The Lais Of Marie De France

Translated, with an introduction and notes, by
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Synopsis
Ancient European stories come to life in the poetry of a now forgotten medieval woman writer.

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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 proofs 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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