Chapter Five

Marie de France and the Anonymous Lays

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Of the approximately 35 Old French narrative lays that have survived, it is generally agreed that the 12 found in London, British Library, Harley 978 (MS H) can be grouped together as the Lais of Marie de France.\(^1\) In Alfred Ewert’s edition, these lays amount to 5,718 lines of text, with an average length of 476.5 lines.\(^2\) Most of the remaining lays are anonymous, but within this group it is possible to identify 11 lays that are representative of the anonymous lays as a whole, yet form a distinctive corpus of material. These lays were first brought together as a collection by Prudence Tobin in 1976, and they have recently been re-edited and translated into English by Leslie Brook and myself.\(^3\) Their titles are, in alphabetical order, *Desiré*, *Doon*, *Espine*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor*, *Lecheor*, *Melion*, *Nabaret*, *Trot*, *Tydorel*, and *Tylolet*.\(^4\) In the Burgess and Brook edition, these 11 lays (sometimes called the anonymous Breton lays) amount to 5,319 lines, with an average length of 483.5 lines.\(^5\) In order to assess whether there are any marked

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\(^1\) Nine of Marie’s lays are found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, nouv. acq. fr. 1104 (MS S), the exceptions being *Laüstic*, *Chaitivel*, and *Eliduc*.

\(^2\) Alfred Ewert, *Marie de France: Lais* (Oxford, 1944; repr. with introduction and bibliography by Glyn S. Burgess, London, 1995). All quotations are taken from this edition, but the edition by Jean Rychner, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, (Classiques Français du Moyen Age) 93 (Paris, 1966) has also been consulted. In addition to the 12 lays in MS H there is also a 56-line General Prologue. All English translations are my own.


\(^4\) Eight of these anonymous lays are preserved in MS S, the exceptions being *Melion*, *Nabaret*, and *Trot* (see n. 1 above). For a full list of manuscripts, see Ewert, ed., pp. xviii–xix, repr. p. xxxv, and Burgess and Brook, p. 7. When giving references, I shall use the Harley order for Marie’s lays and, as they are arranged differently in the Tobin and the Burgess-Brook editions, alphabetical order for the anonymous lays.

\(^5\) Tobin has 5,236 lines because, unlike Burgess and Brook, she does not edit *Desiré*, *Espine*, and *Graelent* from MS S.
differences between Marie’s lays and the 11 anonymous lays, I shall examine the 23 poems from the point of view of (i) their prologues and epilogues, (ii) the male characters and the theme of chivalry, (iii) the female characters and the theme of love, (iv) the supernatural or merveilleux element, and (v) the objects and symbols they contain.

I. Prologues and epilogues

(a) Prologues

Marie’s lays and almost all the anonymous lays begin with a prologue (Lecheor has an introduction rather than a prologue). The prologues in Marie’s lays occupy 110 lines of text, varying from two lines (Le Fresne) to 26 lines (Guigemar). In the anonymous lays there is no equivalent to the General Prologue found in MS H (but not in MS S). Although she only gives her name once (“Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie” [Hear, my lords, the words of Marie], Guigemar, v. 3), in the first part of the prologue to Guigemar she proclaims her sense of responsibility (“Ki en sun tens pas ne s’oblie” [Who in her time is not unmindful of her obligations], v. 4), her conviction that her stories are based on good material (“bone mateire,” v. 1), her determination to reach a high standard of literary performance (“Mult li peise si bien n’est faite” [Is very upset if it (the material) is not well handled], v. 2), and her expectation of praise for any success she may achieve (vv. 5–6). Writers regularly complain of hostility towards their works, but her comment that envious gangleür [gossips, scandal-mongers] and losengier [backbiters, slanderers] behave like “malveis chien coart felun” [vicious, cowardly, evil dogs], biting others out of treachery, has the stamp of personal experience. In v. 15 Marie uses the first person form voil [I wish], and the second part of the prologue contains the forms sai (v. 19), conterai (v. 21), and mosterai (v. 24). In the remaining prologues she repeats the forms voil (Bisclavret, v. 14; Chevrefoil, v. 1) and mosterai (Milun, v. 24), and we also find the forms dirai (in the for-