

Barred Windows and Uncaged Birds:  
The Enclosure of Woman in Chrétien de Troyes  
and Marie de France

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**F**EW MEDIEVAL tropes capture the sense of female inaction better than the metonymy, pervasive in European literature from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, between a woman's body and the castle, tower, or anchorhold that encloses her. The women in these architectural strongholds are seen as both contained and containing, as fragile vessels easily broken, as both closed off from the world and inviting it in by the attractiveness of the obstacles placed in the way. Typically there is stasis in their containment. What could be more stationary and less able to act than a figurative castle?<sup>1</sup> At least so it would seem. Critics have tended to treat this metaphor of the woman enclosed as homogeneous, unchanging over centuries and among authors. Closer examination of the texts shows, however, that there are significant differences in the way this metaphor is used, both over time and among authors who used it at the same historical moment.

Many are familiar with the equation of woman and castle from the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*; there, the woman, signified by the rose, is enclosed in the tower intended to protect her. Of course, it only incites the lover to violate her barriers. The architectural symbol of the tower is mapped onto the woman's body in order that the man may more clearly penetrate and subordinate her sexually. In the end, his progress into the tower becomes a graphic metaphor for his sexual intercourse with her, and the woman herself merges with and disappears into the architecture. Not only is the rose static and powerless to act; if she ever existed as a woman, she—and whatever agency she had—vanishes in the end. It is as though a metaphor about female sexuality, as described

in the *Roman de la Rose*, must be an essential lack, as Freud and Lacan have described it, rather than a metaphor as complex and endowed with agency as those describing male sexuality. At times the interior space of the female is not only passive, but also menacing. In the works of Marie de France, however, and, to a lesser degree, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot*, the metaphor of the woman as her enclosure moves beyond mere metonymy; it is replete with the sort of symbolic resonances that others have observed in images and language throughout Marie's works.<sup>2</sup> I will argue three things then: first, that Chrétien's and Marie's connection to oral and material culture fundamentally changes their use of metaphor; second, that both Marie and Chrétien gender the space of the tower as feminine in a more vivid and ambiguous way than it is in the *Roman*; and finally, that while Chrétien does not move beyond the understanding of women and their spaces as dangerous and duplicitous, Marie rewrites female spaces in ways that are fundamentally subversive of a medieval patriarchal hegemony that villifies and distrusts the enclosed space of the gynaeceum.

While the version of the metaphor in the *Roman*, just over a century later than Marie and Chrétien, has degraded into cliché, the metaphor of enclosure in these texts is much more labile, more multivalent because the texts are on the cusp between literate and oral culture. Marie's *lais* sustain a relationship between oral and written texts similar to that which Brian Stock describes in his work on textual communities.<sup>3</sup> In her prologue and in *Equitan*, she claims that her *lais* are the written records of texts she has heard and which she assumes others had composed to commemorate adventures *they* had heard. She often identifies these misty precursors as the Bretons, but says little about them; she assumes a certain amount of common knowledge among her audience. She transcribes and interprets the oral texts for her audience, presumably the court of the king she names. At times her audience seems very immediate, as when she reprimands certain of them at the beginning of *Guigemar* for slandering her talent, calling them cowardly dogs. In addition, there is a sense that Marie is crafting her *lais* like the symbolic objects she represents so often, such as the peeled hazel stick that Tristan marks with his knife to express a long and intricate message to the Queen in *Chèvrefeuille*. As often happens in a mingled literate and

oral culture, both objects and texts are used to communicate meaning. *Chèvrefeuille* is the sung culmination of Tristan's love, which he makes both to celebrate the message he had conveyed and to remind the queen of that message; the lai is then passed on orally via an untold route and transcribed by Marie. The lai is therefore a very complex artifact of expression by means of writing, singing, speaking, and creating and interpreting symbolic objects, and unlike stories in an oral culture, the written lai would itself be an object. Likewise, Chrétien famously incorporates the *matière* provided him by his patron, Marie de Champagne, while he crafts the *sens* of the poem. Though it is not clear that the *matière* for *Lancelot* was conveyed orally, it seems probable given the way the introduction is written and given the great importance of love stories at the court of Marie de Champagne, also immortalized in *The Art of Courtly Love*. Both Marie's lais and Chrétien's romances have the sense of made objects, of crafted artifacts, and this "making" of a lai or tale, as Marie calls it, "En aveit fet un nuvel lai," is much closer to materiality than composition is in a fully literate culture.

The romance tradition of Chrétien and Marie could be compared with a stage roughly antecedent to textual communities: "primitive communities of understanding" formed by groups of texts "loosely enough structured to admit variations from real life and yet sufficiently patterned to give some shape to otherwise formless events."<sup>4</sup> Chrétien and Marie simultaneously describe feudal ritual images and render them interpretable as textual symbols capable of deeper meaning. Their symbolism, succinct and often repeated, bears the weight of a seemingly great immediacy for their audiences, and the symbolic objects described have a much greater *objectness* than they would in an exclusively literate culture. This qualitatively changes the use of metaphor. Each mention of an image builds on and subtly alters the last, accruing meaning and cultivating a more sensitive audience with each repetition. Within this complexity of interpretation, however, the underlying assumptions about the ability of women to act differ dramatically. While the works of both Chrétien and Marie show a livelier use of the metaphor than in *Roman de la Rose*, suggestive of writers still on the threshold of literacy, there are significant differences in interpretations of the same images. Marie allows her female characters much more agency and activity than Chrétien; though they

are tightly circumscribed by male characters, Marie's women subvert the metaphors and spaces used to contain them.

In the symbolism of Marie de France's *lais*, the woman's enclosure within a room in a tower may function not only as a sign, but also as a "countersign," as defined by Stephen G. Nichols: a symbol that expresses a contextual meaning not apparent to those uninitiated in the trope.<sup>5</sup> Marie appropriates a ready-made (for her) set of symbols in order to subvert the larger aristocratic culture that constrains female action, and this set of symbols becomes common currency for her audience. In the twelfth century, the *matière* is often carried over from other sources; meaning is made in the treatment of that matter. It is not just the metaphors Marie uses, but how she uses them.

Topographical and architectural descriptions are essential to an understanding of how metaphor functions in the text: although towers in general are often interpreted as phallic symbols, in these texts it is possible to examine the symbolism in a more complex way than a modern psychoanalytic approach allows.<sup>6</sup> A more holistic approach to these metaphors allows us to hold several meanings in suspension simultaneously as a medieval audience would have done in a textual community.<sup>7</sup> Physical symbolism is especially significant in the milieu of Marie and Chrétien. As privacy became more prevalent in the twelfth century, especially for women, the allegorical relationship between the body and the architectural extensions of that body into space became more compelling. In *The History of Private Life* Danielle Régnier-Bohler illustrates this increasing need for privacy: "The body increasingly came to be seen as a private possession. . . . The admonitions to respect the privacy of others primarily concerned women, as if the female body were the focal point of all virtue and vice."<sup>8</sup> Régnier-Bohler is spot-on about the body as a possession, but we must remember that the person who inhabited the body was not necessarily the person who possessed it. Aristocratic men maintained hegemonic control over towers and fortress walls as well as over their wives and daughters. Towers and outer walls enclose, control, and isolate at the same time as they protect. It is clear that men sought control over the bodies of their wives or daughters. One of the purposes of Marie de France's *lais* is to imagine their success as continually undermined. Régnier-Bohler quotes a passage from Robert

of Blois's *Chastoiement des dames*: "Any time you pass by another person's house, be careful never to look in and never to stop."<sup>9</sup> This prohibition against looking into houses implies an injunction against looking at wives; women are equated with the inside of dwellings, and both women and domestic space are increasingly isolated from the outside world in the movement towards privacy.

At roughly the same time as the increase in privacy, the increase in written modes of communication began to divert attention from external ritual to the interior sense of meaning that "lurked behind every outer expression or behavioral pattern."<sup>10</sup> Architectural arrangements came to have a hermeneutics as well as a semiotics: a woman in a tower began to be contextually read and interpreted, not just seen and understood. But perhaps twenty-first-century readers would only interpret and not understand. In other words, while metaphor before the twelfth century depended more upon the meaning of the thing itself, and metaphor after depended more upon intertextual literary devices, these twelfth-century writers engaged both, though with varying intentions and results. The women who are depicted as shut up in towers reflect a historical reality as well as a metaphor, but the repeated expression of this topos in contexts that make clear its sexual implications also indicates an essential social and psychological resonance. This resonance is tied not only to the material realities of architecture and female bodies, but also to deeper, more primitive formulations of female sexuality that are often used to silence and encumber women.

### *Lancelot*

Though Chrétien uses the metaphor of enclosure in complex ways, he does not undermine the interests of the male upper class to the extent that Marie does. The positioning of the Queen in Chrétien's *Lancelot* as she talks to Lancelot through her barred window and of Laudine in *Yvain*, as Yvain passes perilously through her portcullises, is nearly identical to that of the woman in Marie's *Yonec*. But there are differences in their treatments as well. Examples of the metaphor of enclosure in Chrétien demonstrate how it functions when not being used to subvert and how a man's entrance into the enclosure of woman may be read.

While the woman is sexually penetrated, the lover is direly wounded, killed, or threatened with death, and it is worth considering the exchange as full of metaphoric import for the male figure as well as the female.

In *Lancelot* we find Guinièvre enclosed in her room, which has been her prison since she was kidnapped by Meleagant, trapped by the guards and the wounded knights around her. She never acts independently, but is always under the aegis of a male guardian. Although confined, she is also protected from Meleagant by his father, the king. King Bademagu asserts that the Queen is shut up in order that no man may touch her and that his son's plans have been frustrated by this arrangement. By kidnapping Guinièvre, Meleagant is already guilty of *raptus*, or abduction, in the sense most commonly used in the Middle Ages, but the fact that she must still be protected from him implies that he wishes to violate her sexually as well. The king preserves the framework of chivalric society by maintaining the physical integrity of the Queen's body with a protective imprisonment.

During the subsequent liaison between Guinièvre and Lancelot, however, she reaches out to Lancelot through the bars of her window. Guinièvre expresses her desire for Lancelot as she touches and kisses him through the window that visibly protects her chastity. He is able to approach her because a piece of the garden wall has fallen down; this breach of the outer barriers has made the intermediate, partially feminine space of the garden accessible.<sup>11</sup> Lancelot has only to traverse the inner defenses. In keeping with Andreas Capellanus's *Rules of Courtly Love*, their love is heightened by the physical barriers to it: "De ce qu'ansamble ne parvient / Lor poise tant a desmesure, / Qu'il an blasment la ferrière" (4612-14). (Their inability to come close together makes them extremely sad, to the point of accusing the iron grille.)<sup>12</sup> But Lancelot boasts that if the Queen wishes him to enter, no apparatus can keep him out. Here, female desire is ultimately responsible for the man gaining entrance into the tower, although it may require some force on his part: "Riens fors vos ne me puet tenir / Que bien ne puisse a vos venir. / Se vostre congiez le m'otroie, / Tote m'est delivre la voie; / Mes se il bien ne vos agree, / Donc m'est ele si anconbree / Que n'i passeroie por rien" (4627-33). (Your restraint alone can keep me from joining you without difficulty. If you give me your permission to do so, the way is quite open

to me; but without your ready consent, it's so full of obstacles for me that I couldn't possibly get past.) The Queen gives her consent and goes back to her bed to prevent Kay, who lies wounded in the room with her, from hearing. Lancelot assures her that he can pull open the bars very quietly. As he pulls away the bars he cuts himself: "Mes si estoit tranchanz li fers / Que del doi mame jusqu'as ners / La premiere once se creva / Et de l'autre doi se trancha/ La premerainne jointe tote" (4657-61). (The iron was so sharp that he split the tip of his little finger to the nerve and cut the end joint of his second finger right through.) The grille of bars both emphasizes the elaborate architectural metaphor for Guinièvre's body along with its attendant impediments and distracts attention from her body itself. The blood Lancelot spills parallels and displaces the female blood more commonly associated with consummation or menstruation.<sup>13</sup> In his chapter on voyeurism in Chrétien, A. C. Spearing cites thirteen different passages that describe the blood that stains the Queen's sheets which he describes exclusively as visual signs of the lover's meeting. But, as in *Yonec*, this preoccupation with Lancelot's blood on Guinièvre's sheets also signals a narrative anxiety about the *vagina dentata*, a fear of entering woman's space. And yet this fear is complicated by Lancelot's attraction to Guinièvre and the corresponding priority given to courtly love.

The entrance into the woman's space from the outside, through the unsanctioned window rather than the patriarchally controlled doorway, presents a challenge to the lover, but Lancelot easily overcomes this and all other obstacles.<sup>14</sup> The pattern of love intensified by dividing walls is apparent here and again in a passage that compares Lancelot to Pyramus: "Donc le dut Lanceloz bien feire, / Qui plus ama que Piramus, / S'onques nus hon pot amer plus" (3820-22). (So Lancelot was constrained to do his lady's will, for he loved more than Pyramus, if that were possible for any man to do.) In the well-known story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the two lovers are separated by a wall through which they try to kiss, an allusion to love heightened by barriers that would not be lost on medieval readers familiar with the story. Constrained though Lancelot may be by her will, however, it is he who acts, and not the queen.

In this passage, Chrétien writes that Lancelot, though his body departs, has left his heart behind with the Queen, a common enough

description of love. He also leaves enough of his body behind to stain the sheets, evidence that later threatens to tarnish his honor. Lancelot is endangered not only by entering a woman, but by being somehow retained by her.<sup>15</sup> Entering a woman's enclosure appears to provoke a vivid anxiety of injury, loss of blood, and, here, also loss of integrity. The metaphor makes physically clear the danger of the woman's body, often described as colder and less active than a man's, the subversive peril of the enclosure that injures male members as it lures.

Guinièvre escapes the punishment of death for adultery by telling a half-truth, but Lancelot must also compromise his honor as he holds up his wounded hand and swears that Sir Kay did not sleep with her. By prevaricating, Lancelot averts their downfall, at least temporarily; but his perversion of the truth both imperils his integrity as a knight of the Round Table and destabilizes the structure of Arthurian society as a whole. The hand he swears with, wounded in his tryst with his king's queen rather than in battle on his king's behalf, comes to stand for a society in which violated female boundaries undermine its basic tenets. The hand that should represent male honor comes to symbolize the injury done in female space.<sup>16</sup> Twelfth-century authors, as Edith Joyce Benkov writes, often associated women and lying: "In their eyes, women's facile manipulation of language and their skillful ways of blending truth and lies appear as constant sources of worry and . . . could be a genuine threat to established order (whether of husband or king)."<sup>17</sup> Although it is a man who lies, the lie is invented on account of a woman and is thus reminiscent of the lie Iseult must tell to escape punishment for her tryst with Tristan.<sup>18</sup> Both lies rely on semantic twists that conflict at the most basic level with the straightforward orality of feudal values.<sup>19</sup> They rely on interpretations of words more commonly seen in the legalistic parsing of written texts. Because women cannot act, they lie, twisting words to their advantage. At the same time, by drawing Lancelot into her space and enmeshing him in a feminine ambiguity of language, Guinièvre threatens the precarious balance of her husband's phallogocentric hierarchy. Some would say that if Guinièvre acts, she acts only to destroy the chivalric structure and Lancelot himself. Lancelot's injury, however, seems at the same time covenantal, like a blood pact that binds the lovers together. The image of a hand raised in oath again functions

both as sign and symbol. Usually, gruesome wounds in battle and the offering of two hands in oath serve to bind knight and lord, as so commonly happens in heroic and chivalric literature. Here, bloodshed and an oath unite and bring to the fore the new heroes of romance: a couple.<sup>20</sup> This maneuver, though, does not fundamentally overturn Guinièvre's subjection to male control, nor is it clear that Chrétien viewed this new sphere of romance and the power of the courtly lady favorably. It could be that the extent to which Guinièvre is able to exert her will, if not take action, could be accounted for by the influence of female patronage on Chrétien: Marie de Champagne, after all, played an important role in the composition of *Lancelot*.<sup>21</sup> Chrétien is often ambiguous about the moral worth of courtly love, perhaps because of the problem of *matière* vs. *sens*, and though his depiction of enclosed women appears to project a kind of female agency, he is equally ambiguous about female space and women's power overall: in *Lancelot*, in particular, women jeopardize the most basic male power structures.

### *Yvain*

The architecture in Chrétien's *Yvain* is again laden with symbols of the female body but features little of the mutuality described in *Lancelot*, providing an even starker contrast to Marie's *lais*. In *Lancelot*, Guinièvre at least desires Lancelot. *Yvain*, like *Erec and Enide*, imagines women in remarkably passive roles. Yvain first enters the woman's enclosure (a whole castle in this case) on the heels of the husband, Esclados, whom he has just mortally wounded. Yvain follows Esclados to the very gates of the castle, but the portcullis slams down in front of him, preventing his entrance into the castle, then behind him, trapping him and cutting his horse in two. He barely escapes with his life; his spurs alone are severed. The castle is open only to Laudine's husband so long as he lives. The text specifies that "li ponz li fu abeissiez / Et la porte overte a bandon" (878-79).<sup>22</sup> (The bridge was lowered and the gate opened wide for him.) In this chaste marriage, the gate to the lady's body and castle are unobstructed for the husband, but other men face the peril of metal boundaries, again embodied, symbolically and materially, in the grill-like portcullis. The husband escapes because "El droit chemin s'est

anbatuz / Li chevaliers mout sagement” (933-34). (He very knowingly dashed through by the proper way.) Both Yvain and Esclados, pursuer and pursued, are compared to birds, specifically a gyrfalcon after a crane. Laudine does not desire Yvain’s bird-like flight into her castle, but the metaphorical connotations remain the same, and his forced entrance disturbingly resembles the metaphoric rape in *Roman de la Rose*. The servant’s aid and the woman’s final acquiescence only reinforce this parallel. Yvain passes through the gate into the general enclosure with ease, but is stopped at the entrance to the great hall. Just as in *Lancelot* and *Le Roman de la Rose*, the entrance to the castle is described as high, but narrow and difficult to enter. The trap consists of both a blade that severs the horse and a portcullis of sharp iron like the bars on Guinièvre’s window. The severing of Yvain’s horse and his spurs, two symbolic badges of knighthood, reveals the conflict between chivalry and romance within the female domain. His role as lover imperils his prowess as knight. His predicament is meant to amuse, but the threat to male hegemony that would provide a source of humor to the courtly audience also reveals an underlying unease. And as with *Lancelot*, though the violence against the invading male can in part be attributed to anxieties about female spaces and female bodies, it is also a manifestation of patriarchal power over those spaces and bodies. Gendering interior space female paradoxically results in a vulnerability in male power structures against which metals bars must be set.

When Yvain fails to gain entrance by the sanctioned passageway, he must rely on supernatural help from the confidante of the lady who provides him with a ring that makes him invisible, giving him the same sort of power as the birdman, Muldumarec, in *Yonec*. Like Muldumarec, Yvain hides in a bed, and when the townsfolk search for him they compare him again to a bird which has escaped through a window. But unlike Muldumarec, Yvain comes to Laudine before Laudine has summoned him, and Laudine does not hate her husband.

In a reversal common to the trope of lovesickness, Yvain becomes entangled in the metaphor of enclosure. As he gazes upon Laudine in mourning, he is inhabited by love at the same time that he lurks as the unseen voyeur within her domain. For twenty-nine lines Yvain is described as the wounded dwelling place of love (1377-1405). Sparring

sees Yvain, while Laudine's people search for him, as a "perfectly secret and secure voyeur,"<sup>23</sup> and so he is in a sense, but at the same time, his body is destabilized and weakened. Like Muldumarec, he is invisible to spectators. The people beat all around the room while he lies invisible and watching on a couch, hidden inside the lady's castle, and Love wounds him with a wound as harsh "Que cos de lance ne d'espee" (1370) (as a wound from lance or sword). He wishes himself imprisoned as he remains within Laudine's castle, and Love remains lodged within his body. As with Muldumarec, Yvain performs a Christ-like sacrifice, wounded, beaten, pierced by the lance of love, a sacrifice that is in some sense Eucharistic, an offering up of the body, and a consummation with the beloved in advance of actual intercourse. Yvain watches Laudine grieve for her husband through the window of the tower in which he is imprisoned while she walks free. Chrétien plays with this reversal; the man watches the woman walk into her enclosure and fasten the gates, and he is imprisoned and enclosed by his love for her. Yvain's position at the window emphasizes this shift. But the commonalities with Marie's *lais* and the gender inversion end there. Just as the language and conventions of lovesickness and courtly love often empower the man while purporting to make the lady the *domina* and the man her servant, Yvain's enclosure within the woman's space gives him power over her rather than vice versa.<sup>24</sup> It is he, not Laudine, who is free to act in her space. It is he who, having killed her husband, woos her by trickery, and it is he who wins her and her land and then deserts them for more than a year. Like Lancelot, he is invited in by a woman, but only through a handmaid acting as proxy; it is unclear whether the maiden is substituting for Laudine's authority with Laudine's tacit permission or if she is cooperating in the duplicitous violation of Laudine's space for her own reasons. I am inclined to favor the latter: Laudine is quite vulnerable to Yvain once he has penetrated the protecting walls of her enclosure, and her lack of action continues to give him the upper hand. In either case, however, female authorization to enter the space is somehow required.

As soon as Laudine's husband dies, his property becomes hers. She gains control of her own enclosure, but her seneschal comments that "fame ne set porter escu / ne ne set de lance ferir" (2096-98). (A woman is unable to bear a shield or strike with a lance.) Her decision to marry

Yvain is finally motivated by a need to protect her castle from outside attackers, although Chrétien points out that she is forced to do exactly as she in fact wishes to do.<sup>25</sup> But if Laudine's castle symbolizes her body here as it does earlier, the threat is not only military vanquishment, but also rape. Yvain's ability to protect the lady's castle and body from others gives her a real motive for marrying him. Her vulnerability urges her to marry Yvain for protection, although by marrying Yvain she cedes the rights to her property. Yvain's action (and Laudine's inaction) as he penetrates her space rights the temporary inversion of gender roles between them and regenders the enclosure, affirming its identity as a masculine symbol of military power: a castle. In *Yvain*, as in the extended metaphor of Christ as knight in the *Ancrene Wisse*, the appropriate, socially sanctioned response is for the woman to accept the suitor who will protect her castle from the foes who attack it because she herself is unable to act on her own behalf. Medieval writers were not, however, uniformly oppressive in their portrayal of women as subordinate in spatial and sexual relations.

### *Yonec*

While Marie de France draws heavily on the courtly metaphor of enclosure as woman's body, she also subverts many of its patriarchal implications. Using the same symbolic elements as Chrétien, Marie tells a completely different story about female agency. Although for Marie towers are sinister symbols possessed by men and used to control women, women appropriate their own symbols from within the masculine constraints of their culture; the chambers that imprison them come to represent them in a more dynamic sense than in Chrétien. They claim these buildings as their own, their spirits either straining against their barred windows or escaping through their windows like birds. They are imprisoned by their husband's socially validated ownership, but they are sometimes able to transgress these constraints and act in their own interests, finding a sort of freedom by choosing a lover.

The heroine in *Yonec* is married to a very old, very hardy man who will not allow her to leave her tower, go to church, or even have the comfort of a young companion like the woman in *Guigemar*. She curses

her diabolical husband, her parents, and the system that confines her to a life of dreary bondage. She comments on her imprisonment as a social phenomenon; she accuses not only her parents for bargaining her away to an old man, but the community as well. Marie is criticizing a system, not merely an example. Her criticism coincides almost exactly with a notion of consent that was becoming increasingly part of the theoretical discussion of marriage in texts of the period. Gratian's decretal *Concordia discordantium canonum*, written ca. 1140, includes the first clear definition of both consensual and coital theories of marriage; while earlier the church had recognized marriages as legitimate if sexual intercourse had taken place, now the consent of both the man and the woman was also required.<sup>26</sup> Marie's *lais*, which so often portray the woman's consent as irrelevant to her relatives, question the morality of forcing women into unwanted marriages. The woman is joined specifically to "sun cors" (88), the body of the old man, and it is her body which determines the relation between herself and the patriarchal hegemony in which she lives.<sup>27</sup> She is essentialized to her body, which legally belongs to another and which imprisons her in much the same way as her chamber.

As the *lai* opens, the lady, who has lost her beauty from sorrow, weeps as she looks at the sunlight coming through the window. She fantasizes about an escape: "Mult ai oï sovent cunter / que l'em suleit jadis trover / aventures en cest païs, / ki rehaitouent les pensis. / Chevalier trovoënt puceles / a lur talent, gentes e beles, / e dames truvoënt amanz / beals e curteis, pruz e vaillanz, / si que blasmees n'en esteient / ne nul fors eles nes veecient" (95-104).<sup>28</sup> (I've often heard / that one could once find / adventures in this land / that brought relief to the unhappy. / Knights might find young girls / to their desire, noble and lovely; / and ladies find lovers / so handsome, courtly, brave, and valiant / that they could not be blamed, / and no one else would see them [91-100].) The invisibility of the lovers to others is key. If the lovers have no meaning to those outside the relationship, no place within the social fabric, then the importance of each individual within the relationship is enhanced, and the power of the woman in a mutual relationship is increased. The husband controls the visible world in this tale, but the woman is empowered to operate in the realm of the invisible, the land of fairy.

Moreover, both tower and knight-hawk can be read as countersigns,

to use Nichols's term. Although the tower often signifies patriarchal power and a hawk chivalric dominance, in Marie's *lais* they are coded in opposition to hegemonic symbolism: the tower becomes a bower of love, and the hawk is supremely submissive to the lady. Symbolic objects in *Yonec* and Marie's other *lais* subvert the conventional functions of these metaphors, reappropriating them for purposes that reflect a feminine perspective. The tower is still a concrete representation of male power, but the husband's imprisonment of his wife does not serve the purpose he intends; rather than accepting the topographical dictates mapped onto her body, the wife rewrites her surroundings and her body to serve her own purposes. The husband's attempt to demonstrate his potency, already a joke in such an elderly man, fails miserably. Not only does the wife not bear children in the seven years he imprisons her, but she also loses the beauty he had sought to preserve from others. Since she regains it only when her lover reawakens her sensibilities, it remains the signifier of her autonomy, the unspoken yet speaking message that, like Philomela's tapestry, breaks open patriarchal silencing. Perhaps more important, the constraint of the tower does not ultimately seal off her body from others. The lord forbids all others access to the lady, including a chamberlain or porter, and he furthermore forbids her the consolation of the gynaeceum, the space marked off specifically for women from the rest of domestic space.<sup>29</sup> But restricted in her contact with other people and spatially limited though she is, the wife constructs a room of her own within the narrow constraints of masculine topography. Her chamber, with the window through which she contacts the world, becomes an extension of her body, and from this point on, functions counter to convention working as a source of empowerment even while it cages her body. Denise Despres aptly compares the spirituality in *Yonec* to that of female mystics; both share a mysticism very much in touch with the world of the senses.<sup>30</sup> But unlike anchorites, who close themselves off from the world, blocking up their doors and avoiding the openings to their chambers in order to channel their spiritual energies inward and upward, the woman in *Yonec* reaches *out* through her window, contacts the mystical source, and draws it inside. This woman generates spiritual truth by transgressing established boundaries of the body and senses. While she seems stationary and bound by her enclosure,

the exertion of her imagination allows her love, health, beauty, consummation, escape, and revenge. Muldumarec, the knight-hawk, specifies that, though he loves her, he cannot come to her until she wishes for him. Just like Lancelot, he crosses her boundaries only at her volition. But while Marie's construction of this scene is so similar to Chrétien's, the underlying meaning is very different. Marie rewrites female agency as a powerful and generative force rather than the seductive but fundamentally destructive force we see in Chrétien.

In three of Marie's lais, *Yonec*, *Laiüstic*, and *Milun*, women receive messages from their lovers when a bird or a bird's song comes through the window into their bedchambers. The husband can control the woman's body by imprisoning her in towers and in her own room, but there are certain things he cannot restrain. Marie's women become intellectually, spiritually, and, to a certain extent, sexually free within the constraints of imprisonment by coopting the instrument of their incarceration as a symbol transformed to represent themselves. Their enclosures are both constraining and protective, smothering and generative. Just as these women are able to ignite a smouldering power while they are still locked up in their tower, so too can Marie work within the constraints of the metaphors available to her.

The hawk in *Yonec*, and birds more generally in Marie's lais, are powerful symbols; but they, like the tower, are not one-dimensional signifiers.<sup>31</sup> Although in *Yonec* the hawk is primarily a positive emblem of spiritual growth, it can be interpreted on several levels. In the lais, the bird is reappropriated as a vehicle between the physical restriction of inner space and the outer world beyond domestic enclosure. The soul is often portrayed as a bird. In late medieval iconography of the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as descending like a bird on a shaft of light through a window into Mary's chamber, an image that vividly recalls the knight-hawk in *Yonec* descending on a sunbeam into the woman's room where he transforms himself into her lover. The love between Muldumarec and the woman in *Yonec* is both mystical and worldly; it is paradoxically both and yet something in between, like the sacred-yet-carnal desire of female saints for a physically beautiful Jesus.<sup>32</sup> The bird symbolism in Marie's *Lais* mediates the liminal space between the dichotomies of self and other, inner and outer, static and

active, and physical and mystical. The symbolic gestures the women in the *lais* perform sabotage their husbands' power over them. They can conflate their wives' bodies with their chambers, but in doing so, they gender the space as female and therefore under female authority.

At the same time that Marie shifts the accepted terrain of these metaphors, she destabilizes the sense of narrative verisimilitude. If we read the *lai* as a fantasy, as Debra Nelson does,<sup>33</sup> the heroine's psychosomatic manifestations convince her husband and the old woman who guards her that she is having an affair; her appearance is changed by an imaginary and therefore invisible, though truly felt, love. It is possible to read her leap from the chamber window as symbolizing her departure from the flesh, an out-of-body experience caused by the trauma of her long solitary confinement.<sup>34</sup> Even after leaving her chamber, she experiences various degrees of enclosure, in the knight-hawk's palace in a walled city, for example, and in the ring he gives her, symbolic of chastity preserved. The woman's insistence on the knight-hawk's Christianity indicates that she is searching not only for love, but also for spiritual union of the self and other. Her experience suggests the transformative power of a dream vision. Her incarceration is at first paralyzing and renders her powerless, but within her chamber she is able to reappropriate her own body as a source of mystical strength, to will her lover to appear, and, whether she imagines the magical events or not, to manipulate her son into killing her malicious husband. Though the cliché of a woman enclosed implies immobility, stasis, and stagnation, here her encounter with the bird-lover enables the woman, whether in reality or only in her dreams, to move, act, and rebel.

The women in these texts both contain and are contained, and they derive a magical power from this connection. The tower *is* an assertion of phallic power over the women, but unlike in Chrétien's works, it is recognized as such, and much of the attention in the *lais* is directed towards the heroine's transcendence of this domination through the female model of the chamber. The chamber, womb- and cave-like, enclosed though it is within the physical restraints of masculine monuments and the cultural hegemony of masculine society, is at the same time the locus of feminine power often associated with nature.<sup>35</sup> The two metaphors paradoxically coexist, creating an underlying tension in

the text. The woman in *Yonec* reappropriates her enclosure, and, by transgressing its boundaries, claims the magical power that derives not only from the fantastic knight-hawk, but also from her own body.<sup>36</sup>

The complex symbols in these *lais* go beyond allegory, metaphor, even metonymy, allowing multiple readings that would be apparent to contemporaries familiar with the conventions. In a society just moving from orality to literacy, material objects retain a force in literature that is lost to us now, just as a turf is no longer sufficient to represent transfer of land ownership.<sup>37</sup> M. T. Clanchy has shown how, until literacy gained real traction in the thirteenth century, hearing and seeing were more important than intellectual comprehension. But more importantly, the metaphor of enclosure exemplifies the woman's relationship to her own body in the grips of a patriarchal society. The literary representation of the imprisoned woman may reflect a reality in which women, fantasizing about true love and conjuring up imaginary lovers, attempted to escape miserable marriages, physical restriction, and the constraints of their own bodies built around them by masculine culture. Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the way in which certain women turned inward, mystifying their otherwise unremarkable lives: "Women more often used their ordinary experiences (of powerlessness, of service and nurturing, of disease, etc.) as symbols into which they poured ever deeper and more paradoxical meanings."<sup>38</sup> The way in which helplessness comes to symbolize power parallels the paradox essential to Christian ideals: the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Women do not necessarily escape from the metaphorical and real constraints on them; they work within those constraints to construct their own meaning for the symbols imposed upon them. In the saints' lives, women do not dispute that they are weak and worthless; they argue that that very worthlessness constitutes their special status in God's kingdom.<sup>39</sup> In Marie's *lais*, the women do not deconstruct the metaphor of the enclosure that corresponds to and defines their bodies; they invest it with other meanings.

Reading Marie's *lais*, it quickly becomes clear that the metaphor of enclosure can menace men very directly. Entering the woman's tower presents a real threat to the male lover in *Yonec*: "[li sire] Des engins faire fu hastis / a ocire le chevalier. / Broches de fer fist granz furgier / e acerer les chiés devant: / suz ciel n'a rasur plus trenchant. / Quant il les

ot apareilliees, / sur la fenestre les a mises, / bien serrees e bien asises, / par unt li chevaliers passot, / quant a la dame repairot” (288–98). (But he [the husband] was quick to invent / a way to kill the knight. / He had great spikes of iron forged, / their tips sharpened— / no razor on earth could cut better. / When he had them all prepared / and pronged on all sides, / he set them in the window— / close together and firmly placed— / through which the knight passed / when he visited the lady [284–94].) This architectural construction and the positioning of the lovers within is remarkably similar to that in *Lancelot* where Lancelot cuts his fingers bending back the bars at Guinièvre’s window. He too, marking the bed with his blood, leaves a track for others to interpret. The bloody beds in both *Lancelot* and *Yonec* present an interesting reversal of the blood more commonly associated with consummation. Just as the woman bleeds upon penetration, so here, the male is reciprocally penetrated and bleeds profusely, or, in the case of Yvain, suffers severe symbolic wounding, a near castration. The idea of the *vagina dentata* may be said to gain new force with these images of barbed windows and caged women, but the barriers presented to the men in these instances seem not to hinder them at all in their love. The attempt by the jealous husbands to exercise control over their wives’ bodies *reinforces* the sexual imagery, paradoxically affirming the lack of male authority to control it and the entrance to the woman’s womb. In fact, the positioning of the woman as topographically inaccessible seems to invite violation of established boundaries. The knight and the lady come together despite the old husband’s ingenuity. In her discussion of female saints, Bynum discusses how bodily integrity is a positive ideal: “Set apart from the world by intact boundaries, her flesh untouched by ordinary flesh, the virgin . . . was also a bride, destined for a higher consummation. She scintillated with fertility and power.”<sup>40</sup> Enclosure and “intact boundaries” do not cut the woman *off* from her sexuality; rather they heighten that sexuality and the importance of consummation: with God, in the saints’ lives, or with a lover, in Marie’s *lais* and Chrétien’s *Lancelot*. The razor-sharp edge of entry into female space is where things happen, where self splits from and interfaces with other, where dreams and reality overlap, where metonymy allows for both *is* and *is not*.

One of the few ways in which women are portrayed as gaining a sort of

power in the Middle Ages was with the threat of cuckoldry. While mothers were visibly parents, there was no absolute guarantee of fatherhood before DNA analysis, and paternity assumed increased importance with the increase in agnatic primogeniture. As Marie says in *Milun*: “Nuls ne puet estre si destreiz / ne si tenuz estreitement / que il ne truisse liu sovent” (286-88). (No one can be so constrained or so closely guarded that he can't find a way out [288-90].) Muldumarec and his lady do indeed cuckold the old husband, and their son, Yonec, kills the husband, asserts his heritage, and even gives his name to the lai. Men build walls and towers around and affix doors and barbed windows to their wives' chambers in an effort to contain their sexuality. But ultimately, the men fail to contain female action, most powerfully figured in their ability to conceive. In *Yonec*, the husband succeeds in punishing the lovers; Muldumarec's body is pierced as he enters the room, but having penetrated her window, he impregnates her. “Enceinte” or enclosed in her chamber, she becomes “enceinte,” or pregnant (331); the pun indicates the liaison between enclosing and being enclosed. The same word used for a tower or enclosure is used for the woman's pregnancy which is the ultimate mode for her revenge. In this way, the woman transforms the object of her imprisonment into the means for her escape. Her child becomes her way of acting in the world, a power we do not see women possessing in Chrétien's romances. The woman in *Yonec* asserts the same power of transformation demonstrated by the magical knight-hawk; a soul, symbolized elsewhere as a bird, descends into her and is metamorphosed into a human being. She transforms meaning as well as flesh.

Part of the horror of the *vagina dentata* is the man's queasy uncertainty of what a woman might contain in her vast, unseen interiority.<sup>41</sup> The unknowableness of woman's space sometimes puts her in power; the man is left to guess at what goes on in the mystery of a woman's womb, just as he must wonder what she does in her bedroom, the space where she receives her lover through the window and does illicit things with him. The difference with Marie is that it is the inside and the female that is known, the outside and the male that is unknown and to be acted upon. Though it is the husband who is to blame for the wounding of the lover, perhaps in some ways the woman also claims a share in the action which results in a sort of mutual, bloody consummation and the ultimate gift

(in the Lacanian sense): a child with a birthright outside the system, in the land of fairy. The ambiguous and metamorphic sense of these passages expresses the workings of a symbolism delicately balanced between the cultural unconscious and a carefully crafted synthesis of metaphors.

### *Guigemar and Laiistic*

The *lais Guigemar* and *Laiistic* both reinforce and augment the patterns of metaphors laid out in *Yonec*. The echoing is in itself important because it shows that the events in *Yonec* are not just incidental, but part of a larger pattern of female agency in Marie's *lais*. In *Guigemar*, as in *Yonec*, the woman's chamber becomes a countersign within the constraint of the masculine tower. Even as the woman is enclosed, her rebellion is clearly inscribed on the walls of her enclosure at the same time that her story is memorialized by Marie in text. The unhappily married woman in *Guigemar* is locked in a tower very similar to the one in *Yonec*: "Il ne la guardout mie a gas. / En un vergier suz le donjun / la out un clos tut environ. / De vert marbre fu li muralz, / mult par estait espés e halz. / N'i out fors une sule entree; / cele fu nuit e jur garde. / De l'altre part fu clos de mer; / nuls n'i pout eissir ne entrer" (218-26). (The watch he kept over her was no joke. / The grove beneath the tower / was enclosed all around / with walls of green marble, / very high and thick. / There was only one entrance, / and it was guarded day and night [218-24].) The heroine manages to escape from her tower by meeting a lover who enters in a ship through the spatial mediation of the *hortus inclusus*. The garden, while enclosed, is still a place of greater freedom than the chamber the husband builds for her; it is both outside and inside, enclosed by the wall around it. The sea and the mysterious ship provide the heroine's only escape from the green marble enclosure darkly symbolic of the jealous husband. The similarities between *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, and to some degree *Lancelot*, include the punitive constriction of the enclosure, the single mode of entrance into the chamber, the window through which the lovers are undone, and the voyeurism of an outsider. In both *lais*, the woman first gains her sexual freedom when the desired lover penetrates the security of her enclosure, and in both the woman is mysteriously enabled to leave that enclosure in order to

follow her lover. This topography recurs throughout Marie's *lais*, but some details in *Guigemar* uniquely illustrate its sexual and gendered symbolism. Marie describes a painting on a wall in the woman's *chambre* that symbolizes her predicament:

La chambre ert peinte tut en tur.  
Venus, la deusse d'amur,  
fu tresbien mise en la peinture;  
les traiz mustrot e la nature  
cument hom deit amur tenir  
e leialment e bien servir.  
Le livre Ovide, u il enseigne  
coment chascuns s'amur estreigne ,  
en un fu ardant le getout ,  
e tuz icels escumenjout,  
ki ja mais cel livre lirreient  
ne sun ensiegnement fereient .  
La fu la dame enclose e mise (233-45).  
[The room was painted with images all around;  
Venus the goddess of love  
was skillfully depicted in the painting,  
her nature and her traits were illustrated,  
whereby men might learn how to behave in love,  
and to serve love loyally.  
Ovid's book, the one in which he instructs  
lovers how to control love,  
was being thrown by Venus into a fire (233-44).]

The painting enclosing the woman condemns the Ovidian controlling of love and hence her entrapment.<sup>42</sup> The painting is inside the chamber, not simply within the keep. The chamber and the painting are the woman's text, but since the chamber is trapped inside the tower, she is forced to remain within both.

The heroine possesses the chamber, her own and only domain.<sup>43</sup> Her husband is somehow oblivious to the significance of the mural. Marie does not describe how it came to be there. The chamber represents the woman's point of view: the mural condemns her husband's mistreatment

and justifies her adulterous relationship with Guigemar; it prefigures in Venus the expression of desire that will eventually overcome her imprisonment. The locus of the heroine's voice simultaneously dismantles Ovid, the male authority on love, and reestablishes in his place a feminine deity who instructs lovers to "leialment e bien servir." The painting expresses the woman's plight through art just as Philomela tells her unspeakable story of male oppression by weaving it into a tapestry. Even more aptly, the heroine of *Guigemar* protests her enclosure on the very walls of her male-constructed prison. She appropriates the means of her victimization and silencing and transforms it into a non-verbal communication of her power, which ultimately lies in her ability to love. These walls act to counter masculine power: as marble barriers they symbolize the woman's submission to a system in which beautiful young women are forced into marriages with jealous old men, but they are also inscribed with a contradictory message that rebukes this system and transfers power to the woman. Despite the narrowness of her confinement, the woman is able to bring a man into her chamber, to keep him there for a year and a half without her husband's knowledge, and to escape through the one passage available to her. The means by which she escapes also subverts conventional expectations. The sexual metaphor of the man as the active ship coming into the passive harbor, a commonplace in classical and medieval literature, shifts when the heroine of *Guigemar* takes on the active role, rescuing the knight from the ship and later using it to escape herself. The ship is a symbol of mutual love, female agency, and deliverance. Like the woman in *Yonec*, and unlike those in Chrétien, the heroine of *Guigemar* escapes and acts on her own behalf.

Marie subverts power relations in the *lais* and asserts her voice and the authority that goes with it. Just as the heroines of her *lais* reshape their environments, Marie refigures the predominant metaphors available in her culture. She allows for female "parole," if not openly, at least by the few means open to women. By metamorphosing signs into countersigns, a power that derives from literary rather than oral culture, she transforms meaning and enables female action. Medieval literature often manifests the urge to silence women. The resistance Marie encountered in speaking is apparent in the introduction to *Guigemar* as well as in

her justification against detractors in the Prologue. Marie's enemies could have been motivated by simple envy, as Marie says, but it seems likely that they were also reacting to the threat involved in a woman's speaking, or, more importantly, *writing*, the new arena for action.<sup>44</sup> Marie's women are enclosed, but they are placed thus in order to expose the limitations of male literary and literal structures. The heroine in *Guigemar* is cloistered within her tower, but her husband is not able to cut off the speech represented in the prophetic image on her wall. While Philomela expresses her rebellion in tapestry, the lady's rebellion is encrypted on the inner walls of her chamber, and her alliances are rewritten in the belt and knot with which she and her lover mark each other. She counter-inscribes male imprisonment with her own markings on her body, on her lover's body, and on the representation of her body just as Marie countersigns her text to alter the meaning of larger cultural metaphors.

In his discussion of the pledges exchanged between the lovers in *Guigemar*, Howard Bloch equates the closure of the lovers' pleat or knot with the obscurity of the text: "Amur est plaie (plait) dans le cors (corpus)." (Love is a wound [a woven knot, something pleasing, something pledged] in the body [text].)<sup>45</sup> The enclosure of the text is figured not only in the love-tokens that bind *Guigemar*'s shirt and the woman's loins, however, but also in the woman's enclosure in the tower. The woman's enclosure—like the knots that can only be undone by the lovers who hold the key, and like the signs and signals within the text that are unlocked only by an intratextual linguistic key—is undone as it is metamorphosed from an emblem of the man's phallic strength into a countersign of the woman's interior power. The metaphor of enclosure is intratextual—the countersigns I have discussed above depend upon an analysis inherent in and exclusive to Marie's *lais*—but it is also intertextual; the countersigns subvert broader literary metaphors knowledge of which depends on a larger vision of cultural constructions and material realities of the period.

In *Laüstic*, as in *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, the lovers are again separated by a dark stone wall and fall in love in part because of their proximity. The love is not merely convenient, but is actually caused by the proximity of their buildings; they almost touch, and their gardens share a wall. The

*mal mariée*, in love with her neighbor, looks out her window towards him. The lovers communicate their love by means of a nightingale, which comes to represent the union they never achieve physically as they connect across the breach between their houses, maintaining contact by listening to the song of the nightingale and by gazing for long periods through their windows. Love was commonly thought to enter through the eyes, and medieval theories of sight postulated a more tangible connection than we do; contact between eyes is tantamount to physical penetration.<sup>46</sup> The lady pretends to be kept awake all night by the singing of the bird, but her wakefulness is actually the insomnia brought about by lovesickness. Her husband recognizes her gaze as a visual transgression of the boundaries of her chamber—and her body—and hence as a sexual trespass. As in *Yonec*, the husband makes a trap for the bird. He catches the nightingale and viciously kills it in front of her, throwing it at her so its blood spatters her tunic. The blood that marks her garment is reminiscent of the blood of Muldumarec the hawk-man; again, the blood connotes a consummation that is also death, both of the bird and of the physical love the nightingale symbolizes.

In order to convey her story to her lover, the woman sends the bird to him, wrapping it in samite embroidered with signs or writing: “a or brusd é tut escrit” (136) (embroidered in gold and writing [136]).<sup>47</sup> Diana Faust suggests that because of the association of *Laiüstic* with Ovid’s tale of Philomela, it is likely that the woman embroidered the story of her husband’s brutally symbolic murder on the samite shroud.<sup>48</sup> The husband tries, but fails, to silence his wife’s symbolic and literal language. As in *Milun*, she sends her message by a bird, her last means of speaking her love from her incarceration within the house her husband controls. The husband imprisons the wife and savagely destroys her means of communication with the world, but she gets the last word through the dead nightingale. Benkov describes the male impulse to silence women and the threat their speech represents; their silencing corresponds to their enclosure, and the threat they present is the reason for their containment. “So it follows that the keeping of women is the keeping of language,” and this at a time when the keeping of—and nature of—language is up for grabs.<sup>49</sup> The woman must be contained in voice as well as in body. But the multiplicity of woman’s orifices makes speech and

sexual penetration impossible to prevent. Benkov notes the impotence of the male effort to silence and contain; a woman who has been beaten mute by her husband is nevertheless able to get the last word by sign language. Her sign language is equivalent to Philomela's tapestry, the wall-painting in *Guigemar*, and the samite shroud in *Laiüstic*. The woman in *Laiüstic* inscribes her rebellion on the symbol of her oppression, as in *Guigemar*. Besides refiguring the story of the husband's tyranny, the containment of the bird allows the woman to be symbolically possessed by her lover, who fetishizes the nightingale in its elaborate chest; she bestows the symbol of her self upon the man she chooses.

Her silence, like the nightingale's, is itself a sort of enclosure, a containment that she transgresses by non-verbal means just as she transgresses the limits of her chamber by non-physical means. The caged woman's inability to communicate, like the strangled nightingale's inability to sing, is at the same time a speaking. Its name a memorial in the title of the lai, its body encapsulated in its own little tomb, the nightingale is an expression of the death of her love and of her rebirth, her muted metamorphosis into stillness. The woman self-consciously uses the symbolism of singing and silence, of freedom and containment, in order to refigure her plight. Unlike the women in *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, she is never able to escape the barriers that contain her, but by using the bird as a countersign she is able to convey her awareness of being caged. Marie does not portray her as entirely eluding the structures of patriarchy, but she at least enables her to express her intended subversion of those structures. And as she memorializes this woman's story, so Marie sends out her own encoded speaking, an expression of the ways in which she is silenced, in her densely metaphorical lais.

In Marie's lais the husband has the power to control the woman's body, to imprison her in towers and in her chamber. But he cannot control everything. The free flight of the birds that figure so prominently in these lais, in and around the captured space of the body, brings to mind the transcendent, unrestrainable elements of the human spirit. Marie's women become spiritually if not physically free within the constraints of their imprisonment. Silent, they speak; immobile, they act.

On the verge of literate culture, halfway between corpus and lingua franca, on the cutting edge at the entrance to the female body, the

metonymy between body and building is not so easily pinned down as the cliché in the *Roman de la Rose* would suggest. Like the words *slut*, *bussy* (*buswif*), and *wench*, this metaphor has undergone a pejorative shift by the late thirteenth century. While it might seem that a woman enclosed does not act, that instead she is acted upon, the paradigm is much more complex in both Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France; together, men and women act upon each other; agency is passed back and forth nimbly and ambiguously. And in Marie's *lais*, women are the most active of actors, employing the very tools and metaphors deployed to pin them down.

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## ∞ END NOTES

1. See Roberta Cornelius, *Figurative Castle: A Study in the Mediaeval Allegory of the Edifice with Especial Reference to Religious Writings* (Diss. Bryn Mawr, 1930) and Jean-Marie Kauth, *Enclosure of Woman: From Romance to the Ancrene Wisse* (Diss. University of Michigan, 1995). A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) discusses the importance of space in the textual construction of voyeurism. Cary Howie, *Claustrophobia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2007) conflates the medieval erotics of enclosure with a queer theory analysis of the twenty-first-century closet. But the metaphor described here is far from a modern understanding of the erotics of enclosure.

2. See, for example, Stephen G. Nichols, "Deflections of the Body in the Old French Lay," *Stanford French Review* 14 (1990): 27-50, 28n; Glyn Burgess, "Symbolism in Marie de France's *Laustic* and *Le Fresne*," *Bulletin bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne* 33 (1981): 258-68; and Micheline de Combarieu, "Les objets chez Marie de France," *Marche romane (Mediaevalia* 80) 30, nos. 3-4 (1980): 301-7, as well as notes 5, 7, and 35.

3. Brian Stock's idea of textual community articulates conditions for textual production in a newly literate culture: "What was essential for a textual community, whether large or small, was simply a text, an interpreter, and a public. The text did not have to be written; oral record, memory, and reperformance sufficed." A textual community is "a group in which there is both a script and a spoken enactment and in which social cohesion and meaning result from the interaction of the two." Brian Stock, *Listening for*

*the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 37, 100.

4. Stock, *Listening*, III.

5. Nichols says, "I use 'countersign' to identify Marie's frequent use within her lays of symbols that have a specific contextual meaning recognized by the principal narrative subjects and which communicate meanings that, in terms of the sociolect of the lays, are idiosyncratic or even contradictory of socially determined norms. . . . The countersign is thus an extradiegetic marker embedded in the narrative signifying disjunction or contradiction between conventional meaning and expectation and textual intention" ("Deflections of the Body," 28n).

6. Hélène Cixous, "The Tours: *Les Tours*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2002): 431-33, is only one example of those reading towers as phallic symbols, in her case, New York's World Trade Center towers.

7. See Burgess on the differing medieval sense of symbols: "The symbol was seen on the one hand as a drawing together (Greek *symbollein*), a summation or *collatio* of diverse factors crystallizing the essence of a matter . . . and on the other as a visible sign of the invisible, a material representation of the spiritual, a phenomenon linking the experience of the senses to a reality beyond nature and history, beyond its own structure" ("Symbolism," 260).

8. Danielle Régnier-Bohler, "Imagining the Self," in *The History of Private Life*, vol. 2, *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 331. On the architectural ramifications of increasing privacy, see also Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994).

9. Robert of Blois, *Chastoiement des dames*, quoted by Régnier-Bohler, 331.

10. Stock, *Listening*, 146.

11. In his discussion of Susanna in the garden, Spearing notes that the enclosed garden is figured as feminine in the Middle Ages.

12. Old French quotes come from Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, ed. Helga Jauss-Meyer (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1974), lines cited in text. I have used the translation of D. D. R. Owen, *Arthurian Romances* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1987) for both *Lancelot* and *Yvain*, except where a more literal translation is helpful.

13. Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

Press, 2003), makes a similar argument about blood: “In the opposition of public masculine bloodshed and hidden women’s blood, stories about chivalric battles and warfare promote the association of all women’s blood with menstruation and define all women’s blood as a blood that should remain hidden and private” (x).

14. The husband nearly always enters the chamber through the door, while the lover, lacking a key and authorized access, usually comes in a window. This commonplace of spatial representation may also imply a certain illegitimacy in its sexual implications as well. Entering through the wrong door often euphemistically implied intercourse that was “against nature,” possibly sodomitic or oral, but here it would seem more likely to refer simply to the act not licensed by marriage.

15. Although they seem the stuff of psychological myth-making, there have been instances of penis captiva, in which the penis is trapped in the act of intercourse by vaginal muscle spasms. One medieval account of this can be found in the *Book of the Knight of the Tour Landry*: a couple is miraculously bound together as they have sex in a church.

16. As Stock describes, physical gestures, by the hands in particular, usually comprised the feudal pledge of fealty (50–51). Chrétien explores the boundaries between public honor and private love in *Yvain and Erec and Enide* as well as in *Lancelot*. He maintains a constant tension between the heroes’ knightly obligations and romantic connections, and while the former is firmly enmeshed in oral rite, the latter relies on literary models.

17. Edith Joyce Benkov, “Language and Women: From Silence to Speech,” in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse*, ed. Julian Wasserman and L. Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 245–65, 245.

18. In this notorious example of doublespeak, Iseult swears that she has had no man between her legs besides Mark and the beggar who had fallen carrying her to land. Her statement is technically true, but she does not add that that beggar was Tristan in disguise.

19. “Feudal rites were united by a number of common features: respect for the individual and his word, the belief of the concrete over the abstract, [and] the formalization of obligations through ritual” (Stock, *Listening*, 50).

20. Janet Hamilton, “Ruses du destin: blesseures et guérisons dans l’univers chevaleresque,” in *Écriture de la Ruse*, ed. Elzbieta Grodek (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 261–69, discussing the Tristan legend, observes that men are often inspired to battle, and then healed by women (262) and that this connection links romance and chivalry. Guigemar is also healed by his lady love.

21. I am grateful to one of the readers at *Medieval Feminist Forum* for this insight. See McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), for a discussion of adulterous queens, women's power, and the role of female patronage.

22. Old French from Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, ed. T. B. W. Reid (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1942).

23. Spearing, *Medieval Poet*, 76.

24. Roberta L. Kreuger, "Love, Honor, and the Exchange of Women in *Yvain*: Some Remarks on the Female Reader," *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (1985): 302-17, argues that Chrétien self-consciously uses this paradoxical portrayal of Laudine to elicit varying responses from the women in his audience: "the narrator calls our attention to the romances' mystification of woman's place at the same time that he reveals the underlying reality of her status as an object of exchange" (304).

25. The reactions of the critics to Laudine's acquiescence have been mixed. Gustave Cohen, *Un grand romancier d'amour et d'aventure au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Chrétien de Troyes et son oeuvre* (Paris: Boivin & cie, 1931), sees Chrétien as misogynistic, as reacting to a real-life Laudine. Z. P. Zaddy, "Chrétien misogyne," *Marche romane* 30, nos. 3-4 (1980): 301-7, disputes this, arguing that the anti-feminist passages surrounding her assent are merely humorous and that Laudine is "incontestablement celle [la héroïne] pour laquelle on éprouve le moins de sympathie" (301). But as Kreuger points out: "The implication that women really desire what necessity dictates to them conforms to the misogynist comments, reminiscent of the *Ars Amatoria*, which punctuate this episode—that Laudine may come to desire Yvain because women often change their minds, as Yvain muses (1439-40), that women say no to what they really want, as the narrator insinuates (1644-48), that women get mad when they hear what is good for them, as Lunete tells Laudine (1653-56)" (310). Marc Glasser, "Marriage and the Use of Force in *Yvain*," *Romania* 108 (1987): 484-502 and Ellen Germain, "Lunete, Women, and Power in Chrétien's *Yvain*," *Romance Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1991): 15-24, whose argument largely reproduces Kreuger's, describe necessity as Laudine's real reason for marrying Yvain. Maureen Fries, "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition," in *Popular Arthurian Traditions*, ed. Sally K. Slocum (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), calls her the woman in Arthurian legend who is "the most bound into patriarchal custom" (6).

Rosemary Woolf, "Christ the Lover-Knight," *The Review of English Studies* 13, no. 49 (1962): 1-16, notes that a twelfth-century audience would expect a woman to respond to a man displaying the conventions of "courtly love" with love; the man deserves her, whether she likes it or not (9).

26. See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 229, 36-38, and Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 69-71. Citing Duby, Chantal Maréchal, "Mise en contexte et étude comparée de quatre lais: *Doon, Milon, Tydorel, et Yonec*" (Diss. University of Michigan, 1983), 149, compares the interaction between Muldumarec and the woman in *Yonec* to marriage rituals in the twelfth century and argues that their alliance resembles a clandestine marriage. K. Sarah-Jane Murray, "The Ring and the Sword: Marie de France's *Yonec* in Light of the *Vie de saint Alexis*," *Romance Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2006): 25-42, also claims that the sword and ring the lovers exchange betoken a marriage vow that substitutes for her barren, forced union to the *vieillard*.

27. See Gayle Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) for a discussion of marriage as the basic form of social bond in the form of a gift exchange in which women are the gifts and men are exchange partners.

28. All quotes are from the Old French text in Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. Karl Warnke, trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1990), lines noted in the text. All translations into English (unless otherwise specified) are from Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978).

29. See Régnier-Bohler's discussion of the gynaeceum ("Imagining the Self," 344-48).

30. Denise Dupres, "Redeeming the Flesh: Spiritual Transformation in Marie de France's *Yonec*," *Studia Mystica* 10, no. 3 (1987): 26-39.

31. Critical interpretations of the symbol of the hawk have varied widely. Marie specifies that this hawk at least is a noble bird: "Lady, he said, do not be afraid, the hawk is a noble bird" (125-26). The hawk's reputation for nobility, its status as the hunting companion of the noble, would make it a logical choice for the embodiment of a courtly knight and would appeal to the aristocratic audience of *Yonec*. June Hall McCash, "The Hawk-Lover in Marie de France's *Yonec*," *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1991): 67-75, notes that

Albertus Magnus calls the goshawk *astur gentilis* or *accipiter gentilis* and compares it to the *fin amant* for its habit of eating its victim's beating heart (68). Despres identifies the hawk in *Yonec* as *raptor* and argues that he is responsible for the lady's spiritual "raptus" ("Redeeming the Flesh," 31). But the symbol is multivalent. Hugh of Fouilloy, *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's Aviarium*, trans. by Willene B. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 142-43, specifies that there are two types of hawks: "domesticus" (tame) and "silvestris" (wild). Only the wild hawk is known as a thief, but the tame hawk he compares to a spiritual leader who seizes souls for conversion. The hawk Marie describes is trained: "It had straps on its feet; it seemed like a hawk of five moultings or of six" (112-13). McCash observes that while the wild hawk has been interpreted as a symbol for carnal lust, the chained, tame hawk that Marie describes is an emblem for *fin amor*, carnal love held in check by noble love (70).

32. Jacques Ribard, "Le lai d'*Yonec* est-il une allégorie chrétienne?," in *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. B. Grout, R. A. Lodge, C. E. Pickford, and E. K. C. Varty (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), argues that *Yonec* is a Christian allegory, that the woman represents the human spirit imprisoned in the body, that Muldumarec is a Christ figure, and that Yonec himself is the Paraclete. While these parallels are quite clear, *Yonec* should not be interpreted only on this level.

33. Deborah Nelson, "Yonec: A Religious and Chivalric Fantasy," *USF Language Quarterly* 16, nos. 3-4 (1978) argues that the lai, from the point of the lover's entrance on, is a fantasy constructed by the woman to fulfill her spiritual needs and to obtain vengeance through the son. Nelson compares the lai with the tradition of religious-secular ambiguity in Provençal lyrics and finds that it is dually engaged with religious and chivalric backgrounds. Ribard also sees this episode as oddly dream-like ("La lai d'*Yonec*," 166).

34. De Combarieu, "Les objects," argues that in both *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, the contrast between the narrow confinement of the women and their subsequent escapes to the open worlds of their lovers symbolizes the interior and exterior obstacles they had faced and the freeing power of their love (40).

35. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), speak of the paradox of enclosure, and although they are talking about women enclosed in caves in the nineteenth century rather than medieval chambers, the metaphors involved are similar and suggest the power of wisdom and "the umbilicus mundi" (94-95).

36. Glyn Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), rather carelessly argues that *Yonec* is an example of “the rescue of a damsel in distress” (100). This statement demonstrates a narrowed vision of this lai: the woman is not merely rescued. Her lover, when he comes, comes only when she summons him, and his bodily presence is intentionally left ambiguous. In the end, she is not freed by male agency.

37. See Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 38, 52, 254, for examples of objects like turfs, knives, or staffs standing in place of or alongside of deeds to symbolize land transactions. When memory is relied upon instead of words, these items symbolize a great deal more than was later recognized.

38. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 25.

39. Bynum quotes Margaret Porete, whose description of herself as “the sum of all evils” enables her to claim absolute possession of God’s goodness because of her neediness (277). Bynum notes that women accepted their status: “It was because they knew God acted through the lowly. Women’s symbols did not reverse social fact, they enhanced it” (279). But while the claims of these women reinforced the status quo, they nevertheless undermined the meaning of existing power structures.

40. *Ibid.*, 20.

41. Although the fear expressed in the idea of the *vagina dentata* may indeed be related to a general male apprehensiveness about the interiority of woman, the unfillable empty space that encloses and perhaps swallows up the male, it also arises from a very specific fear of damage caused by medieval contraceptive practices. In some methods, pieces of iron were supposedly placed within the vagina. Helen Rodnite Lemay, “Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Lectures on Female Sexuality,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 1 (1978): 391-400, translates a reference to this from *De secretis mulierum*: “For when men have sexual intercourse with these women they sometimes suffer a large wound and infection of the penis because of iron (ferrum) that has been strategically placed by their partners” (395). See also Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) for a discussion of how the misogynistic fear of woman’s body tied in with other, more tangible fears (6, 129, 188-93, 227).

42. Tracy Adams, “‘Arte Regendus Amor’: Suffering and Sexuality in Marie de France’s *Lai de Guigemar*,” *Exemplaria* 17, no. 2 (2005): 285-315, evaluates the many different interpretations of the nature of the painting and of the relationship between Ovid and Marie and characterizes the mural as an ekphrastic description that reflects the lovers’ mental state.

43. R. W. Hanning, “Courtly Contexts for Urban *Cultus*: Responses to Ovid in Chrétien’s *Cligès* and Marie’s *Guigemar*,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Foreign Literatures* 34 (1981): 34-56, sees a special significance in the authority of the paintings decorating the woman’s chamber: “Perhaps it is no accident that, while a male artist-figure creates the tower, a female deity presides over the *chambre*” (45).

44. Benkov, “Language and Women,” notes the silencing against which Marie and her heroines struggle: “Much of medieval literature seems to have as its subtext that women’s speech must either be carefully controlled or in some cases violently suppressed” (245).

45. Howard Bloch, “Guigemar’: A Provocation,” *Romanic Review*, no. 1 (1988): 63-73, 72.

46. “The spirit transmitted by the optic nerve is emitted outwards to apprehend the things outside; having grasped those things, it embraces them and represents them to the superior part of the soul” (Brian Lawn, ed., *The Prose Salernitan Questions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979], 10-11, quoted in Jacquart and Thomasset, 83). In Aristotelian medicine the eyes, located near the brain, are also seen as more susceptible to damage by over-indulging in intercourse (Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 56) or from the gaze of menstruating women (75). The *Ancrene Wisse* plays on the metonymy between windows, piercings, and eyes embodied in the word they share: (*eb*)*Surles* (*eye-thurles*, cf. *nose-thurles*>*nostrils*). Stock argues that the rise of literacy affected visual phenomena such as architecture and sparked an interest in optics (*Listening*, 82-83).

47. In contrast to Hanning and Ferrante’s translation, Glyn Burgess and Keith Busby, trans., *The Lais of Marie de France* (New York: Penguin, 1999) translate “a or brusdè e tut escrit” (137) as “embroidered in gold and covered in designs” (96). The translation is ambiguous about the nature of the “designs,” about whether they themselves express the lovers’ story or whether they are abstract decoration. The modern French translation by Laurence Harf-Lancner, more explicitly than either English translation, reveals the narrative sense of the embroidery: “sur laquelle elle a brodé leur histoire en lettres d’or.” Although there is no need to claim that their story is necessarily

told in letters, I would assert that the designs are not random, that they do indeed convey a comprehensible message. The key word in the translation is “écrit.” Larousse’s Old French dictionary lists two primary meanings for the verb *escrire*, *escrire*: “Écrire” and “Dénombrer, recenser.” It also lists a twelfth-century definition for the noun *écrit*: “Écrit, inscription” (250). Clanchy notes examples of symbolic objects that were both tokens of property transfer and also covered with writing related to the transaction: a whip-handle carved with an inscription describing the gift of horses, for instance (*From Memory to Written Record*, 257).

48. Diana M. Faust, “Women Narrators in the *Lais* of Marie de France,” in *Women in French Literature: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Michel Guggenheim, Stanford French & Italian Studies; vol. 58 (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri & Co, 1988), 17-27, 23-24.

49. Benkov, “Language and Women,” 263-64.