MARIE’S HONORABLE ADULTEROUS WOMEN
AND WORTHY ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN
IN “YONEC” AND “MILUN”

by

Kimberly L. Preuitt

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English and Philosophy
University of Central Missouri

May, 2014
ABSTRACT

by

Kimberly L. Preuitt

Marie de France defends noblewomen in the Middle Ages who commit adultery in two of her *lais*, “Yonec” and “Milun,” when members of society would have executed the women for their infidelity. Marie also places value on the women’s illegitimate sons by giving them power, prestige, and land, which society denied to children born out of wedlock. Research methods include analysis of primary sources, Marie’s *lais*, “Yonec” and “Milun.” Research extends to secondary sources, including literary analyses and criticisms of the *lais* and social/historical background about the Middle Ages. Marie defends the adulterous noblewomen to illustrate that relationships based on love improve the women’s happiness, health, and beauty. Marie shows that God and nature support relationships based on love instead of marriages formed for the sake of securing property or wealth. Marie shows that the illegitimate sons are superior to their peers because they are born from love unions.
MARIE’S HONORABLE ADULTEROUS WOMEN
AND WORTHY ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN
IN “YONEC” AND “MILUN”

by

Kimberly L. Preuitt

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English and Philosophy
University of Central Missouri

May, 2014
MARIE’S HONORABLE ADULTEROUS WOMEN
AND WORTHY ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN
IN “YONEC” AND “MILUN”

by

Kimberly L. Preuitt

May, 2014

APPROVED:

Thesis Chair: Dr. Miriam Fuller

Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Darlene Ciraulo

Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Kathleen Leicht

ACCEPTED:

Chair, Department of English: Dr. Daniel Schierenbeck

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Miriam Fuller for her valuable feedback and encouragement throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank Professor Darlene Ciraulo, Professor Kathleen Leicht, and Professor Daniel Schierenbeck for their helpful guidance.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“YONEC”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“MILUN”</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Marie de France’s *lais*, “Yonec” and “Milun,” address noble women being treated as property for political and financial alliances in the Middle Ages. Marie challenges this widely accepted social practice by examining two women who lose their health and well-being after being trapped in miserable, loveless marriages when their families gave them to their husbands without the women’s consent. Joseph H. Lynch explains that “the choice of a spouse was intended to gain heirs and to regulate the transmission of property from generation to generation” (289). Laurie Finke addresses marrying for property in the Middle Ages, describing some medieval heroines as “courtly women in literary texts where female sexuality circulates as a kind of symbolic capital – reconfiguring economic transactions among feudal men in terms of generosity and gift giving” (qtd in E. Jane Burns 45). To regain happiness and the will to live, these heroines take a lover outside of marriage. As a result, love transforms them internally and externally. Not only do their adulterous affairs improve the women’s emotional and physical state, their infidelity also allows them to exercise power through refined love. In refined love, women gained control through their secret relationship with a
suitor. The man must earn his lady’s trust and respect by serving and obeying her without question, resulting in the reversal of conventional gender roles. Only after he proves his loyalty and discretion to his lady will she grant him her affection. These intimate relationships were based on love and mutual attraction instead of formal legalities concerning wealth and property; refined love relationships served as a rebellion against established social and religious morals.

Because refined love occurred outside of marriage, the relationship transformed sex into pleasure for women instead of a marital obligation. Women risked severe punishment if they were caught having sex outside of marriage. John F. Benton and Thomas N. Bisson describe medieval laws dictating that “violators of marriage should be sewed in a leather sack and burned alive,” or adulterers should suffer some other “penalty of death” (105). Despite these threats, women’s willingness to risk their lives in relationships outside of marriage illustrates the extent of their discontent from being trapped in unhappy, unfulfilling marriages. Albrecht Classen argues that Marie believes “happiness in marriage would be of great importance … Yet, adultery is not necessarily of evil in Marie’s view, as long as the lovers can be discreet and preserve the secrecy of their affair” (262). Marie de France shows that medieval society should condone infidelity when a woman is forced into marriage against her will and becomes
an object of abuse. The women in “Yonec” and “Milun” are not condemned for their decision to commit adultery, but rather, they are justified.

Marie also emphasizes that the illegitimate children from the love affairs are worthy and grow up to be important contributors to a society that, by legal and social standards, would have rejected them. Laura Wertheimer explains that “parentage was everything . . . only legitimate birth entitled one to the social position or property of one’s parents. Indeed, hereditary transmission of status from parent to child through legitimate birth was . . . firmly entrenched in medieval society” (382). Marie creates a society in her lais that condones extramarital affairs in extenuating circumstances through people’s willingness to protect the discretion of the love affairs and their willingness to help the adulterous women and their illegitimate children.
CHAPTER 2
“YONEC”

In “Yonec,” Marie shows the physical colonization of the conqueror of Caerwent, a city in Wales, that parallels his colonization of his wife. Even though he is a foreigner, the citizens of Caerwent must accept the husband’s authority as “lord of the land” (14) despite their disapproval. The husband’s colonization of Caerwent parallels King Henry II’s invasion of Wales. In 1157, King Henry II “tried a diplomatic solution” to colonize Wales by offering castles to Rhys (Hosler 54). After Rhys’ refusal, King Henry II and one third of his knights marched into his territory anyway; although there was no fighting, the king took hostages to ensure his control over Wales (Hosler 54). After colonizing Caerwent, the man in “Yonec” takes “a wife in order to have children, / who would come after him and be his heirs” (19-20). Marie illustrates the old, wealthy man colonizing the young, beautiful girl as he would property. The girl marries him only because her family gives her to him. The husband takes the diplomatic approach (like King Henry II) by negotiating for the lady with the family. The lady blames her family for giving her to the man when she cries, “A curse on my family / … / who gave me to this jealous man / who married me to his body’” (81, 83-84). Jennifer Willging points
out that the wife “makes it clear that she has entered into this marriage against her will, and that it is strictly a union of bodies, not of minds or hearts” (125).

Marie illustrates how the absence of love in marriage affects the wife in “Yonec.” The husband controls his wife by “lock[ing] her inside his tower / in a great paved chamber” (27-28) and ordering his widowed sister to “guard her even more closely” (32). Just as he conquers and controls the land, he maintains strict control over his newest property, his wife, even though she has done nothing to justify her husband’s jealous, protective control over her. Similar to when King Henry II invades Wales by taking hostages, the husband, ruler of Caerwent, imprisons his wife. He further controls her by forbidding her to speak with anyone. She “never left that tower, / neither for family nor for friends” (39-40), nor can she speak to other women he keeps locked in a different chamber, “unless the old woman gave her permission” (36). Under such strict control, the lady becomes lonely and unhappy. Marie not only illustrates the tragedy of an old man robbing a young woman of her freedom, but she also shows the tragedy of society accepting families treating women as property by giving the woman to the man. The lai states that the lady “came from a good family” (22), which reveals that her imprisonment in an unwanted marriage was a common occurrence. Lynch explains that noblewomen were most often victims of loveless marriages for the sake of transmitting property: “the marriages of the poor could be made with less formality
and for love precisely because they had no property to transmit and no one cared about their heirs” (292). Her husband even restricts her relationship with God. The lady complains that she “‘can’t even go to church / or hear God’s service’” (75-76). Her marriage to an impious man puts her soul at risk of going to hell. She cannot nourish her spirituality by associating with other believers. She cannot go to confession to cleanse herself from sin.

By illustrating the lady’s reaction to her abuse, Marie reveals through “Yonec” that women are individuals, not property. Marie shows the internal and external consequences of the abuse on the lady. Because of her isolation and unhappiness, the lady “lived in great sorrow, / with tears and sighs and weeping” (45-46). She also loses her will to live: “She would have preferred / death to take her quickly” (49-50). Benton and Bisson explain that “the ecclesiastical prohibition of divorce made the termination of an unfortunate marriage difficult” (101). Death would have been her only hope of escape from her marriage.

Marie also illustrates the external damage to the old man’s wife. His wife “lost her beauty, / as one does who cares nothing for it” (47-48). Denise Despres explains that the old man does not understand that “his wife’s beauty is a projection of a spiritual state, rather than a physical condition” (29). Her loss of beauty results from her husband’s restricting her freedom to practice her spirituality. Also, after seven years of
marriage, the lady never produces children. At this point it is unclear whether it is the husband’s or the wife’s physical failure. However, their inability to reproduce shows the unnaturalness of the relationship – an elderly man marrying a very young woman, and the even more unnatural, forced marriage that secures property rather than a union resulting in love, respect, and happiness.

Through illustrating the husband’s abuse and his wife’s resulting misery, Marie justifies the wife’s desire to take a lover outside of marriage. According to June Hall McCash, Marie stresses that

    [m]arriage bonds were created for reasons of property, not love, and the woman was usually the pawn. Taking these conditions into consideration, Marie allowed her lovers their brief moments of happiness on earth. She does not condemn them, nor does she seem to see them, merely because of their extra-marital love, as sinful or unnatural. (388)

Not only is his wife justified, her extramarital relationship is sanctified. When the lady asks God for a noble lover that is “handsome, courtly, brave, and valiant” (98), God grants her wish immediately. As soon as the lady finished her prayer, a hawk flew into her chamber and it “became a handsome and noble knight” (115). Muldumarec’s arrival is God’s immediate response to the wife’s prayer for a lover. Judith Rice Rothschild explains that “Marie’s morality is not limited to traditional Christian views;
but rather, it pertains to human needs and to the ‘essential correctness of human relationships, regardless of laws and moral commandments’” (19). Although the marriage follows legal and social standards, it is destructive to the wife’s well-being, whereas the lady’s love relationship with Muldumarec restores her health.

Through sending (or allowing) Muldumarec to come to the lady after she prays for a lover, Marie shows that God approves of the wife taking a lover outside of marriage. God sends the lady a man that has all the qualities that her husband does not: Muldumarec is attractive; close to her age; polite; respectful; and Christian. Despite Muldumarec’s superiority to her husband, however, the lady agrees to take him as her lover only if Muldumarec “believed in God, / and if their love was really possible” (139-40). To satisfy the lady’s suspicions, Muldumarec volunteers to take communion to prove that he is pious. He tells the lady, “‘I shall take on your appearance / to receive the body of our lord God, / and I’ll recite my whole credo for you’” (161-63). By his willingness to relieve her fear, Muldumarec shows sensitivity to her needs and emotions. More importantly, Muldumarec’s supernatural ability to shape shift from a hawk into a man and his ability to transform into the appearance of his lady symbolizes the Trinity. Muldumarec’s symbolic Trinity further illustrates his worthiness of his lady’s love and serves to deepen the contrast between Muldumarec’s spirituality and the husband’s evil. Willging points out that “[I]t is the knight’s catechism-like recitation
of his belief in God, and his oath that despite his rather sinister arrival he comes from
the side of the divine rather than the diabolical, that convince the lady he is capable of
loving her in a spiritual as well as a sexual manner” (127). Only after Muldumarec
proves his dedication to God and his lady does she accept his love.

Through her new love affair with Muldumarec, the lady gains power over her
choices and body that she never possessed in her legal marriage. Muldumarec validates
her feelings; he shows respect by treating her as a person instead of property.
Muldumarec also pledges to love only his lady, in contrast to her husband keeping
women for his pleasure in another part of the castle. Muldumarec declares, “’Never
have I loved any woman but you / nor shall I ever love another’” (129-30). Benton and
Bisson explain that “it was considered altogether unusual for a husband to remain
faithful to his wife” in the Middle Ages (106). Even though Muldumarec is not the
lady’s legal husband, he pledges and keeps his faithfulness to her. Muldumarec shows
his loyalty by promising to come to her whenever she asks for him. He tells his lady,
“’whenever you please, / I will be here within the hour’” (199-200). His lady holds the
power to see him when she wants instead of having to accept periodic visits from her
husband. Even when Muldumarec has been fatally wounded, upon seeing that his lady
is frightened and grieving, he “embrace[s] her” (397) and “comfort[s] her gently” (400).
Muldumarec loves his lady and establishes and maintains a trusting connection with her from beginning to end.

In contrast to her husband, who married her for her beauty and her body to reproduce, Muldumarec respects his lady’s body; he does not force himself on her. When Muldumarec waits for the priest to arrive so that he can receive communion, he “lay beside her on the bed / but he didn’t try to touch her, / to embrace her or to kiss her” (166-68). Muldumarec shows respect for the lady’s body, which is a drastic change from her husband forcing her to have sex. The lady complains of her sexual obligation to her husband when she says, “‘It’s a rough rope that I pull and draw’” (85). Georges Duby explains that “women were not always consenting parties: there was a good deal of rape in noble houses” (220), which illustrates the probability that the Welsh lady was forced to have sex with her husband. Willging explains that Muldumarec’s “profession of faith, given before both the literal and figurative ‘communion’ of the lovers . . . distinguish[es] their union from common adulterous affairs and make[s] it truly ‘blameless’” (127). Even though their union is not recognized legally, spiritually, they have had a wedding before consummating their symbolic marriage. Furthermore, the process of their marriage does not follow traditional medieval practices. Muldumarec asks for his lady’s consent instead of negotiating with her family and demanding her compliance. She grants him permission to love her after he proves his faith in God
through taking communion. Marie emphasizes the woman’s consent to her symbolic marriage to Muldumarec again by stating that “[s]he gently begged him / to come back often” (197-98). The lady’s symbolic union to Muldumarec satisfies religious practices while it simultaneously defies social practices.

Emphasizing the importance of women’s consent in marriage, Marie shows a depth to the lady’s relationship with Muldumarec that she did not have in her legal marriage. The lady and her hawk-lover share an authentic, mutual love for one another that is joyful and fulfilling. The lady also gains a partner with whom she can pray and exercise faith in God in contrast to her husband, whom she believes that in place of being “baptized . . . was plunged instead in the river of hell” (87-88). Additionally, Muldumarec has red blood. He sheds much of it (for his lady’s sake), signifying that he is healthy and full of life, in contrast to her husband, who, as the lai implies, is a vampire whose “sinews . . . [and] veins are hard, / filled with living blood” (89-90), blood which was not his own. The lady’s affair with Muldumarec improves her health emotionally and physically, which shows that nature and love are connected. Love and happiness are natural components to one’s well-being. For example, when Muldumarec comes to his lady, they don’t just have sex. They talk and build an emotionally intimate relationship. They “laughed and played / and [spoke] intimately”
(193-94). Their relationship contrasts with her lonely imprisonment, interrupted only by her husband’s visits for sex.

As the lady spends time with Muldumarec, her emotional state undergoes a drastic change. She was “in great joy. / In the morning she rose restored; / she was happy all week” (212-214). Since she is in a relationship in which she feels valued, Muldumarec’s lady also perceives her own self-worth because “[h]er body had now become precious to her” (215). The lady also undergoes a dramatic physical transformation. She now “dresse[s] with care” (234) and “completely recover[s] her beauty” (216). Marie explains that “[b]ecause of the great joy she felt, / because she could see her love so often, / her whole appearance changed” (225-27). Marie illustrates the connection between love, happiness, and healthy well-being. The once-beautiful lady regains her beauty when she is in a loving relationship. Muldumarec is also able to impregnate his lady, proving that her husband was infertile. Her pregnancy also reveals that her marriage was unhealthy and unnatural because of the husband’s extreme age in contrast to his wife’s youth and because of his wickedness in contrast to her piety. The lady’s pregnancy shows that God approves of her love union with Muldumarec because God allows Muldumarec, not her husband, to impregnate her. Wertheimer explains that “Christian marriage doctrine . . . rejected as immoral any
sexual activity outside of marriage” (386). However, Marie challenges noble society to reconsider the purpose of marriage; she encourages society to condone adultery in extreme circumstances by showing that God approves of the lady’s adultery with Muldumarec.

Marie further justifies the lady’s relationship with Muldumarec by contrasting her husband’s evil and selfishness with Muldumarec’s goodness and self-sacrifice. When her husband detects a positive change in his wife’s demeanor, he is troubled that she is joyful. He does not care about his wife’s well-being. When her husband notices her restored beauty and happiness, he commands his sister to watch his wife and “‘find out / what it is, and where it comes from, / that gives her such great joy’” (250-52). When her husband discovers her relationship with Muldumarec, he decides to murder Muldumarec simply because his wife’s joy is intolerable. His sister revealed to him “the truth about the knight / . . . the lord was troubled by it. . . . He had great spikes of iron forged, / their tips sharpened. . . . he set them in the window . . . through which the knight passed / when he visited the lady” (282-83, 286-87, 291, 293-94). Muldumarec’s wound is severe; he “stain[s] the bedclothes with blood” (316). In contrast to the evil husband, Muldumarec prioritizes his lady’s safety above his own needs when he is fatally wounded. Even though he is lying on her bed dying, he shows concern only for her well-being.
Muldumarec is a source of light, or goodness and holiness, whereas her husband is associated with darkness and evil. When the lady finds Muldumarec bleeding and dying on his own bed, “the candles and the chandeliers, / … were lit night and day” (390-91). However, when her husband comes to sleep with her in her tower, “no chamberlain or porter / dared enter that room, / not even to carry a candle before the lord” (42-44). Muldumarec provides safety and protection, whereas her husband offers destruction and death. Muldumarec’s lady is afraid to return to her husband. She tells Muldumarec, “I would rather die with you / than suffer with my lord. / If I go back to him he’ll kill me’” (411-413), but Muldumarec provides for her by giving her a magic ring and his sword. When the lady returned to her country, her lord “never accused her of that deed, / never insulted or abused her” (455-56) because of the ring Muldumarec gave her for protection.

The ring and sword also symbolize their marriage. The lady accepts her symbolic union to Muldumarec, using the symbols as a source of comfort. Muldumarec’s ring – a symbol of eternity – provides for his lady’s safety, as well as the sword. The ring, also symbolic of the female genitalia, and the sword, a phallic symbol, symbolize their physical consummation. After Muldumarec dies, his lady “left carrying the ring / and the sword – they comforted her” (441-42). Through the lady’s symbolic
marriage to Muldumarec, Marie shows that marriage itself is not the problem, but that society must re-examine and change its motive behind noble marriage.

The lady is also blessed with a living reminder of her union with Muldumarec – a son. McCash points out that “nature seems to harmonize with true love, to support it, and to give the lovers comfort and even help at their time of grief and separation” (388). More specifically, Despres clarifies that “[t]he child she bears is a constant reaffirmation of a better love than she experienced in her first revelation, for he signifies a love that has been tested and in which sacrifices have been exchanged” (36). Marie punishes the lady’s husband for marrying her for reproductive purposes only. In fact, his intent backfired because although she was married to the old man, she produced a son with a lover. Her son would then inherit her husband’s land, thus forever extinguishing her husband’s name and ownership of the property after his death because he had no biological heirs.

Despite medieval society’s stigma placed on children born out of wedlock, the lady’s illegitimate child with Muldumarec is noble and worthy. Normally an illegitimate child would lose most privileges awarded to the oldest male heir – he would not inherit land, wealth, social status, or influence in society. However, Marie emphasizes Yonec’s virtues despite his illegitimacy. Yonec is superior to other young men his age: “In all the kingdom you couldn’t find / one so handsome, brave, or strong,
so generous, so munificent” (460-62). Yonec possesses knightly courage. When his mother reveals the truth of his father’s betrayal and dies of sorrow, Yonec immediately beheads his step-father, who, up to this point, Yonec has believed to be his real father. Emma Campbell explains that,

Yonec’s slaying of his stepfather is justified by the presentation of the lord’s treachery as a crime against the lineage Yonec now represents … the execution of the stepfather grounds Yonec’s newly discovered sovereignty in a way that is both anticipated and endorsed by the narrative, establishing Yonec as Muldumarec’s son and heir as well as his avenger. (105)

Yonec honors and defends his mother at a moment’s notice. Susan M. Johnson adds that Muldumarec’s burial site has “become an abbey housing a religious order. Thus, the last scene is played out in a distinctly Christian environment” (170). Marie uses Yonec, an illegitimate child, to defend Christianity from evil through slaying his father’s vampiric murderer. Marie illustrates that a young man from whom society would withhold claims to wealth and property selflessly delivers his community from the evil conqueror of Caerwent. Despite his illegitimacy, Yonec is a spiritual and local hero.

Marie further emphasizes Yonec’s worth by revealing his discernment and compassion. Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr. explains that even though “the fruit of their love
does not share in this suffering . . . [Yonec] avenges the evil deed of the husband, justifies the love of his parents, and then succeeds his father as king” (55). After he hears the story of his parents, Yonec honors his mother’s relationship based on love instead of her legal, socially accepted marriage to Yonec’s step-father. He does not condemn his mother for her infidelity to his step-father; instead, he shows compassion to his mother for losing her lover to a brutal murder. R. W. Hanning points out that “Yonec” “celebrat[es] the ultimate triumph of love over jealousy and tyranny, a triumph possible because of love’s generative power – the next generation grows up to redeem its predecessor” (98).

Marie illustrates Yonec’s worth by having him become the king of Muldumarec’s land while also retaining ownership of his step-father’s land. Marie also shows that Muldumarec’s people respect Yonec, despite their knowledge of his illegitimacy. The townspeople loved his father, and they respected and obeyed his father’s command to wait for his son to become king. The townspeople explain that after Muldumarec was killed, “‘we have had no lord, / but have waited many days, / just as he told and commanded us, / for the son the lady bore him’” (521-524). They do not question Yonec’s abilities to protect and govern them. He has already proven himself through his bravery and his loyalty to his real father.
The citizens of Muldumarec’s kingdom not only justify the lady’s adultery with Muldumarec, they also show respect to her. Despite his knowledge that his mother conceived him out of wedlock, Yonec believes his mother’s story and defends her without question or hesitation. Also, when she dies, Muldumarec’s people honor her. There is no evidence that Muldumarec commanded them to care for her. In fact, fearing that his people will blame her for his death, Muldumarec urges his lady to leave him:

“’[G]o away! Leave this place . . . / there will be great sorrow here, / and if you are found / you will be hurt’” (402, 404-406). However, their honoring her shows how, in their perception, she was not to blame for his death and that she was venerable despite her adultery. The people’s respect for Yonec’s mother also reflects their sympathy for her loss of Muldumarec. Through their compassion, his people show they believe relationships based on love are important, and they understand that Muldumarec’s lady suffered immensely from Muldumarec’s murder. Despres explains that “[t]he lady’s experience . . . gives meaning to her suffering, thereby providing her with an identity that is no longer that of the passive victim, but one who willingly suffers in the service of love” (36). Even though the lady suffers after Muldumarec’s death, she is no longer her husband’s helpless victim. The happiness and fulfillment she derived from her relationship with Muldumarec transforms her into a partner who intentionally suffers for her lost love. Mickel points out that “In ‘Yonec’ it is the offspring of the
lovers who finally justifies the love of his parents, and flourishes as the meaningful result of their union. Similarly, in ‘Milun,’ the joy of the parents and their meaningful union are found only in the fruition of their love. All their love and joy are in the child, who justifies their love” (58).
Both “Yonec” and “Milun” feature women trapped in unwanted, forced marriages. Both extra-marital relationships greatly improve the ladies’ happiness, fulfillment, and physical well-being. Both *lais* feature a messenger bird, showing the importance of communication between partners – Muldumarec in the form of a hawk, and Milun sending letters to his lady hidden in a swan. The birds link the love affairs to nature. Birds fly, symbolizing freedom, and birds also choose their own mates; which represents how choosing partners in marriage is natural. Both birds also illustrate a love that is constrained by society. Muldumarec’s lady is so strictly guarded in a tower that Muldumarec becomes wounded when he visits her. Milun and his lady must starve the swan before sending it with a message to ensure the swan flies to the other location. Both relationships produce an illegitimate son – both sons prove their worth through brave and knightly deeds that contribute greatly to society. Marie reveals through her *lais* that healthy marriages are based on love and respect, not wealth or property. Marie illustrates the importance of love through the noble couples risking their lives for their lovers while simultaneously concealing their love affairs from society.
Similar to Muldumarec’s lady, the lady in “Milun” also initiates a relationship of her own. However, while Muldumarec serves his lady by rescuing her from an abusive relationship, Milun serves his lady through giving her physical pleasure and obedience. Like Muldumarec, Milun shows that he is courtly and worthy of his lady’s love. For example, when the lady sends a messenger to offer her love to Milun, Milun is friendly and generous to his lady’s messenger. Milun “gave rich gifts to the messenger, / promising him his friendship” (34-35). Also, Milun’s response to his lady is admirable. Right away he pledges his dedication by sending her a ring and promising his loyalty to her. Milun “willingly granted her his love, / and said he would never leave her” (31-32). Milun’s service and loyalty to his lady show his willingness to participate in refined love. Burns explains that “courtly love … offers models for love relations that disrupt the binary and exclusive categories of male and female and masculine and feminine” (48). With his military experience, Milun is accustomed to giving commands; however, he is willing to receive and obey commands from his lady. In their love affair, his lady is proactive, while Milun is reactive. Milun tells his lady’s messenger that “‘whenever she wants, she can send you for me / and I’ll go with you’” (41-42). Additionally, when Milun’s lady becomes pregnant, Milun reassures her that he will obey her: “he would do / whatever she counseled” (65-66). Milun places the decision-
making power into his lady’s hands. By giving her power over such an important
decision, Milun proves that he is truly in her service; he submits to her will.

Although she loves Milun, his lady laments her pregnancy and fails to see their
child as a blessing, which reveals her desire to maintain her independence and power.
His lady complains that she “lost her honor and her good name / when she got herself
into this situation” (58-59). The lady’s decision to have a secret lover is part of her
autonomy; she rejects having her body and her will controlled by a child. Marie
challenges medieval society, questioning why a woman should marry her lover just
because she is pregnant, and she illustrates her point with Milun’s lady’s decision not to
marry. Marrying Milun to legitimize the baby would end his lady’s independence and
autonomy simply by having a husband to obey and a child to care for. From the
beginning of their relationship, Milun’s lady shows her desire to maintain her
independence, liberty, and youth. When Milun gives her a ring (through her
messenger) as a token of his love and loyalty, she does not respond to it. She only
responds to the love Milun was offering. Her messenger “gave her the ring . . . / The
girl was delighted / at the love she was being offered” (45, 47-48). Milun’s lady avoids
society’s pressure to marry through her desire to meet with Milun away from
domestication. When Milun visits her, they make love “[o]utside her room, in a grove”
(49). The outdoor love-making scene links the lady’s desire for love to nature and
shows her rejecting society’s constraints by avoiding civilization (sex inside the castle).

Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman argue that “Milun is not seen as an eligible match for the woman he loves, most likely because … he does not hold any land of his own” (482). However, Milun was “well beloved / and honored by many princes” (19-20); he was such a strong knight that “he couldn’t find a single opponent / who could knock him off his horse” (11-12), resulting in his fame in many countries (15-17). Although the *lai* does not mention whether Milun possesses land, he is certainly an eligible match for his lady. As a result of Milun’s many victories in battle, princes honored him by awarding him with riches for his service, such as money, armor, and other items of value. With his acquired wealth, Milun would be able to purchase land, or he would have enough money to be eligible to marry an heiress. Despite his eligibility, neither Milun nor his lady shows interest in marrying. After learning about his lady’s pregnancy, Milun did not offer to marry her, nor did she express any desire to marry him.

Despite her desire for youth and independence, however, the lady does take some responsibility for her baby by giving him to her sister, who will cherish him. She sends a letter to her sister with the baby explaining that the child “belongs to her sister, / who has endured great grief because of him” (73-74). Milun’s lady suffers *before* the baby is born: she fears losing her autonomy, youth, and her shapely figure. She also
fears that if anyone discovers her pregnancy, she will be “grievously punished: / tortured by the sword / or sold into slavery in another land” (60-62). The lady fears being tortured by the sword – a phallic symbol – symbolizing her unconscious fear of marriage.

The lady’s fear of becoming a slave in another land symbolizes her fear of beginning a new life as a mother and wife, which would end her youth. Both roles require her to function as a servant, demanding obedience; she would certainly lose her power. Sandy Bardsley argues that “[n]oblewomen . . . might have seen little of their children on a day-to-day basis, and their involvement in their children’s lives might take the form of oversight rather than direct care” (108). While not having to tend to all her child’s needs, Milun’s lady would have a lifelong obligation of loving and nurturing a child she did not want. Having to breastfeed her baby would take a toll on her body, further changing her physique to be less youthful and attractive. Bardsley explains that in the Middle Ages, “not even the rich could avoid the pain of childbirth” and describes childbirth as a “dangerous experience” (111), which illustrate the physical consequences of her sexual union with Milun. Marie refers to marriage symbolically through referencing the “ancient customs / observed in those days” (63-64). Marie is implying that inflexible marriage customs are a burden to young women. Marie challenges the
legal institution of marriage: women’s freedom to marry should not be dictated by their reproductive functions.

Milun’s lady’s chooses independence and freedom over the responsibility of marriage and motherhood through her decision to give her (Milun’s) ring to her baby. Her son can trace the ring back to Milun, since his maternal aunt can help him locate his mother more easily. Milun’s lady gives away the baby and ring, both symbolic of marriage. Also, the letter she sends with her son tells the “unfortunate story of his mother” (80), and where he can find his father, but not where he can find his mother, which shows the finality of her decision. Evidence of the lady’s decision against forming a family is her old nurse giving the son to Milun (105-106). Milun did not see his lady when he came for his son; he and his lady experienced parenthood separately as individuals instead of together as a couple. The lady gives Milun no opportunity to envision the three of them together as a family.

Marie uses the lady’s predicament to show how, in some circumstances, women should not have to marry so young. Neither Milun nor his lady is ready to fulfill the responsibility of caring for a child. Duby explains that marriage was a “rite of passage” that required a man to “turn his back on adventure, become mature, and settle down” (225). However, Milun is not ready to relinquish his tourneying. After hearing about “the knight without equal” (342) who, unbeknownst to Milun, is his son, Milun, who
is now at least in his forties, decides to “joust with this knight, / in order to do some harm to him and his reputation” (353-54). Paul B. Newman adds that “Marriage was one of the most common actions which led to public acceptance of a person, male or female, as an adult. . . . Husbands and wives were usually free of most, if not all, of the controls of their respective parents and were responsible for their own actions in the eyes of the law” (246-47). Milun and his lady show that they need years to mature before they are ready to handle the commitment of marriage and family.

Despite her efforts to evade marriage, the lady must confront her fear of marriage again. Her father gives her to a rich man without her consent – just like the family of Muldumarec’s lady, who gives her to a foreign rich man. In her marriage, she fears that her husband will discover that she has already had a child – similar to the mother in “Yonec.” However, Milun is not there to protect her. Marie explains that the lady is “especially worried about being blamed / for having had a child already” (132-33). When Milun’s lady learns that she will lose her freedom in a marriage she does not want, she declares, “‘Now I’d rather die than live, / but I’m not even free to do that’” (143-44). Milun’s lady would rather die than marry a man she does not love. Similarly, Muldumarec’s lady also wanted to die rather than face entrapment in her miserable marriage, and after her husband found out about her infidelity, she wanted to die rather
than have to confront her husband. Marie illustrates that marriages based only on wealth and property instill fear and desperation in women.

Even though her husband is not as abusive as the husband in “Yonec,” Milun’s lady loses her autonomy in her marriage. For example, she does not have access to ink and parchment; she does not have the freedom to write a letter to Milun or anyone else (169). She does not have the freedom to openly write letters. Also, her husband keeps her strictly guarded when he is away from the castle. In an attempt to communicate with his lady, Milun hides a letter to her in his swan’s feathers and sends his squire to deliver the bird. When Milun’s squire approaches the lady’s castle to give her Milun’s swan, the porter tells the squire that “‘no one can speak to her’” (192). However, the porter arranges for the squire to meet with the lady secretly. Newman describes the roles of husbands and wives in medieval marriage: “[A] wife was to be subordinate to her husband. He was her lord and master. She was to obey him and be meek and humble. She was to accept his correction of her behavior even if this meant being struck” (274). The lady’s power drastically decreased when she had to enter an unwanted marriage.

Now that Milun’s lady is controlled and restricted in her marriage, similar to property, the unnatural qualities about her marriage become evident, which are similar to those in “Yonec.” Milun’s lady does not produce children in her legal marriage. She
also does not love or obey her husband. She and Milun “met together several times” (287-90), which implies her adultery. Also, she is excited about her husband’s death – it is her release, her freedom regained. Upon her husband’s death, the lady sends a messenger to Milun, telling him that “he should come to her without delay: / her husband was dead – now was the time to make haste!” (517-18). She becomes an active member of society through her love for Milun – secretly through the messenger-swan at first, and then openly after her husband’s death. She is “delighted” (525) to reconnect with her son, and she marries Milun. The lady enters a marriage with Milun based on love, and together they live “[i]n great happiness and well-being” (531). Marie depicts women as individuals who desire social interaction and love, but on their own terms.

During her years of marriage, Milun’s lady has time to mature, which contributes to the maturing of her relationship with Milun. She shows that she still rejects motherhood by her unwillingness to take responsibility for the swan at first. When the messenger brought her the swan, she “called one of her valets / and said to him, / ‘Make it your business / to take good care of my swan’” (209-211). However, by ultimately accepting responsibility for the swan, she is able to re-establish a connection with Milun. The messenger had to appeal to her self-importance by telling her that “‘No one but you should have him; / this is indeed a royal present’ . . . He placed the bird in her hands” (214-15, 217). Her affection for the swan (petting it) and acceptance
of responsibility leads to reconnecting with Milun. However, after their reunion, more time is spent on communicating through hiding letters in the swan than on having sex. Their focus on communication indicates a major change in their relationship. The couple changes from having sex frequently and focusing only on sex, to expressing their love for each other through written communication, and having sex only a few times in twenty years (287). Marie emphasizes the importance of written and verbal communication over sex in her lai, “Chevrefoil.” Tristan, exiled from his country for loving the Queen, reconnects with her by carving a message in a tree he knows the queen will see. Upon seeing his message, the Queen searches for Tristan, alone, in the woods. When they meet, Tristan “spoke to her as much as he desired, / she told him whatever she liked” (95-96). Even though much time passes before they can reunite, Tristan and the Queen speak to one another freely in the woods instead of rushing to have sex, honoring communication between lovers. McCash explains that Milun’s swan “consoles and provides unity through communication to the separated lovers” (391). In other words, the swan that the lady first perceived as an inconvenient obligation, like a child, now brings comfort. Also, the lady seals the first letter she sends to Milun with a ring, indicating that she is more accepting of a public union with him.
After re-establishing communication, the lady regains power through her continued relationship with Milun. Nora Cottille-Foley points out that “Marie’s female characters are capable of changing positions in the plot and, by doing so, they upset traditional power relationships” (154). Milun tells his lady in his letter that she has the power to kill or cure him with her love, placing his fate and the power of the decision to reunite in her hands. The lady reverses power roles by waiting a month to reply to Milun when she first receives the swan, even though he asks her to respond in three days. Her delayed response builds Milun’s anticipation to hear from her. Despite her delay, the lady admits her love for Milun more willingly. She confesses that she “couldn’t have any pleasure without him” (275). Further evidence of the lady’s power in her relationship with Milun is his asking for her permission to look for their son. She thanks Milun for wanting to “find their son” (370). Marie’s use of the possessive plural “their” indicates that Milun’s lady is more willing to publicly acknowledge her union with Milun because “their” son serves as the link between their union. His lady’s permission to find their son shows her growing acceptance of having a public relationship with Milun, in contrast to her much earlier decision to send their son away immediately after his birth. The lady tells Milun that she “wouldn’t interfere with his plans” (372), though she does not express further interest in Milun’s mission. Although Milun’s lady does not embrace motherhood, she no longer rejects it.
Similar to Yonec, Milun’s illegitimate son, who has come of age, demonstrates worthiness. He has grown into a “fine young man” (295). Milun’s son learns about his parents, was “delighted with what he had learned” (306), and feels that he must measure up to his father’s chivalric virtues. Marie shows that even though Milun’s son is born out of wedlock, he values his parents despite their adultery. Milun’s son is worthy because not only was his father a “good knight” (299), he was born from a love union. Mickel explains that “When the sister tells the young man about his father, she stresses his worth as a person. Far from ashamed at the irregular nature of his birth, the young knight is pleased to have such worthy parents” (57). Immediately after learning of his birth, Milun’s son leaves to joust and earn fame and honor just like his father. Milun’s son becomes an excellent fighter; people everywhere referred to him as “‘the knight without equal’” (342). He is also generous to poor knights.

In fact, it is the son’s empathy that establishes his reconnection with his father and re-establishes his identity. In a joust with Milun (his identity unbeknownst at the time), the son knocks him off his horse. When his son sees Milun’s white hair, he is moved with compassion for the older man and brings his horse back to him. Milun’s son tells him, “‘My lord, remount; / I’m saddened / that I should have so humiliated / a man of your age’” (427-30). Through his respect for Milun’s older age, Milun identifies
his son’s ring (which used to belong to Milun). The son’s knightliness and worthiness lead him to his reunion with his father.

After a happy reunion, Milun’s son feels compelled to reunite his parents for the sake of their love. In fact, the son is willing to kill a man he does not know (his step-father), who has imprisoned his wife (Milun’s lady), for the sake of defending his parents’ love. The son’s impulse to kill his step-father is similar to Yonec’s because in both lais their step-father stands in the way of a relationship formed from mutual love. Fortunately, Milun’s son does not have to commit murder since his step-father dies.

Marie is careful to point out that Milun’s son reunites his mother and father in marriage “[w]ithout consulting any relatives, / with no advice from anyone else” (527-28).

Milun’s marriage to his lady is based on their love for one another; there is no negotiation of land or wealth. It is only after Milun and his lady are married and reunited with their son that they live “[i]n great happiness and well-being” (531).

McCash interprets that “[w]hile Marie does not condemn extra-marital love that is true . . . she nevertheless sees marriage to be the rational consequence of mutual love” (393). Despite Milun’s quest for fame and his lady’s striving to maintain her independence, neither individual is completely happy in the lai until the couple is united in a public, loving relationship.
Marie justifies adultery in “Yonec” and “Milun.” In both love affairs, both partners experience happiness, health, and joy, showing the naturalness and healthiness of love. Both unions produce a son. In both relationships, women exercise power over their bodies, and their lovers treat them as individuals instead of property. The women are in a partnership where they can make decisions. The children produced in these healthy, loving unions believe their mothers are worthy, despite their knowledge of their mothers’ adultery.

Marie shows that members of society in both lais do not condemn the ladies’ decisions to commit adultery. For example, the lady’s messenger in “Milun” does not condemn her for initiating an intimate relationship with Milun. He carries out messages between the couple faithfully. The old nurse is committed to helping her lady keep her pregnancy a secret and deliver the child to safety. The nurse does not judge or condemn her lady for having sex outside of marriage. Milun’s messenger has no problem getting the swan to Milun’s lady – in fact, he performs his duty better than Milun asks. He is supposed to get the swan to a servant, but the messenger ensures that he puts the swan into the lady’s hands, despite her restricted access to visitors. Also,
the hired retainers give much care to Milun’s son as they take him to his aunt’s home. They took their responsibility for caring for an illegitimate baby very seriously. The retainers “stopped to rest seven times a day; / they had the child nursed, / changed, and bathed” (110-12), and they even “brought a wet nurse with them” (114). Throughout the lai, Marie seasons the story with evidence of members of society approving of a loving relationship and the child that comes from the love affair, despite his illegitimacy. Marie shows that maintaining loving unions and nurturing the illegitimate children that come from them are more valuable than upholding legal or socially acceptable practices.

Marie further communicates her disapproval of husbands treating their wives like property by punishing the husbands that married women for reasons other than love. First, the women dishonor their husbands through their infidelity. The husband in “Yonec” is murdered by the son of his wife’s lover to avenge the husband for murdering his father. Also, the wife in “Milun” celebrates her husband’s untimely death, and although the lady’s son does not murder his step-father, he plans to. In both lais, the husbands’ land is inherited by men who are not related to them, but who are produced from love affairs.
By justifying women’s infidelity in marriages that resemble business transactions, Marie is challenging society to rethink the purpose of marriage. Willging emphasizes that Marie’s,

depiction of adultery in her Lais is not in the interest of irreverence … not in doing away with morality itself; rather, it is in the interest of correcting that morality and making it more harmonious with human nature, desires, and emotions. Marie offers a new morality that nourishes rather than represses human nature, making it less a state to be reviled and repressed, as theologians see it, than one to be embraced and nurtured.

(129)

Marie justifies the heroines’ infidelity by contrasting their internal and physical deterioration, resulting from their unhappy marriages, to their joyful, healthy restoration through loving, respectful relationships that emphasize the ladies’ function as individuals. Burns explains that readers “get a sense of ladies … as protagonists operating within a sphere of love that they have substantially remapped and reshaped” (49). Though the ladies were powerless as objects or property, both regain power through participating in love unions. Many members of the society that Marie creates in “Yonec” and “Milun” condone the ladies’ infidelity through their willingness to help the ladies, conceal their love affairs, and sympathize for their lost love.
Marie also challenges the social practice of excluding illegitimate children (or adults) from benefitting from positions of wealth and power by showing how Yonec and Milun’s son are such important contributors to society, even protecting, serving, and governing their people. Classen points out that “these two sons – the only two of the Lais – assume an important role in setting things right at the stories’ respective conclusions” (252-53). Furthermore, Marie sets the stage for a continued cycle of marriages based on loving relationships. Since Yonec and Milun’s son both respect their parents, despite their infidelity, Marie shows that both sons see value in relationships that allow for mutual respect and result in well-being and happiness. Because the younger generation embraces marriage based on love instead of perceiving marriage as a way to negotiate wealth and property, Marie ensures that the new perception of marriage based on love is sure to endure by passing it down through generations.
WORKS CITED


