CHAPTER THREE


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All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

Tolstoy’s opening words in Anna Karenina might well describe Marie de France’s depiction of love in her Lais. All of the stories are about love and the suffering it engenders, yet each presents love’s travails in a unique configuration. Rather than tell one long story, Marie assembles 12 tales that depict star-crossed lovers who endure love’s pains, each in his or her own way. As she conveys not a single conception of love but a range of erotic, familial, social, and spiritual relationships, Marie draws upon and transforms a diversity of literary sources to portray men and women who struggle to fulfill their desires in the face of complex social constraints.

Virtually all scholarship on Marie’s Lais considers love in some way.1 From numerous perceptive studies, several key critical notions

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emerge: that Marie portrays love as suffering; that she depicts a good number of *mal mariées*; that women’s words often instigate love affairs or dramatic action;² that the author grapples with the social necessity of sexuality, which is often portrayed androgynously;³ that writing, reading, and desire are closely linked in the *Lais*;⁴ that love, like language, is often fatal;⁵ that love, for Marie, should be a reciprocal passion rather than a courtly game;⁶ that love involves forging new identities;⁷ that Marie constructs a view of transgressive love that defies ecclesiastic, feudal, and courtly conventions;⁸ that the *Lais*, in their variety, constitute “une véritable réflexion sur l’amour.” Yet the variety of Marie’s collection makes it impossible precisely to “define” love outside of its unique poetic representation. The *Lais* invite us to examine the nature of their lovers’ dolorous stories in each individual tale, as we propose to do in this essay. Although each poem deserves far more attention than we can provide here, we hope that our global, comparative approach to Marie’s collection will illustrate many of her literary innovations and distinctive insights.

The flowering of vernacular literature in 12th- and 13th-century France and England heralded a profusion of writings about love. Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* (Art of Love) and his *Remedia Amoris* (Remedies

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² Paupert, “Les femmes et la parole.”
⁶ Dubuis, “La notion de druerie.”
⁷ Maddox, *Fictions of Identity*.