

La Femme Bisclavret: The Female of the Species?

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IN RECENT YEARS, Marie de France's lai *Bisclavret* has been deeply scrutinized by ecocritical medievalists. Addressing the issues raised by the lai and its werewolf knight—the permeable boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, the hierarchy and indeed legitimacy of the human-animal binary, the ethical agency of nonhuman subjects—has helped focus attention on the animals that inhabit medieval texts as living creatures in their own right.¹ In doing so, however, such readings of *Bisclavret* (including my own) have frequently turned aside from the questions asked by feminist approaches to the lai. Because they typically privilege the wolf's perspective, ecocritical interpretations of *Bisclavret* tend to sympathize with its protagonist over the wife who betrays him. Many feminist readings, on the other hand, sympathize with the wife's terror on finding herself married to a monstrous beast and point out the misogynistic implications of the punishment she endures: a mutilation

1. Notable recent treatments of the tale from a critical animal studies perspective include Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 42–68; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “The Werewolf’s Indifference,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 351–56; Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 102–36; and Peggy McCracken, “Translation and Animals in Marie de France’s *Lais*,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 46, no. 3 (2009): 206–18, doi: 10.3828/AJF3.206S.46. 3.206 and *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 62–66.

that is passed down only among her female descendants. At the same time, feminist readings often implicitly accept the human-animal binary that critical animal studies resists. In this essay, I hope to achieve a reconciliation between approaches, showing how dismantling anthropocentric readings of *Bisclavret* can set the stage for feminist readings that similarly complicate presumptions of the lai's misogyny.

Marie's lai tells the story of a noble and courteous knight, well loved by all, whose peculiar habit of disappearing for three days each week causes his wife great distress. After much persuasion and assurances of her love, he finally reveals his secret: he becomes a werewolf. As soon as the wife learns where he hides the clothing that allows him to resume human form, she immediately offers herself to another knight who has long loved her and then conspires with him to steal the clothing, trapping Bisclavret in lupine form. A year later, the king encounters the wolf while hunting in the forest and, amazed at the creature's docile behavior, brings the wolf back with him to court. The wolf is kind and humble to all, so much so that when he uncharacteristically attacks first the other knight and then his wife, biting off the latter's nose, the court assumes he must have reason for doing so. Torture reveals the wife's betrayal and the location of Bisclavret's clothing. Bisclavret is restored to human form, his erstwhile wife and her lover are banished, and we are told that many of the women of her lineage inherit her noselessness.

Traditional anthropocentric readings argue that the lai centers on the triumph of the human over the bestial. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, for example, sees Bisclavret's fundamental conflict as the need to learn to "control the beast with his human 'entente e sen' [understanding and intelligence]," resolved when the lai transfers "untamed, uncontrolled animal appetites" to his wife.² In a similar vein, Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante describe the lai as a whole as "a parable about the forces of bestiality that exist within human nature," one that is "concerned with the human capacity to manifest nobility even under the most trying conditions, and thus to transcend the animal part of our nature and garner the hard-won benefits of civilization."³ Noble and courteous

2. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts in *Bisclavret*," *Romanic Review* 81, no. 3 (1991): 259, 263.

3. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, eds. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*

behavior is proof of Bisclavret's humanity, which is only "temporarily obscured" within his outer lupine form; no matter his outward appearance, "Bisclavret is human all along."⁴ Bisclavret's violence against his wife is also cast as appropriately human, in contrast to the mindless violence associated with animals.⁵ In these readings, anthropocentrism is at work on two levels. As Karl Steel points out, the werewolf's power to speak to "the animal part that is within us all" is possible only "if humans are understood to have discrete 'animal' and 'human' parts."⁶ Furthermore, such readings also take for granted that human is always superior to animal, that the animal is necessarily something to be rejected, repressed, or transcended—a view reflected in the writing of medieval theologians such as Albertus Magnus, who raise human beings above other animals because humans possess the power of reason that regulates the concupiscent and irascible appetites shared with the rest of the animal world.⁷

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 101.

4. Lucas Wood, "Of Werewolves and Wicked Women: *Melion's* Misogyny Reconsidered," *Medium Aevum* 84, no. 1 (2015): 62; Nancy Bradley Warren, "Objects, Possessions, and Identity in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *Romance Languages Annual* 6 (1994), 190.

5. See, for example, Michelle Freeman: "The bisclavret has of course not been seized by the rage characteristic of the werewolf but by the rightful *human* fury of a husband who has been seriously wronged." "Dual Natures and Subverted Glosses: Marie de France's *Bisclavret*," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985): 294 (emphasis added). Similarly, Renée Curtis argues that biting off the wife's nose must be seen as the "reaction of an outraged husband beside himself at having been deceived and betrayed by his wife and determined to punish her." "Physical and Mental Cruelty in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *Arthuriana*, 6, no.1 (Spring 1996): 27, www.jstor.org/stable/27869168.

6. Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 12.

7. For Albertus, the possession of reason differentiates human and nonhuman animals in ways that go beyond species: "An indication of this is that a person's irrational powers, such as the concupiscent and the irascible, are susceptible to the persuasion of reason. This is not the case with other animals. He therefore differs in more than species from the brutes and he seems to have a certain difference in kind [*genus*] over them since he participates in animality itself in respect to a power which is different from that in other animals." Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, ed. and trans. Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr. and Irvin M. Resnick, 2 vols.

Yet in imaginative literature we often find a more complicated picture. From Bevis of Hampton's warhorse Arundel and Yvain's lion companion in medieval romance to allegorical representations in bestiaries, animals can stand as paragons of virtue offering examples for humans to imitate. One of those virtues is loyalty, the quality that defines Bisclavret for many readers. This might pose a conundrum, for wolves in medieval texts are hardly paragons of loyalty; rather, they embody many of the negative characteristics that are considered bestial.⁸ The ultimate non-human exemplar of loyalty is the dog—so much so, in fact, that loyalty becomes the dog's primary characteristic in secular texts. Admittedly, a werewolf is not a dog; yet there are remarkable parallels between Marie's characterization of the wolf Bisclavret and medieval descriptions of dog behavior.⁹ Bisclavret enacts loyalty in his canine body most vividly in his initial approach to the king in the forest, when he rears up to place his paws on the king's stirrup and kisses his leg and foot: "Vers lui curut quere merci. / Il l'aveit pris par sun estrié, / La jambe li baise e le pié" (he ran to him beseeching mercy. / He seized the king's stirrup, / Kissed his leg and foot).¹⁰ Bisclavret's approach seems to mimic the act of homage; echoing the king's declaration that "ele ad sen de hume" (154; [the beast] has the sense of a man), anthropocentric readings offer this as primary evidence of the man trapped inside the wolf.¹¹ But while we may indeed

(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2:1407.

8. Surveying the depiction of wolves across multiple medieval literary genres, Aleksander Pluskowski describes the archetypal wolf as "characterized by unbridled cruelty, bestial ferocity as well as literal-mindedness and gullibility, driven by ravenous hunger." *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 132.

9. For more on Bisclavret's dog-like aspects, see Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 61–63, and Alison Langdon, "The Nose Knows: Encountering the Canine in *Bisclavret*," *Enarratio* 18 (2013): 49–69, <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/69737>.

10. Marie de France, *Bisclavret*, 146–48; in *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995). Future references will be to this edition and will be documented parenthetically by line number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

11. Noah D. Guynn, for example, writes that the scene "clearly recalls a feudal commendation ceremony." "Hybridity, Ethics, and Gender in Two Old French Werewolf Tales, in *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, ed. E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2013), 164. See also Freeman, "Dual Natures and Subverted Glosses," 294; Jean Jorgenson,

read this moment as a human demonstration of fealty, Susan Crane reminds us that it is equally evocative of dog behavior, for “it seems as plausible that one of the king’s dogs might lick his foot as that one of his huntsmen might kiss it. To the extent that the werewolf’s gestures recall a dog’s, they are not evidently due to the ‘mind of a man.’”¹² Though the behavior may be read in two registers—as a human knight doing homage to his lord or as a dog fawning on his beloved human—the signification is the same: it functions as a declaration of submission and affection, a declaration that is clearly perceived and understood by the king.

The encounter in the forest effectively defines both the terms by which the king reads the wolf and the nature of the relationship that develops between them, one that offers a pointed comparison with Lady Bisclavret’s response to the revelation of her husband’s wolfish nature. After she hears the “merveille” (marvel) of her husband’s lycanthropy, Bisclavret’s wife “de poür fu tute vermeille” (reddened with fear) and immediately begins to plot her betrayal (97, 98). In contrast, though the king also initially “grant poür ad” (felt great fear) when he sees the “merveille” of the docile wolf in the forest (149, 152), he carefully reads Bisclavret’s eloquent canine behavior and just as immediately responds appropriately by calling off his hunters and extending his protection. Bisclavret continues to exhibit loyalty by refusing to be separated from the king: “Le bisclavret li vet siwant; / Mut se tint pres, n’en vout partir, / Il n’ad cure de lui guerpir” (162–64; The bisclavret went along following him; / He kept himself very close, he would not leave, / He had no desire to forsake him). Bisclavret’s behavior elicits a corresponding response from the king, who takes the wolf with him wherever he goes:

U ke li reis deüst errer,
 Il n’out cure de desevrer;
 Ensemble od li tuz jurs alout:
 Bien s’aparceit què il l’amout.
 (181–84)

“The Lycanthropy Metaphor in Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*,” *Selecta* 15 (1994), 27; and Leslie Scoduto, *Metamorphosis of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 45.

12. Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 59.

Wherever the king must go,
He had no desire to part from him;
He went together with him always:
He could see well that he loved him.

The king's behavior is described in terms that clearly echo that of the wolf.¹³ Moreover, the mutual loyalty fostered between them is reinforced by the ambiguous use of pronouns in these lines that draws attention to the reversibility of subject and object, man and wolf. Lady Bisclavret's response, on the other hand, rejects any rapprochement between "human" and "animal" natures, a rapprochement that king and court embrace.

Continuing to work within both human and canine registers leads to the lai's denouement and Bisclavret's restored autonomy. The king's model is followed by the court, which imitates the precedent of mutual trust and loyalty between human and wolf: "N'i ad celui que ne l'ad chier; / Tant esteit franc e deboniere, / Unques ne volt a rien mesfeire" (179–80; There was no one who did not hold him dear; / He was so noble and gentle, / He never wished to do wrong in any way). When the wolf breaks out into uncharacteristic violence, first against the knight who abetted Lady Bisclavret and later against Lady Bisclavret herself, the king and his court become convinced that the knight must have committed some wrong against the wolf (207–10, 241–50). As with the encounter in the forest, conventional humanist approaches read Bisclavret's response as human. Bruckner, for example, asserts that Bisclavret's "rage is not that of the werewolf; it is the understandably human and feudal desire for vengeance, the appropriate punishment of

13. Peggy McCracken identifies a similar mutuality already at work in the first encounter between king and wolf in the forest, arguing that both are described "in terms that suggest neither category is exclusive of the other. For the king, the wolf is like a man because he demonstrates feudal homage. But the scene in which the wolf is taken to appear like a man may also imagine that the king is like an animal. The king's encounter with the wolf comes at the end of a hunt, and the king's pursuit is not so very much different from the wolf's actions. Both are hunting, the king for sport, and the wolf to live. So if the king sees the wolf as like himself, like a man, we might speculate that the wolf could see the king as like himself, like an animal." "Translation and Animals," 215–16.

his wife's betrayal."¹⁴ However, whether anthropomorphized or not, the medieval textual tradition saw dogs seeking similar vengeance. As Crane has shown, there is a longstanding medieval precedent for dogs as arbiters of justice.¹⁵ The most famous story is that of the dog of Antioch, who "arma ultionis assumpsit" ("took up the arms of revenge") against his master's murderer and persuaded the human community of the man's guilt.¹⁶ This popular story with origins in Ambrose's *Hexameron* is taken up by Gerald of Wales and is included in multiple versions of descriptions of dogs in the bestiary tradition, which insists that "saepe etiam necis illatae evidētia canes ad redarguēdos reos indicia prodiderunt, ut muto eorum testimonio pleurumque sit creditum" ("often even dogs produced evidential proofs to contradict circumstances of a murder that was committed, so that most of their silent testimony is believed").¹⁷ In Marie's lai, Bisclavret's canine judgment directs the court to uncover the truth and facilitates Bisclavret's full restoration.

The same anthropocentric readings that privilege the human perspective over the animal often lay the ground for readings of *Bisclavret's* misogyny by transferring the negative attribution of animality from wolf to wife, thus maintaining the hierarchical binary. A number of readers have argued that in contrast to Bisclavret, whom they see manifesting as essentially human no matter his outward appearance, Lady Bisclavret is the true beast of the tale: the "real werewolf," one whose "animal side consumes the human through the agency of a woman, more carnal and closer to animal than even the half-wolf man."¹⁸ Such assessments are directly linked to Lady Bisclavret's noselessness, in that nose-cutting was a form of punishment or revenge frequently linked to sexual misconduct and one that effectively rendered the individual on whom it was inflicted

14. Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts," 262.

15. Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 61–62.

16. *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary: Commentary, Art, Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. Willene B. Clark (London: Boydell, 2013), 147.

17. *A Medieval Book of Beasts*, 146.

18. Freeman, "Dual Natures and Subverted Glosses," 294; Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 145. François Suard goes so far as to claim that not only Lady Bisclavret herself but also her female progeny become werewolves. François Suard, "Bisclavret' et les contes du loup-garou," *Marche Romane* 30 (1980): 274.

unrecognizable as a human.¹⁹ Others argue that the wife's disfigurement is "strikingly similar to the effects of leprosy," a similarity that suggests another link to the crime of adultery, for leprosy was considered to be a marker of "carnality, unbridled lust, even moral depravity."²⁰ Intriguingly, this implies yet another connection between the wife's punishment and her own supposed excessive sexual desire; synthesizing arguments by Katheryn Holten and William Sayers, Leslie Dunton-Downer explains that "the tearing off of the nose makes the wife, as figurative *lupa*, look like a *lepra* and exposes her bestial nature."²¹ The lai's narrator seems to encourage the association of noselessness with sexual transgression by referring to the knight whom she enlists to aid her betrayal as the man "pur ki sun seignur ot trahi" (308; the man for whom she had betrayed her lord), thus positing adultery as her motivation.

Reading such assumptions against the common medieval antifeminist assertion that women were naturally more susceptible to animal appetites, scholars have frequently concluded that, if the facial disfigurement representing the predilection for sexual sin is passed down only through Lady Bisclavret's female descendants, this may seem to suggest that it has been marked as a peculiarly, even essentially, female trait.²² Lady Bisclavret then becomes a second Eve whose sin is transmitted through the generations of her female descendants: "The noseless wife

19. Glyn S. Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 104; Judith Rice Rothschild, *Narrative Technique in the Lais of Marie de France: Themes and Variations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974), 135n115. Patricia Skinner provides an excellent, succinct overview of the medieval context of nose-cutting in "The Gendered Nose and its Lack: 'Medieval' Nose-Cutting and its Modern Manifestations," *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 45–6, 7, doi:10.1353/jowh.2014.0008. For a more detailed discussion, see Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

20. William Sayers, "Bisclavret in Marie de France: A Reply," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (1982): 82; Katheryn Holten, "Metamorphosis and Language in the Lay of Bisclavret," in *In Quest of Marie de France, a Twelfth-Century Poet*, ed. Chantal A. Maréchal (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992): 199.

21. Leslie Dunton-Downer, "Wolf Man," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997): 209.

22. Emma Campbell, "Political Animals: Human/Animal Life in *Bisclavret* and *Yonec*," *Exemplaria* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 101.

condemned to birth noseless daughters replays God's sentence on Eve that she and her female descendants will bring forth their children in sorrow, suffering physically for her sin."²³ The association with Eve implies a generalization of Lady Bisclavret's failings to women as a whole, leading Paul Creamer to decry the "insidious woman-hating universe" he sees Marie creating in her lai and Diane Watt to declare it "profoundly misogynist."²⁴

I see two main problems with this overall line of thinking that a less anthropocentric perspective might address. The first concerns the nature of Lady Bisclavret's crime against her husband. Too many readers have, I think, been distracted by the narrator's own apparent interpretation of adultery as the motive for her betrayal. For all that Valentin Groebner asserts in his brief synopsis of Marie's lai that Bisclavret's "unfaithful wife maliciously bans him to his animal form in order to live with her lover,"²⁵ such an interpretation is contradicted by the narrator's earlier assertion that "Ele ne l'aveit unc amé / Ne de s'amur aseüré" (107–8; she had never loved [the other knight] / or promised him her love) until after she had determined to free herself from her husband. It's worth considering an alternative translation for the line that gives rise to the assumption of adultery as motive: "Pur ki sun seignur ot trahi" (308).²⁶ While "pur ki" here is typically translated as "for whom," it is plausible to translate it as "through whom"—in other words, referring to the knight as the instrument of Lady Bisclavret's betrayal, not the object. That we default to a reading that echoes a medieval antifeminist truism about female perfidy is a point I will return to later.

Nor am I convinced by the supposed inversion of human/animal roles in the lai. For some, Lady Bisclavret's noselessness represents this

23. Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 65. See also Cohen, "Werewolf's Indifference," who deems Lady Bisclavret's heritable noselessness an "infinitely repeating historical sign of the misogyny that has limned this tale" (356).

24. Paul Creamer, "Woman-Hating in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*," *Romanic Review* 93, no. 3 (2002): 259; Diane Watt, *Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 46.

25. Groebner, *Defaced*, 75.

26. For a detailed discussion of Marie's ambiguous diction, see Alison Langdon, "Dites le mei, si ferez bien': Fallen Language and Animal Communication in *Bisclavret*," in *Animal Languages in the Middle Ages: Representations of Interspecies Communication*, ed. Alison Langdon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 154–56.

resemblance literally: having behaved badly, Lady Bisclavret assumes a physical as well as a metaphorical animal identity. Sometimes such readings go far beyond the dehumanizing effect of *dénasement*: Michelle Freeman refers to the “wolf-like” appearance she passes on to her daughters, while for Leslie Scoduto, Lady Bisclavret’s disfigurement is evidence that she has traded places with her husband: “noseless, she now looks like a wolf.”²⁷ I find these assertions somewhat bizarre—how could a noseless human look like a wolf, whose muzzle is so prominent? Such contortions reflect the difficulty of understanding why noselessness is an appropriate fate for Bisclavret’s wife, or why the nose is an apt target for Bisclavret’s canine rage.

To see Lady Bisclavret’s noselessness as emblematic of her adultery is to interpolate the wolf’s vengeance within an exclusively human register. However, attempting to see from the wolf’s perspective yields a somewhat different interpretation of Lady Bisclavret’s punishment. Although medieval people would not have known the physiology of animal cognition and communication, they were aware of the seemingly preternatural ability of dogs to judge correctly emotions and intentions that are invisible to human senses; then as now, canine intelligence was understood to manifest itself in part through their extraordinary powers of olfaction. Gerald of Wales notes the way that dogs depend more on their noses than on their eyes and will use scent to confirm what they see, “as if nature had placed all the powers of infallibility in that feature.”²⁸ Closely following his source in Gaston Phébus’s *Le Livre de chasse*, Edward of Norwich also specifically implies a connection between the dog’s intelligence and sense of smell: “an hounde hath greet mynde and greet smelling.”²⁹ The very features that enabled best use of the power of scent became markers of a dog’s ideal conformation.³⁰

27. Freeman, “Dual Natures,” 298; Scoduto, *Metamorphosis of the Werewolf*, 54.

28. Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1978), 130.

29. Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game, by Edward, Second Duke of York*, ed. William A. Baillie-Groham and Florence Baillie-Groham (London: Ballantyne, Hanson, & Co., 1904), 44 (79). As the Middle English edition is difficult to find, I provide page numbers in parentheses for the 1909 edition as well.

30. For example, Bartholomaeus Anglicus notes that the “gentylnesse and nobilite

It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which canines rely on scent for social communication. Among the most important scents are pheromones, which not only convey information about sexual readiness but a host of other kinds of information as well, including emotional state; a quick sniff can give advance warning of possible aggression.³¹ The nose is thus an important means by which the dog knows who is friend and who is foe. For Dunton-Downer, the wife's punishment is poetic and thus inherently human: "The poetic nature of the act (i.e., its ipseity, that no other act or body part would mean as much or as well as the nose) is the supreme sign of the wolf's humanness and of his possession of a self, a linguistic interiority."³² Poetic, yes—but also supremely canine, for in depriving his wife of her nose, Bisclavret has rendered his wife dependent solely upon sight and sound, those senses most vulnerable to deception by others. In her punishment the figurative nature of the wife's sin, her failure to perceive correctly, is made concrete and literal through deprivation of what could be argued to be the most "animal" of our sense organs—most significant for canines, least significant for humans. In canine terms, Bisclavret's vengeance is complete.

Certain factors also work to undermine the identification of Lady Bisclavret with Eve. For one, though the text does specify that only female descendants inherit her disfiguration, it doesn't state that all of them do so: "plusurs femmes del lignage" (312). As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner points out, the adjective here echoes the beginning of the lai when the narrator explains that in the past, "humes plusurs garval devindrent" (7; many men became werewolves).³³ Many, not all—perhaps even only "some," a perfectly acceptable translation for "plusur" in both cases. The tendency to generalize from Lady Bisclavret's line to all women runs counter to the gap Marie creates in the prologue to the lai, where she offers a categorical description of werewolves' savage

of hounds and of bitches is yknowe by lengþe of face and of þe snowte." *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of De proprietatibus rerum: A Critical Text*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2:1168.

31. Stanley Coren, *How Dogs Think: What the World Looks Like to Them and Why They Act the Way They Do* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 60, 62.

32. Dunton-Downer, "Wolf Man," 209.

33. Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts," 267.

and vicious nature only to distance herself from it in reference to this particular werewolf.³⁴ The narrator invites us to differentiate Bisclavret from the ravenous frenzy associated with wolves by using the Anglo-Norman *garwulf* in her initial negative characterization of werewolves but always using the Breton *bisclavret* in reference to the lai's protagonist:

Garualf, c[eo] est beste salvage:
Tant cum il est en cele rage,
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,
Es granz fore[z] converse e vait.
Cest afere les ore ester;
Del bisclaveret [vus] voil cunter.
(9–14)

The [garualf] is a savage beast:
When he is in that rage,
He devours men, does great harm,
Dwells and roams the great forests.
Now I let this matter be;
I want to tell you about the [bisclavret].

Though Bisclavret admits to living “de preie e de ravine” (66; on prey and plunder) in the woods—behavior that hardly sets him apart from the king and his hunters—with the exception of his attacks on those who wronged him we see no evidence of violence or frenzy in his behavior.³⁵

Still, could Lady Bisclavret be expected to see anything other than a monster before her? Tovi Bibring argues that Lady Bisclavret does not know of her husband's particular nature as a werewolf, imagining only the monstrous, savage beast that is for her the only possible form for a werewolf to take;³⁶ unlike king and court, Lady Bisclavret has never

34. Bruckner, “Of Men and Beasts,” 252.

35. McCracken sees Bisclavret's violence in the forest as more properly a difference of degree than kind (“Translation and Animals,” 214). While this is true, it also equates his hunting of prey with the king and his hunters, collapsing the distinction between animal and human violence.

36. Tovi Bibring, “Sexualité douteuse et bestialité trompeuse dans *Bisclavret* de

known her husband in lupine form. And even with their long association with the docile wolf, even though they had been inclined to presume a reason for the wolf's earlier attacks on his wife's new husband, when the wolf attacks Lady Bisclavret herself the members of the court initially "l'eüssent tut depecié" (238; would have torn him all to pieces), language that echoes the description of the hunters and dogs who nearly destroyed the wolf in the forest a year earlier:

A lui cururent tutejur
E li chien e li veneür,
Tant que pur poi ne l'eurent pris
E tut deciré e maumis.
(141-44)

They chased him all day,
The hounds and the hunters,
So that they all but caught him
And maimed him and tore him to pieces.

However, in both of these encounters the hunters and courtiers are stopped by an individual willing to consider particulars, to assess how what is observed of another individual might subvert what is assumed. In his initial encounter with the wolf, the king establishes a model of perception and good judgment by hesitating to use violence against a creature categorically assumed to be inimical to humans.³⁷ Instead, he carefully considers this particular wolf, weighing it against what he knows about lupine behavior and marking this wolf's deviation from that pattern in favor of another. The king's counselor applies the king's model when he urges similar restraint after Bisclavret's attack:

Ceste beste ad esté od vus;
N'i ad ore celui de nus
Que ne l'eit veü lungement

Marie de France," *French Studies* 63, no. 1 (2009): 2.

37. See Carl Grey Martin, "Bisclavret and the Subject of Torture," *Romanic Review* 104, no. 1/2 (2013): 29.

E pres de li alé sovent.
Unke mes humme ne tucha
Ne felunie ne mustra,
Fors a la dame que ici vei.
(241–47)

This beast has lived among us;
There is not one of us
Who has not observed him for a long time
And been near him often.
He has never touched anyone
Nor shown sign of wickedness,
Against any except the woman I see here.

As Bruckner argues, the wise counselor's reminder of the wolf's gentle behavior is "precisely the kind of observation the wife herself might have made when her husband first revealed his dual nature, but apparently forgot under the pressure of fear, the horror of the flesh."³⁸

How to make sense, then, of heritable noselessness? This bizarre detail leads Ernest Hoepffner to speculate whether Marie wrote the tale to explain a physical flaw that was characteristic of a certain noble family.³⁹ But as with the question of Lady Bisclavret's supposedly wolf-like appearance after her husband's avenging bite, I wonder how literally we should take noselessness. After all, Lady Bisclavret's outward deformity is only the external manifestation of a defect that most readers argue she possessed prior to the physical attack. A clue might lie in Marie's oddly repetitive phrasing of the line: "senz nez sunt nees / E si viveient esnasees" (113–14; they were born without noses / and lived noseless). In her translation of the lai, Judy Shoaf comments that Marie's rhyme is silly,⁴⁰ but silliness seems out of character with an otherwise careful poet. I'm inclined to agree with Bruckner that Marie is engaging in

38. Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts," 264.

39. Ernest Hoepffner, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1971), 148.

40. Judy Shoaf, "Bisclavret," n. 7. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/jshoaf/marie/bisclavret.pdf>, accessed 1 March 2018.

intentional word-play here,⁴¹ calling attention to the question of what it might mean to be born without a nose and live noseless.

Thinking of the nose as an instrument of knowing is the key to understanding its significance in *Bisclavret*. Though humans have evolved to have a greater reliance on sight than on scent, the persistence of the nose as a metaphor for knowing (to sniff out the truth, plain as the nose on one's face) suggests our continuing, implicit recognition of the significance of scent and the insights the nose can provide. This may at least partially account for Gregory the Great's explication in his *Book of Pastoral Rule* of the nose as a symbol of discernment "whereby we elect virtue and reject sin."⁴² Leslie Dunton-Downer makes the tantalizing suggestion that Marie is playing on the Old French idiom "n'avoit point du nez," which means to be unreasonable or to lack good sense.⁴³ Might then the heritability of her disfiguration be understood as her inability to foster accurate perception and good judgment in many of her daughters?

Pace Creamer, Marie's lai offers no categorical condemnation of women or female nature such as we find in *Melion* or *Biclarel*, two of its close analogues.⁴⁴ In Lucas Wood's words, "*Bisclavret* indicts one particular woman for specific actions . . . [but] never asserts that gender is the, or even a, cause of the wife's behavior let alone that all women are nefarious or inherently defective."⁴⁵ The tendency to generalize from Lady Bisclavret's female line to all women runs counter to the disassociation Marie creates in the prologue, where she offers a generalized assessment of werewolves' vicious natures only to distance herself from it in reference to this particular werewolf. Having recognized this, we should be suspicious of the apparent invitation to generalize about women at

41. Bruckner, "Of Men and Beasts," 252.

42. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 45.

43. Dunton-Downer, "Wolf Man," 209.

44. In its prologue, the narrator of *Biclarel* declares that men who know women's hearts well would never imperil themselves by marrying one (7-9), while *Melion* concludes with the protagonist's bitter commentary on female dishonesty (587-90). *Melion and Biclarel: Two Old French Werewolf Lays*, ed. and trans. Amanda Hopkins (Liverpool Online Series, 2005), <http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/cultures-languages-and-area-studies/liverpoolonline/Werewolf.pdf>, accessed 1 March 2018.

45. Wood, "Of Werewolves and Wicked Women," 62.

the end of the lai; “la femme Bisclavret” is no more a stand-in for all women than Bisclavret is for all werewolves.

Bisclavret continually works to encourage empathetic attribution of and inquiry into motives of the other, rather than drawing conclusions based on categorical assumptions. The ambiguous ending of the lai, which as Martin argues “confronts us with our susceptibility to misjudge just at the moment when we appear to have successfully scrutinized simplistic conventions,”⁴⁶ encourages a similar inquiry into Lady Bisclavret’s motives—motives that the text itself leaves inscrutable. In doing so, Marie’s lai might be seen as resisting both anthropocentric and antifeminist assumptions rather than exemplifying them.

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46. Martin, “*Bisclavret* and the Subject of Torture,” 25.