" (101). Likewise,

Jorgensen states that "While the wife is expelled from the social system because of her attempted subversion of it, Bisclavret is rewarded for his constancy to it. He is reintegrated into the system" while she is exiled from it, a just end for them both (29). Both sentiments are true: the tale's end is a fitting reward for the sympathetic werewolf, who has regained the humanity informs that he has always exhibited in thought and action.

But what of the events that lead up to Bisclavret's regaining of his human form? Do they hold with the argument that Bisclavret is to be seen as sympathetic? Though Lucas Wood states that Bisclavret "essentially and has always been nothing but a man—and a superlatively handsome, courtly, nobleman at that," Bisclavret hesitates to regain his human form by putting on his clothes right away (4). Why would he do this? Marie writes that, when his clothes were given to him, Bisclavret "paid no attention to them at all" (32). More than a few critics see this hesitation as an attempt to cling to his animalistic nature, as proof that Bisclavret does not want to be a human. However, such an analysis disregards the fact that Bisclavret has been human the whole time, no matter his physical form.

The argument that Bisclavret does not desire to be a human undermines the attempts by Marie de France to make clear that Bisclavret is a character meant to be sympathized with, who has been motivated by his human motives and thoughts even when in his wolf form. Bisclavret's retention of his humanity is what separates him from the werewolves of old; had Marie's werewolf been similar to more traditional lycanthropes, maybe the argument for his hesitation would ring true as the savage nature of the animal would be much more appealing to a *garulf*. Instead of such a beast, Marie de France presents a *Bisclavret*, a werewolf more human than some without the curse of lycanthropy.

Why, then, does Bisclavret hesitate to put on his clothes? In short, it is his humanity that prevents him from donning his clothes in front of other people. Bisclavret feels the need for modesty, a trait that a wolf would surely not feel. Indeed, if one remembers Campbell's statement that Bisclavret's wife's transformation is different from Bisclavret's own because "Bisclavret's transformation…as in other medieval werewolf stories, occurs away from prying eyes," the reason for this hesitation is made very clear (100). Bisclavret wishes to robe and disrobe in privacy due to him by his honor: his modesty is at stake in this situation. It is the words of the wise man who advises the king that exposes the notion that Bisclavret feels the human need for modesty. The wise man says:

> Sire, you are not doing this right. There is no way the beast will put on his clothes in front of you nor change his beastly appearance. Don't you know what that would mean? He feels very great shame about all of this. Have him taken to your bed chamber along with his clothes, and let's leave him there alone for a while. If he turns into a man, we'll certainly notice. (de France 32-33)

Bisclavret's desire for modesty is understandable: presumably, as he puts on his clothes, Bisclavret will be simultaneously turning into a man, a man without clothes—a very naked man. For the king or anyone else to see him naked would be shameful and embarrassing, therefore he desires to be alone when he puts on his clothes and changes into his human form. It is only when Bisclavret is left alone that he dons his clothes and regains his human form, showing that his desire for modesty and decorum is not only completely understandable but also undeniably human.

Marie de France's use of a werewolf in her lay *Bisclavret* is, at first, an element that can cause a certain amount of confusion, especially when Marie herself explains the destructive prowess and desires of traditional werewolves. Bisclavret is different, however: the retention of his humanity in his wolf form allows him to be read as a sympathetic character, exposing the deception and wrong-doing of his wife. Bisclavret's dual status as man and wolf establishes a link between his human and animal forms, a link that Marie uses to establish the legitimacy of a werewolf as her protagonist. Rather than being the villain of the lay—an epithet reserved for Bisclavret's wife—the lycanthrope is a positive figure, one that is rewarded for his nobility and humanity in both of his forms. Marie de France breaks with tradition, exposing the nobility of a traditional figure of monstrosity and subsequently acknowledging the vicious nature of humanity. While the evils of werewolfism continued to gain popularity through the Renaissance and into the modern era, Marie de France created a monster who is more than the vicious history with which he is associated, a shining example of nobility in a sea of human monsters.

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