CHAPTER SIX

SPEAKING THROUGH ANIMALS IN MARIE DE FRANCE’S LAIS AND FABLES

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The animals that perform with such captivating charm in the *Fables* and *Lais* of Marie de France come together onstage in a single manuscript: London, British Library, Harley 978. They speak to each other indirectly across the interval of some 50 folios, the fables preceding the *lais* and thus reversing the order of composition hypothesized by modern editors who place Marie’s 12 short tales centered on love before her fable translations. The thread of association offered by her signature and many shared features of her art invite us to follow the medieval scribe’s example by looking at animals in both works, together as well as separately, in order to bring into sharper focus what links and what more properly differentiates *lais* and fables. Both illustrate Marie’s gift for working in the briefest forms of narrative, packing into their elliptical shapes a many-layered complexity that increases geometrically through the combinations that emerge within each collection, as in their dialogue with a variety of traditions that surround and situate them within the larger literary system of the 12th century. But while lays and fables share the interplay between individual pieces and overall coherence, the difference in their truth claims and shifting modes of fictionality, intimately tied to the character of their animal representations, helps establish the specificity of each.

In her different “translations” from one world to another, Marie de France uses animals in a variety of ways to amuse and engage us but also to make us ask questions. When are these animals only, or not

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1 In *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris, 1969), pp. xii, xix, Jean Rychner locates the collection of *Lais*, unique to Harley 978, on fols 118–60 and dates them c.1160–70; others suggest c.1170–80. Harley 978 is among 25 manuscripts that include the *Fables*. Charles Brucker locates them on fols 40a–67b and offers a date c.1189–1208, in *Les Fables, édition critique*, 2nd ed. (Louvain, 1998; 1991), pp. 3, 18–20; other scholars date them c.1167–89. All quotations will be taken from these editions; translations are my own.
really, themselves? How do they figure the multiple relations between
nature and human nature, as humans and animals move along the
scale from sub-human to supernatural? How do beasts (the term more
common to medieval texts) move from the natural to the social world,
as their traits and actions encode and comment on our own? Situated
at the intersection of so many linguistic, literary, and cultural tradi-
tions, from the classical Aesop and the biblical order of creation to the
medieval bestiary, from Celtic tales and myths to animal epics in Latin
and the vernacular, these animals must find their particular voices,
whether literally or figuratively, in the context of fable and lai. Readers
medieval or modern must likewise engage in the art of interpretation
to understand how and why they do so.2

If animals are the sine qua non of most fables, their appearance in
the Lais is more circumscribed. Assorted horses, hunting dogs, singing
birds, and crowing roosters are mentioned in the collection to situate
action in a setting familiar to a courtly public, but Marie gives ani-
mals a special role in six of them: Guigemar’s prophetic white hind,
the werewolf of Bisclavret, Yonec’s shape-shifting hawk-knight, the
eponymous nightingale of Laüstic, the swan messenger in Milun,
and the miracle-making weasel of Eliduc. Their roles may be primary or
secondary, as we shall see, but the concentration on variations entail-
ing birds in three successive lais, starting at the midpoint of 12 tales
(Yonec the 7th, Laüstic the 8th, and Milun the 9th), offers a guiding
thread to follow through the Fables as well.

Birds appear in 27 of the 102 fables gathered together in Marie’s col-
lection.3 They offer a representative cross-section of character types and
themes, from predator to victim, from kingship and justice to honor,
treason, and deception, as the strong and the weak struggle over food,
power, and place. An inventory of birds in the Fables includes 19 spe-
cies, in addition to the general category “oiseus” (nos 23, 46, 80) and
the bat, who cannot decide if it wants to be counted with the birds or
the beasts (no. 23): cock (nos 1, 60), kite (nos 4, 86), crane (nos 7, 80),
eagle (nos 10, 12, 23, 46, 62, 74, 80), crow (or rook) (nos 12, 40), raven

2 Cf. Arnold Clayton Henderson, “Medieval Beasts and Modern Cages: The Making
of Meanings in Fables and Bestiaries,” PMLA 97 (1982), 40–49.
3 See Harriet Spiegel, ed. and trans., Marie de France: Fables (Toronto, 1987). She
counts 103 fables since she considers no. 65, The Wolf and the Beetle, and no. 66, The
Grey Wolf, to be two different texts, whereas other editors count them as the same
fable.