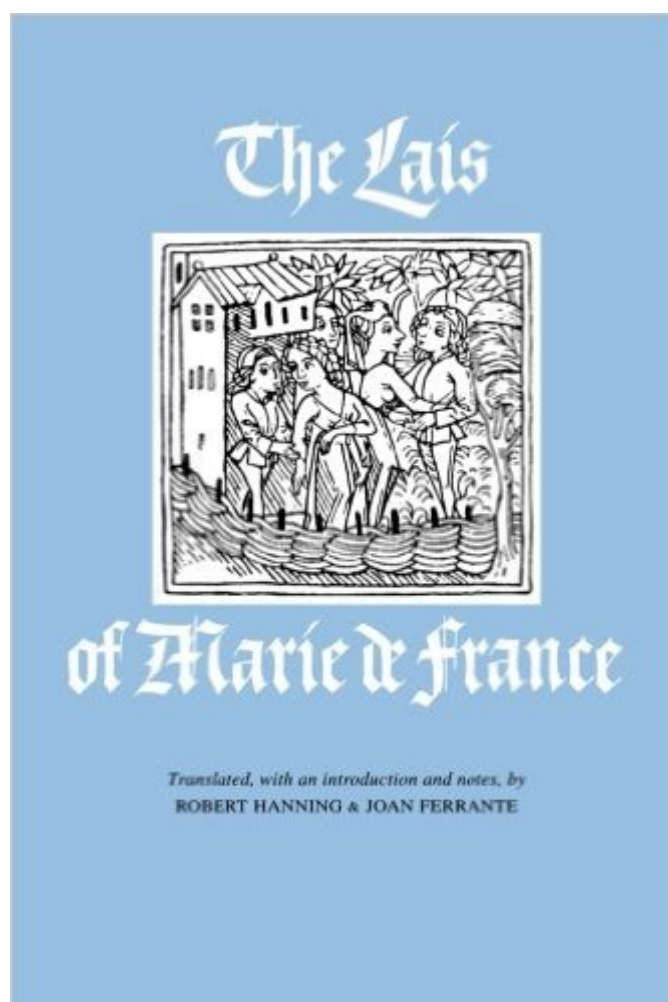


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The Lais Of Marie De France



Synopsis

Ancient European stories come to life in the poetry of a now forgotten medieval woman writer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Hanning and Ferrante edition of Marie de France's *lais* is satisfying on two levels. First, the translation and commentary are unsurpassed. Second, the twelve short tales are gems themselves. Translation of poetry from one modern language to another is difficult, let alone from Anglo-Norman French to modern English. This edition manages it beautifully. Abandoning the original's octosyllabic couplets for free verse, the brevity and simplicity of the verse are preserved. An introduction sets the *lais* in place and time. Essentially nothing is known of Marie de France personally, so the introduction centers on the history, culture, and language of the 12th century. Modest footnotes supplement the text, but the strongest editorial contributions are the commentaries that follow each *lai*. While not completely necessary to an understanding of the stories, which can stand on their own, the commentary definitely enriches one's experience of these old Celtic/Breton tales. Marie herself offers commentary on the tales as a whole in a Prologue, and frequently with a short statement at the beginning of an individual *lai*. This multiple framing of story within author commentary within modern commentary gives the reader great richness and depth. Marie's short but dense prologue offers philosophy and theory of writing that is still being reinterpreted. The *lais* themselves are self-contained and unconnected in plot, but typically involve a chivalric episode or a courtly love situation, and a complication. The narrative moves quickly. These

are not dull and laborious love stories, but adventures. In fact much is made in the critical world of the word "aventure" which translates as chance and luck as well as adventure. Marie de France is known for using a marvel as a plot device. A marvel is a strange, exotic, sometimes magical, element upon which the story hinges. Milun and his lover, for example, exchange love letters for twenty years - love letters carried secretly between them by a swan. Marie de France was likely a slyly disruptive force in the masculine court that she seems to be writing for. Bold and brave women are the rule. A reversal of masculine and feminine roles is not unusual. In *Lanval* a randy lady faerie queen, a pucelle, and her female knights completely overpower King Arthur and his court in a bloodless but completely effective rescue mission of a wrongly accused knight. The accuser is Arthur's queen, Guenivere is not named specifically, who definitely shows us her dark side. I recommend this book to almost all readers, and certainly to anyone interested in the middle ages, courtly love, Arthurian legends, or women's literature.

Before the famous Italian Renaissance, you could speak of a French Renaissance in the 12th century as far as literature is concerned. In Southern France there were the Troubadours, singers and poets, often part of the nobility or their entourage. In the North of France you had Chretien de Troyes and his Arthurian romances and the *Lais* of Marie de France, to name only two of the most important. The '*Roman de la Rose*' was written in the 13th cent. but is probably the most important masterwork of the French Renaissance. About the person of Marie de France almost nothing is known for certain. Her '*Lais*' - stories about romance or adventure - are based upon the popular and folkloristic tales that already existed for centuries in Bretagne - a region close to where the Atlantic meets the North-Sea. These stories were handed down from generation to generation by story tellers. The *Lais* of Marie de France excel by diversity. There are love stories - of course - but also vivid descriptions of tournaments and even a story about a werewolf. Marie de France proves that medieval literature can be entertaining.

Like *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, *The Lais of Marie De France* offer the reader more than the literal. There is high emphasis placed on the symbolism of animals. There are dead nightingales, weasels that know the secret to new life, a jilted werewolf, and others. The *lais* and *Tristan and Iseult* were written during the same time period, as evidenced by the *lai* entitled "*Chevrefoil*," which retells one of the closing scenes in *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*. Most of the *lais* follow the courtly love tradition, but often with a twist of the opposite, especially in "*Eliduc*." Courtly love challenges the institution of marriage and other social conventions. It examines the problems that

arise when people fall in love: selfishness, disloyalty, and violence. I do fear that there is a lot lost in the English translation. The *lais* were originally long French poems, but the translation is presented as prose. However, where the music of the language lacks, the consequences of the work remain.

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