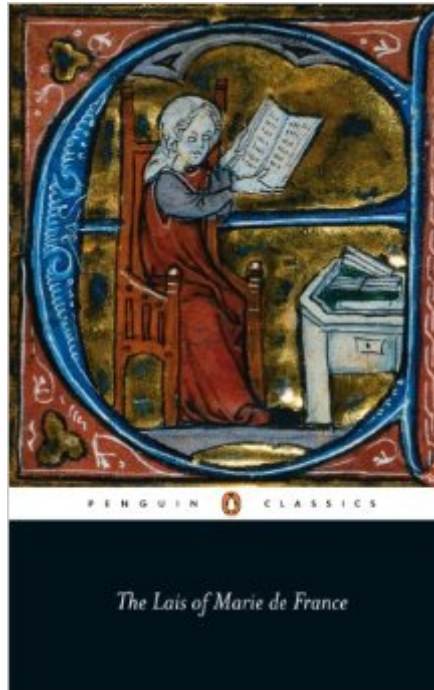


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The Lais Of Marie De France (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Marie de France (fl. late twelfth century) is the earliest known French woman poet and her *lais* - stories in verse based on Breton tales of chivalry and romance - are among the finest of the genre. Recounting the trials and tribulations of lovers, the *lais* inhabit a powerfully realized world where very real human protagonists act out their lives against fairy-tale elements of magical beings, potions and beasts. De France takes a subtle and complex view of courtly love, whether telling the story of the knight who betrays his fairy mistress or describing the noblewoman who embroiders her sad tale on the shroud for a nightingale killed by a jealous and suspicious husband. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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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.

The *Lais* of Marie de France, aside from being a landmark in the history of literature, are a collection of romantic stories that transcend time. I absolutely love the power and authority Marie de France assigns to her female characters. She juxtaposes the social superiority of men during the late twelfth century with abnormally strong women. The effect can be both compelling and saddening, while always poignant. In the *Lai du Lanval*, Marie de France creates a larger-than-life female character whose authority and affluence eclipse even King Arthur's grandeur. She essentially tells a love story in reverse, wherein the woman, as the figurative 'white knight', rescues the man, who plays the role of the 'damsel in distress'. Also, in the *Lai du Laustic*, she tells the tale of a woman who falls in love with her neighbor and uses the chirping of a nightingale to justify her late night meetings with him. When her husband grows tired of her leaving the bed each night, he has the nightingale killed so that his wife can sleep. Without the nightingale's chirping, she cannot talk to her love, thus, as an explanation of their bad fortune, she wraps the dead bird and sends it to her lover. This particular *lai* exposes the sad, immutable predicament of arranged marriages. Marie de France uses clever and subtle ways to describe the complications of love and marriage, which make her writing so uniquely profound. More specifically, I believe the Penguin Classic's edition of *The Lais* of Marie de France is an excellent version to study. Compared to other translations I've read, this is the most readable. The translators, Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby make it clear in their Translator's note that their aim was to stay as close to the original written word as possible.

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