

---

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Translation across Arts, Culture and Theory*

---


March 2015

## Crossing Cultures: The Old Norse Adaptations of Marie de France's Lais

Kenna Jacobs

*University of Connecticut - Storrs*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/tqc>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#), and the [Translation Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Kenna. "Crossing Cultures: The Old Norse Adaptations of Marie de France's Lais." *The Quiet Corner Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 2015.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/tqc/vol1/iss1/5>



### Crossing Cultures: The Old Norse Adaptations of Marie de France's *Lais*

Hákon Hákonarson (Hákon IV), King of Norway from 1217-1263, is often remembered as the ruler who brought an end to the approximate 110 years of civil war devastating his land, during which conflicts surrounding unclear succession laws and the influence of the Church over the King led to a divided country. His influence did not end with the establishment of peace in 1240, however; in fact, once Hákon was recognized as the undisputed king, he continued on to create what is commonly acknowledged as the great age (“*storhetstid*”) of Norwegian history, remarkable for its legal reforms, foreign policy, and a developing cultural life. Intent on demonstrating his excellence in kingship, Hákon made it his goal to emulate – and even surpass – the culture of more advanced European societies. This included the construction of royal buildings and churches, fostering relationships with other rulers, and (most pertinent for our purposes here) the procuring of Old Norse translations of popular French texts of the time. As in all of his endeavors, the commissioning of such literature was a means of promoting the codes and conventions found within the texts, the result of his determination to make his own court comparable to that of France (Beyer 58). Focusing on one of the most notable works procured by the King, *Strengleikar*, this essay will examine how the Norse translations are in fact adaptations that reflect their own customs and views on controversial subjects such as adultery, while simultaneously promoting the courtly ideology found within the original tales.

The *Strengleikar* manuscript is a collection of twenty-one short stories derived from *lais* – short narrative poems of octosyllabic couplets, written in Anglo-Norman and centered around themes of chivalry, love, and Celtic motifs. It includes six by anonymous authors (*Désiré*, *Tydorel*, *Doon*, *Lecheor*, *Nabaret*, and *Graelent*), four of which have no known French originals (*Gurun*, *Strandar strengleikr*, *Ricar hinn gamli*, and *Tveggia elskanda strengleikr*), and eleven of Marie de France's twelve *lais* (*Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Les Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, and *Chievrefueil*), *Eliduc* being the only one left out.<sup>1</sup> As there was already an established tradition of prose narration in Scandinavia at the time, and skaldic or eddic poetry were not suitable for such purposes, the *lais* were altered into prose, inevitably leading to certain changes in terms of omissions and condensation of the material.<sup>2</sup> The changes go

---

<sup>1</sup> Marie's *Lais* are short narrative poems ranging from approximately one hundred to twelve hundred lines. They are written in octosyllabic couplets (eight-syllable lines in rhyming pairs) in the vernacular (Anglo-Norman) rather than Latin, unlike many – even most – of her predecessors.

<sup>2</sup> Eddic poetry is a more popular form with both comedy and tragedy as subject matter, and skaldic poetry is a rigid form with military achievements as its focus. Eddic poems were based on

beyond mere convenience, however, and, upon close inspection, subtle yet telling modifications expose a shift in sensibility and significant changes in content, rendering the *lais* better suited for a Norwegian audience accustomed to the objective style of their poetry and sagas. In examining these various alterations, this study contests past readings of *Strengleikar* as a mere translation and instead aims to reveal the originality of the work, representative of very different intentions and formative literary traditions.<sup>3</sup>

### Omissions and Reductions

It seems fitting to begin with *Janual*, the translation of Marie's *Lanval*, as the representation of Arthur, a powerful king, and his well-known court was perfectly suited to King Hákon's aim of establishing such views of nobility. In his attempt to gain power and the continued support of his people, Hákon could rely on the legend of King Arthur to emphasize the glory that could come from an able and commanding ruler.<sup>4</sup> Though certain omissions are made – the detailed

---

traditional material and written anonymously in a simple and objective manner in alliterative verse, apparently gaining very little praise as either original or impressive works. Skaldic poetry, on the other hand, is considered more sophisticated and produced by named poets – the Old Norse *skálds*. This verse form was much more stylistically and metrically demanding, its rigid rules forcing the poets not only to count syllables (eight lines of six syllables each), but also to use a highly structured poetic language. These were known as *heiti* – special words not used in prose – and kennings – elaborate metaphorical constructions, both of which aided in accommodating the necessary alliterative and rhyming elements of the skaldic verse. As professional poets, the *skálds* wrote within the courts of Viking Age rulers on current events and military exploits, political contentions, and Norse mythology, among many subjects.

<sup>3</sup> Though it is now growing, certainly since the dissertation (*Cultural transformations in medieval translations: French into Norse and English*, 2006) and later publications of Sif Rikhardsdóttir, the body of literature concerning *Strengleikar* is shockingly small. As opposed to being dismissed as mere translations, I agree with recent scholarship in that the Old Norse *lais* should be viewed as individual works, worthy of analysis and just as revelatory of cultural and ideological patterns as those written in Old French. Notable works on this subject include: Kalinke, Marianne E. "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)." *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985. 316-363; Kalinke, Marianne E. "Stalking the Elusive Translator: A Prototype of *Guimars Ljod*." *Scandinavian Studies* 52 (1980): 142-167; Kalinke, Marianne E. "Translator or Redactor? The Problem of Old Norse-Icelandic 'translations' of Old French Literature." *New Comparison* 12 (1991): 34-53; Larrington, Carolyne. "The Translated *Lais*." *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms*. Ed. Marianne E. Kalinke. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2011. 77-97; Rikhardsdóttir, Sif. "The Imperial Implications of Medieval Translations: Old Norse and Middle English Versions of Marie de France's *Lais*." *Studies in Philology* 105.2 (2008): 144-164.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the representation of King Arthur within this *lai* is anything but commanding and glorified—he mistakenly believes his wife's slanderous lies about *Lanval* and is consequently undermined by the fairy lady at the end of the tale when the truth is revealed.

explanation of the legal procedure, for example – of specific interest in *Janual* is the decrease in emotionality which can be detected, most notably, in the less passionate responses of both the queen, in her denunciation of Janual, and Janual himself, at the loss of his lover. After being rejected by Janual, the queen accuses him of having little interest in women:

...þui at þér hugnar betr at eiga við unga sveina ok gera syndgan vilia þinn a þeim. Slica skemtan lætr þu lica þér.

[...because you prefer to carry on with young boys and perform your sinful desire on them. That is the kind of amusement you like.] (Cook and Tveitane 217)<sup>5</sup>

However, her spiteful rant ends here. The continuing insults found in *Lanval* are no longer present, reducing the expressive nature of the original in favor of a more straightforward account:

Vaslez amez bien afaitiez,  
ensemble od els vus deduiez.  
Vileins cuarz, malvais failliz,  
mult est mis sire malbailliz,  
ki pres de lui vus a sufert,  
mun esciënt que Deu en pert!

[Vous préférez prendre votre plaisir  
avec de beaux jeunes gens!  
Misérable lâche, chevalier indigne,  
mon époux a bien tort  
de vous souffrir auprès de lui:  
je crois qu'il en perd son salut!] (Marie de France ll. 285-288)<sup>6</sup>

Janual then mentions his secret lover as a retort, and realizes that he will now lose his lover forever due to his lack of discretion. He becomes full of grief, and here, again, we find a reduction of detail, as the French elaborates, emphasizing his very physical reaction in fainting, sighing, and begging for his lover's pity:

Il se pleigneit e suspirot,

---

<sup>5</sup> All quotations of the Old Norse lais will come from this edition. From this point on, they will be abbreviated "ON" (Old Norse).

<sup>6</sup> All citations of the lais of Marie de France will come from this edition. From this point on, they will be abbreviated "AN" (Anglo-Norman).

d'ures en altres se pasmot;  
 puis li crie cent feiz merci,  
 qu'ele parolt a sun ami.  
 Sun quer e sa buche maldit;  
 c'est merveille qu'il ne s'ocit.

[Il se plaint, il soupire,  
 tombe évanoui à plusieurs reprises.  
 Puis il implore sa pitié,  
 la supplie de parler à son ami,  
 maudit son cœur et sa bouche:  
 c'est merveille qu'il ne se tue pas.] (AN ll. 345-348)

The translator omits this extensive detailing, reducing the dramatic effect and following in suit with the restrained style typical of Old Norse prose.

Another telling amendment is in the description of the lady – while nothing can be said of her original description, as the first 156 lines of the lai are missing, her appearance at Arthur's court at the end of the tale is far less descriptive than that in Marie's *Lanval*. As opposed to the lengthy passage detailing her harness, clothing, and body (ll. 561-579), the translation skips ahead to state simply: “parf ei aðra leið geta en fyrr er sagt” [“Of her beauty and manners there is no need to say anything other than is mentioned above”] (ON 225). While this choice may have been made either to reduce the amount of detail or to avoid repeating what has, in so many words, already been affirmed earlier in the lai, the change diminishes the grand effect of the lady's reentry into the tale, as it is common in medieval romance to use physical appearance as a reflection of a figure's inner qualities, be they good or bad. McCracken explains this symbolic function of bodies as representing social integrity, using as an example the fact that “good and brave knights are always beautiful,” while a “physical deformity often reflects moral degradation” (McCracken 31). To minimize the external qualities of the lady, then, is to forego an opportunity to further establish her position in the story as the embodiment of moral and social superiority, a key component in Marie's version that is unfortunately lost in translation.<sup>7</sup>

In *Chaitivel*, and the Old Norse *Chetovel*, we find four equally valorous and handsome knights who fall in love with a lady, actively pursuing her, yet she is incapable of making a choice because “[n]e volt les trois perdre pur l'un” [“Elle refusait d'en perdre trois pour l'amour d'un seul”] (AN l. 55). When three of the knights are killed in a tournament and the fourth maimed in his thigh, his injury is such that he is rendered impotent, making him quite useless as a true lover, and

---

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to say whether or not this was intentional, or simply an unforeseen consequence in minimizing what the translator(s) deemed excessive detail.

forcing both him and the lady to live not only in mourning, but also unfulfilled.<sup>8</sup> In the Old Norse version his lamentation over this terrible fate is greatly diminished, omitting any reference to his inability to be physically close to the lady. Instead, we are simply told:

svaraðe skiot Lat gera frov kvað hann nyian strengleic. ok calla hann harms/fvllr. þuiat sv er ec ann yuir allt þat er i er heiminvm se ec oftsamlega ganga i hia mér ok røðer við mec. snimma ok silla. ok ma ec enga huggan af henni fa.

[As soon as the knight heard this, he answered: “Have a new lai composed, lady,” he said, “and call it ‘Sorrowful,’ for she whom I love more than anything in the world and whom I often see walking by me and who talks with me early and late—from her I can get no solace.”] (ON 147)

As a result, the translation seems to put more emphasis on the loss of the first three knights, leaving both the lady and her last lover to deal with overwhelming grief. As she cannot seem to overcome their deaths, the fourth knight is left with no comfort—though readers familiar with the original will understand this to be a mainly physical comfort, the translation does not include lines 221-222, which state explicitly that he will never have a more specific joy, namely:

ne de baisier ne d’acoler  
ne d’altre bien fors de parler

[de l’embrasser et de la prendre dans mes bras,  
le seul plaisir qui me reste est celui de sa conversation] (AN)<sup>9</sup>

The Old Norse translation of *Guigemar* – *Guiamar* – is fairly faithful to the original, though certain passages have been shortened, and these are, for the most part, similar areas in which greater emotion or physicality are involved,

---

<sup>8</sup> The injury here is similar to that of *Guigemar*, one “par mi la quisse” that leads to the knight’s impotence. This can be seen as a reflection on the game of courtly love itself, a futile and sterile game that by nature does not lead to reproduction. This “social truth” has also been pointed out by Roberta L. Krueger in her article “The Wound, the Knot, and the Book: Marie de France and Literary Traditions of Love in the *Lais*,” where she discusses Marie’s dramatization of the game of courtly meritocracy, ultimately concluding that “the fierce competition among knights for scarce resources, either the most attractive parcels of land or the most desirable women, inevitably claims victims” (79).

<sup>9</sup> The Old Norse is also missing lines 209-216 and 223-224, in which the knight elaborates on his suffering.

again making the text more appropriate. The first example of this can be found in the missing lines 399-410 of the original, during which Guigemar bemoans his suffering in wondering whether the lady will love him and, as a result, heal his wound:

‘A las!’ fet il, ‘quel le ferai?  
 Irai a li, si li dirai  
 Que ele ait merci a pitié  
 de cest chaitif descunseillié.  
 S’ele refuse ma preiere  
 e tant seit orgoilluse e fiere,  
 dunc m’estuet il a doel murir  
 u de cest mal tuz jurs languir.’  
 Lors suspira ; en poi de tens  
 li est venuz novels purpens,  
 e dit que sufrir li estoet ;  
 kar issi fait ki mielz ne poet.

[“Hélas, dit-il, que faire?  
 J’irai à elle  
 et implorerai sa pitié  
 pour le malheureux privé de ressources que je suis.  
 Si elle repousse ma prière  
 et se montre orgueilleuse et fière,  
 il ne me reste plus qu’à mourir de chagrin  
 ou languir à tout jamais de ce mal.”  
 Il soupire. Mais bientôt  
 il change d’avis  
 et se dit qu’il lui faut endurer sa souffrance,  
 car il n’a pas le choix.] (AN)

The inner monologue is entirely removed in *Guiamar*, in a sense minimizing the emotional distress of the hero, and, more importantly, showing little interest in the psychology of the character.

Further along, the lady hesitates to reveal her love for Guigemar for fear that he will reject her.<sup>10</sup> The original alone then delves into a discussion of the nature of love, claiming that it is impossible to find happiness while hiding one’s

---

<sup>10</sup> In their version of *Strengleikar*, Cook and Tveitane call attention to the fact that, in the original *Guigemar*, it is in fact the hero who is fearful in revealing his love for the lady (ll. 477-480), though the manuscripts vary on the pronoun used in l. 479 (s’il li, si ele li, sel li). (26n.9)

feelings, for it is a sickness caused by nature itself. More importantly for our study:

Ki un en puet leial trover,  
mult le deit servir e amer  
e estre a sun comandement.

[Celle qui peut trouver un loyal amant  
a toutes les raisons de le servir, de l'aimer  
et d'exaucer ses vœux.] (AN II. 493-495)

This statement reinforces the significance of the private oath that will be made between Guigemar and his lady as they exchange their love tokens, the knot and the belt, in comparison to the lady's marital bond. Here, she has found a loyal and true lover, whom she must serve and treat with respect.

Sif Rikhardsdottir has identified several differences between the original French and Old Norse versions of the *lais*, explaining that “the impartial narrative tone, adopted from the native literary tradition, and the apparent lack of interest in the psychology of the characters differ fundamentally from the ostensibly lighthearted yet subtly judicious narrative presence in the Anglo-Norman poems” (151). This shift in sensibility is quite evident in yet another omission from the original, where the narrator intrudes to comment on the physical encounter between the lovers:

Ensemble gisent e parolent  
e sovent baisent e acolent;  
bien lur covienge del surplus,  
de ceo que li altre unt en us!

[Ils s'allongent l'un contre l'autre,  
s'enlacent, échangent bien des serments et des baisers.  
Quant au reste, quant aux pratiques qui sont d'ordinaire  
celles des autres amants, c'est leur affaire!] (AN II.531-534)

While certain scholars speculate that the omission of this passage in *Guiamar* is representative of a disapproval of the lovers' adulterous relationship, there is in fact no evidence that this is the case. Rather, it again reflects the taste of the Norwegian public who has already been exposed to more expression of emotion throughout the *lais* than they are generally accustomed to in their native literary tradition. Such tender, and perhaps scandalous, moments were not found in what Larrington calls the “robustly objective” prose of saga authors (the popular



literature of the time), leading the translator(s) to alter the text in order to better suit their expectations (81). Scenes of action are elaborated on, whereas scenes of loving discourse are greatly cut down, if not entirely omitted.<sup>11</sup> Adultery remains without judgment, yet the love between Guiamar and his lady – and all loyal lovers, for that matter – is not venerated as blatantly as in the original, their physicality is minimized, and the narrator distances himself from the story, all in a style more suitable for readers.

Marie's *Laüstic* and the Old Norse *Laustik* also involve secret lovers, as the lady spends her nights communicating with the knight across the way; however, their interaction is limited to speaking and throwing gifts from window to window:

N'unt guaires rien ki lur desplaise  
 (mult esteient amdui a aise)  
 fors tant qu'il ne poeent venir  
 eel tut ensemble a lur plaisir;  
 kar la dame ert estreit gardeee,  
 quant cil esteit en la cuntree.

[Rien ne troublait donc  
 leur bonheur  
 que l'impossibilité de se rejoindre  
 à leur guise;  
 car la dame était surveillée de près  
 quand son ami était dans le pays.] (AN ll. 45-50)

---

ok þat þæim ægi mislikaðe. þui at þau varo bæði i myklo hœglifi.  
 nema þat at æins at þau matto ægi saman koma sem þau giarna  
 villdu.

[This did not displease them, for they were both enjoying a  
 pleasant life—except only that they were not able to come together  
 as they eagerly desired.] (ON 102:2)

When the lady explains her bizarre nightly behavior to her husband, he vows to end it by catching, and killing, the bird. The scene varies considerably in the Old French and Old Norse versions, however, with the former standing out as

---

<sup>11</sup> Further examples of this can be found in *Janual*: though Janual reacts to the loss of his lady, “the somatic reactions – fainting, sighing, blushing – are all omitted. The Norse [also] reduces the repetitions of the queen’s charges against Janual, toning down the passion with which she denounces him to the king” (Larrington 85).

noticeably more violent in nature. Firstly, in the French account the husband's immediate reaction to his wife's reasoning is fury, and he "de maltalent en rist" ["laughed angrily"] (AN l. 92); while in the Norse account he simply "became silent from vexation and anger" ["þagðe <hann> af angre ok ræiði"] (ON 104:3). Unlike the original version, the husband is not directly mocking his wife – instead, he focuses his frustration only on the bird itself. The change in intensity continues after the bird is captured – in the French version, readers are explicitly told that he kills it with his own hands, in front of his wife:

e il l'ocist par engresté.  
Le col li runt a ses dous meins:  
de ceo fist il que trop vileins.

[qui le tue par pure méchanceté,  
en lui tordant le cou:  
il avait bien l'âme d'un vilain.] (AN ll. 114-116)

In the Old Norse, on the other hand, the manner in which the bird is killed is left unclear: "...kastaðe honom dauðom a briost hænni" ["...[he] threw it, lifeless, at her breast"] (ON 104:3). While the cruelty of the husband remains unchanged – he is, of course, still acting out of wrath –, the act of violence itself is not illustrated in this adaptation, perhaps assuming that readers would find the refined version adequately malicious.

In a comparison of the two, it must be said that the behavior of the husband is not as shocking in the Old Norse. The French version begins with a description of the knights (lover and husband), who are *both* portrayed as valorous and worthy men. As a result, the husband's later transformation into a cruel and sadistic man is all the more remarkable in contrast to his initial position as equal to the neighboring knight. In the Old Norse, this original description – creating equilibrium between the two men – has been omitted, leaving readers with no knowledge of the husband's nature. It follows that his wrathful response does not come as a veritable surprise, for we have no reason to believe that he was ever a kind or courteous man.

### **Emphasis and Originality**

While the previous examples involve the reduction of emotion or sexuality, we will now look at those in which new details are *added* to the *lais*, through narrative intrusion and an effort to appropriate the text for Norse society. Firstly, as the Old Norse texts are slightly more conservative than their French

predecessors, examples of unacceptable sexual deviance are emphasized through elaboration and direct condemnation of the guilty parties. In the Old Norse *Equitan*, the narrator does not attempt to discern one guilty party, clearly stating that both lovers must be held accountable. The king is responsible for turning against a steadfast servant who made his lord a priority above himself:

Ok agætr hofðingi. svæik / ok svivirði hinn villdasta vin sinn. æigin þion sinn. ræðes mann allz rikis sins. er hanum þionaðe. ok hann tignaðe með goðom raðom. ok rettom raðom. ok ræðom með starve sinu ok stiorinn. ok af honom tok allan vanda. æftir rettom logum ok landzsiðum hann or skar ollum vanda malom. at herra hans skylldi ver<a> frials fyrir ollum ahyggiom. En herra hans svæik hann ok sviuirði puso hans. ok samþyktiz dauða hans. En hans fals pusa.

[Equitan, the powerful lord and excellent leader, deceived and disgraced his best friend, his own servant, the seneschal of all his country, who served him and honored him with good advice and correct counsel and conversation, with his labor and his legislating. He relieved him of all difficulties; following just laws and the customs of the land, he settled all complicated cases, that his lord might be free from all worries. But his lord deceived him and dishonored his wife and conspired in his death.] (ON 81)

The lady, however, seems to be considered equally guilty, as she neglected proper Christian values and even wished evil upon a good man:

er slæit við guð ok hann handsol sin. saker mæiri tignar er hon girntizc ok til sa. bio æignum pusa sinum svik ok dauða. En varr hinn riki drottenn varðe þann er sac/lauss var. ok aftr snere svikunum a þau er svikin gærðo.

[But his false wife, who broke her agreement with God and with him for the sake of the greater glory which she coveted and looked for, prepared deception and death for her own husband. But our mighty Lord protected the innocent one and turned the deceit back on those who had practiced deceit and were guilty.] (ON 81)

A large number of lines are inserted into the Old Norse, emphasizing the immoral nature of the two lovers, and anyone who would conduct themselves in a similar manner. The text reads:

En sa er þessa bok norrœnaðe ræðr ollum er þessa sogu hœyra ok hœyrt hava at þær girnizc alldregi þat er aðrer æigu rett/fengit. huarke <fe> ne hiuscaps felaga. ne ovunde alldre annars got næ gævo...Girnizc ok ængi at auðoga sec af annars dauða...Girnizsk ok alldrægi et gera þeim svik ne svivirðingar er yðr gera tign ok þionosto sœmder ok sama...

[He who put this book into Norwegian advises all who hear and have heard this story that they never covet that which others own by right, ... never envy another man's lot or luck ... not wish to enrich himself by another's death ... never seek to perform deceit or disgrace on those who bring you distinction and service, honor and esteem...] (ON 79)

...for God watches all and brings justice to the innocent. The religious tone as this long passage continues on, including references to Holy Scripture and St. Augustine, is quite different from the short lesson given in Marie's version:

Ki bien voldreit raisun entendre,  
ici purreit ensample prendre:  
tels purchace le mal d'altrui,  
dunt tuz li mals revert sur lui.

[À bien réfléchir,  
on pourrait tirer une leçon de ce récit:  
celui qui cherche le malheur d'autrui  
voit le malheur retomber sur lui.] (AN II. 313-316)

Cook and Tveitane have suggested that the additions imply the translator was a cleric, judging the story “in the manner of a medieval preacher commenting on an *exemplum*” (65). A likely conjecture, this explains the apparent necessity to clearly define this particular adulterous affair as unacceptable, far from the other romanticized stories where adultery was not condemned. Here, the lovers are not merely rebelling against their own unfortunate lives by pursuing their fantasies and/or personal happiness; they are directly working to harm an innocent man in order to satisfy their uncontrollable passions. This, the translator insists, should not be confused with a righteous, worthy love, for it is an act that will surely be condemned – if not by others, then by God himself. The subtle didactic nature of Marie's work is here made blatantly clear, and serves as a moral lesson for all readers.

Marie's *Bisclavret* opens with an introduction drawing attention to the stories one might hear of werewolves, which describes them as follows:

Garulf, ceo est beste salvage;  
tant cum il est en cele rage,  
humes devure, grant mal fait,  
es granz forez converse e vait.

[Le loup-garou, c'est une bête sauvage.  
Tant que cette rage le possède,  
il dévore les hommes, fait tout le mal possible,  
habite et parcourt les forêts profondes.] (AN II. 9-12)

The narrator stops, however, to explain “Cest afaire les ore ester” [“Mais assez là-dessus”] (AN I. 13), for it is instead the story of *Bisclavret* that will be told. Already, we are given clues that our werewolf will not be the dangerous, savage beast that abounds in medieval literature. The Old Norse *Bisclaret* retains this commentary, and also adds a personal touch by describing the translator's own experiences with werewolves:

En sa er þessa bok norrœnaðe hann sa i bærnsko sinni æinn Rikan bonda er hamskiftisk stundum var hann maðr stundum i vargs ham. ok talde allt þatt er vargar at hofðuzt mæðan er fra honom ækki længra sægiande.

[“He who translated this book into Norse saw in his childhood a wealthy farmer who shifted his shape. At times he was a man, at other times in wolf's shape, and he told everything that wolves did in the meantime. But there is no more to be said about him”] (ON 99).

We find no mention of the violent outbursts of this man while in werewolf form, or of the fear the translator felt as a boy learning of his neighbor's ability. Instead, he is described as a storyteller, returning from his time with the wolves to recount his experiences to the townspeople – far from the frightening image one would anticipate if the bestial nature of the werewolf was in fact the purpose of the tale. This addition represents in part the “distinct attempt at integrating the foreign text into the existing Norse literary tradition, indicating an acute awareness of cultural disparity and the need to merge the translated text and its environment to ensure successful adaptation” (Rikhardsdottir 152). Instead of allowing the tales of werewolves to remain the property of the French, the Norse

translator tries to claim the story for his own culture, insisting not only that these beasts also exist in their land, but that he has had first-hand experience with the mysterious beings.<sup>12</sup>

Another difference in the Old Norse lai is found in the treatment of the lady upon learning of her betrayal. When Bisclaret finally sees his wife, he does not rip off her nose, but instead: “hann upp ræistizc ok ræif af hænni klæði sin. ænga suivirðing matte hann mæire gera hænni” [“(h)e reared up and tore off her clothes – he could not do any greater disgrace to her”] (ON 95). This is quite different from the original:

vers li curut cum enragiez.  
Oëz cum il s'est bien vengiez!  
Le nes li esracha del vis.  
Que li peüst il faire pis?

[Il se précipite sur elle, comme pris de rage.  
Il s'est bien vengé, écoutez comment:  
il lui a arraché le nez:  
qu'aurait-il pu lui faire de pire?] (AN ll. 233-236)

Cook and Tveitane speculate that this may be a change to better suit the culture in question; the greater disgrace for Old Norse readers would be the woman's public nakedness. To substantiate this argument they bring attention to the Icelandic *AEfintyr af Tiodiel Riddara*, “closely analogous to *Bisclaret* and probably derived from it, [in which] the bear rips off the lady's clothes *and* her nose, and more emphasis is given to the theme of nakedness inherent in the story” (94-95 n.4). The oddity in the text found in *Strengleikar*, however, is that, though her nose is never ripped off, the translator has kept the hereditary element found in the original *Bisclavret* – all of the women descended from the treasonous woman and her new husband were still born without noses. Here, what began as an apparent difference in taste ends in what appears to be a mistake by the translator, who gives no explanation as to why the daughters would be born without noses and, more importantly, how this would make them easily recognizable as the descendants of their fully-nosed mother. Regardless of these modifications, the final judgment remains the same: just as in *Bisclavret*, the beastly man is honored, the victim of a cruel and deceitful woman.

In Marie's *Le Fresne*, the mother decides that she must eliminate one of her daughters in order to maintain her own legitimacy by avoiding public or personal humiliation, but only after considering more drastic measures:

---

<sup>12</sup> Shape-shifting is in fact fairly common in the sagas, in the form of shamans and magicians. In this sense, the narrator's comments point to a commonality between French and Norse culture.

Pur mei defendre de hunir,  
 un des enfanz m'estuet murdrir.  
 Mielz le vueil vers Deu amender  
 que mei hunir ne vergunder.

[Pour éviter le déshonneur,  
 je n'ai plus qu'à tuer l'un des enfants!  
 J'aime mieux expier ce péché devant Dieu  
 que supporter la honte et le déshonneur!] (AN II. 91-94)

---

En nu at veria sialfa mec fyrir skomm ok svivirðing þa værð ec at myrða aðra mœyna. þui at hælldr vil ec þætta mandrap bæta við guð en verða fyrir hatre ok hafnan allra minna ættingia. ok ropi allz folksens. fyrir þui at sonnu ef þetta kœmr upp fyrir unnasta minn ok frændr þa man ec æiga allzængan vin þar sem nu a ec marga þui at ec dœmda sialfa mec i róp. ok hatr ok amæli. allra dugandi kuenna.

[And now, to defend myself from dishonor and disgrace, I have to murder one of the girls, because I would rather atone for murder with God than suffer the spite and scorn of all my kin and the slander of all people, because truly if this comes to the attention of my dearest one and my family I will have no friend at all, though I now have many, because I sentenced myself to the slander and hatred and blame of all virtuous women.] (ON 2:47)

While the Old Norse *Eskia* remains quite close to the original, omitting only minor details, we find here that *more* detail has been added in order to further explain the fears of the mother, who is unable to bear the consequences she would suffer should her family and neighbors learn of the birth – a bad reputation and the loss of friends. She goes so far as to state that it would be less difficult to atone for murder to God than to be scorned by her kin, painting an incredibly negative picture of the proud woman, one that is even more dramatic than what we find in *Le Fresne*. As in *Equitan*, the translator seems determined to clearly delineate which figures are malicious, her skewed priorities revealing the mother's continuous lack of integrity.

Another helpful addition is found in *Geitarlauf*, the Old Norse adaptation of Marie's *Chievrefueil*, based on the well-known tale of Tristan and Iseut. The French version begins with Marie informing readers that she has personally come across the story multiple times, attesting to its great popularity:

Plusur le m'unt cunté e dit  
e jeo l'ai trové en escrit

[On m'a souvent relaté  
et je l'ai aussi trouvée dans un livre] (AN II. 5-6)

Marie's intention to communicate, and thus perpetuate, certain adventures that she has heard is made clear in her Prologue; that is, she believes that they must be commemorated through their transcription into narrative form:

Ne dutai pas, bien le saveie,  
que pur remembrance les firent  
des aventures qu'il oïrent  
cil ki primes les comencierent  
e ki avant les enveierent.

[Je savais en toute certitude  
que ceux qui avaient commencé à les écrire  
et à les répandre  
avaient voulu perpétuer le souvenir  
des aventures qu'ils avaient entendues.] (AN II. 34-38)

That they are written *pur remembrance* indicates that these are adventures worthy of an audience, and that, even through time, must be honored and remembered. So important is this notion that acts of composition or transmission are often reflected within the *lais* themselves, creating what has been called the “‘writerly’ or self-conscious aspect of Marie’s work” (Kinoshita and McCracken 29). *Chievrefueil* is the most apparent example of such a process, as Marie recounts not only a story, but the manner in which the *lai* was originally recorded:

Pur la joie qu'il ot eüe  
de s'amie qu'il ot veüe  
e pur ceo qu'il aveit escrit,  
si cum la reine l'ot dit,  
pur les paroles remembrer,  
Tristram ki bien saveit harper,  
en aveit fet un nuvel lai.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> It should also be noted that this passage makes a direct reference to their musicality, a component of the original form, as Tristram, with his harp, composed a new *lai*.



[Pour la joie qu'il avait eue  
de retrouver son amie,  
et pour préserver le souvenir du message qu'il avait écrit  
et des paroles échangées,  
Tristan, qui était bon joueur de harpe,  
composa, à la demande de la reine,  
un nouveau lai.] (AN ll. 107-113)

---

Nv af þeim fagnaðe er hann fec i morkinni af huggan  
drotningarennar ok af syn hennar ok funndi. at mvna þau orð er hon  
mællti. Tistram er full/kominn var allzskonar strengleica er i horpu  
gerazc. fann þa nyian strengleic.

[Now from the joy which he had in the forest from the comforting of  
the queen, and from the sight of her and the meeting, and in order to  
remember the words which she spoke, Tristram, who was perfect in  
all sorts of lais that are composed for the harp, made a new lai.] (ON  
199)

The goal is not entirely met in this lai, however, as Marie neglects to tell readers what Tristram carves into a hazel branch in his attempt to communicate with his lover. While the Old Norse *Geitarlauf* remains fairly true to the original, it does differ slightly in this moment, as it states quite clearly Tristram's message. Scholars have long disputed over the subject, claiming that either it was only his name inscribed, that it was some type of reminder of an earlier message, or, finally, that it was in fact all of lines 63-78 found within the lai itself. *Geitarlauf*, however, eliminates all ambiguity by choosing the latter option, explicitly confirming that Tristram engraved the entirety of his musings on the branch (a very long branch, indeed). In so doing, the translator has made an interesting choice in comparison to the traditional Norse literature of the time. As Carolyne Larrington notes, the lai "demonstrates to its audience how a traditional Norse lexis of emotion, employed in native eddic poetry to express women's grief and longing, can also be used to describe men's emotion" (83-84). Differing from the saga prose, male interiority is illustrated, allowing insight into "the art of courtly conversation, of speaking about one's love and gaining emotional release from that articulation" (Larrington 84). In contrast to their existing literary tradition, here the Norse translator has allowed for emotionality, exposing readers to such an approach to literature in choosing not to eliminate it from the tale.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Somewhat contradictory to the rest of the examples found here, this choice implies that the translator was not entirely against all sentimental expression, and perhaps chose to reveal the

## Conclusion

These are but a few elements pointing to the fact that, regardless of the desire to emulate the literature of the French and promote its courtly ideology, the Old Norse translations were nonetheless adapted to appropriately reflect the culture they were embedded in and what would, or would not, be acceptable to their audience. The changes in narrative tone and diminishing of certain elements are authentic to the Old Norse literary style, yet, at the same time, an effort is made to add certain details to the originals, adjusting them to fit more seamlessly into Norse culture. Though infused with new roles for women and surprising outlooks on sexuality, the Old Norse *lais* are also adapted, to varying degrees, to suit the goals of the scribes and their intended readers. While superfluous detail and overt sentimentality are generally omitted, a noticeable effort is made to clearly define the boundaries of morality, not only in terms of sexuality but, more broadly, in general behavior. Added details also point to the translator's effort to appropriate the text, making alterations for the purpose of inserting it directly into Norse society. As a result, *Strengleikar* takes on a life of its own, separate from the original works that served as inspiration. Indeed, the adaptation reflects what Marianne Kalinke has coined "a transmutation of genre"; that is, a movement from translation to revision, revision to adaptation, and adaptation to "indigenous re-creation" (345).

The effort was a great success, and such translations became so popular that they led to the creation of original works in greater Scandinavia in the later thirteenth century – and flourishing in the fourteenth –, specifically the *riddarasögur*, chivalric romance sagas modeled on the corpus of translated texts. King Hákon's goal was achieved, and the continual progress demonstrates a persistent dedication to the development of Norse culture, lasting far beyond his reign, as Norway worked to establish itself as a dominant and cultivated kingdom.

## Works Cited

Beyer, Harald. *History of Norwegian Literature*. Trans. Einar Haugen. New York: New York University Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1956.

---

(purported) details of Tristram's musings in an effort to demonstrate authority over the well-known tale.

- Cook, Robert, and Mattias Tveitane. *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*. Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-institutt, 1979.
- Kalinke, Marianne E. "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)." *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985. 316-363.
- Kinoshita, Sharon, and Peggy McCracken. *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012.
- Krueger, Roberta L. "The Wound, the Knot, and the Book: Marie de France and Literary Traditions of Love in the *Lais*." *A Companion to Marie de France*. Ed. Logan E. Whalen. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 55-87.
- Larrington, Carolyne. "The Translated *Lais*." *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms*. Ed. Marianne E. Kalinke. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2011. 77-97.
- Marie de France. *Lais de Marie de France*. Trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner. Ed. Karl Warnke. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1990.
- McCracken, Peggy. *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998.
- Rikhardsdottir, Sif. "The Imperial Implications of Medieval Translations: Old Norse and Middle English Versions of Marie de France's *Lais*." *Studies in Philology* 105.2 (2008): 144-164.