



Smart Marie De France Knew the Ways of this World – Medieval Advice Literature (Fables) and Social Criticism in its Relevance for us Today

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Since antiquity, a huge body of short texts has been produced in which deep wisdom of timeless value has been formulated. The succinct, poignant formulation of an idea has commonly achieved its purpose very effectively in many different life situations, and this in all cultures. Those texts, whether proverbs, aphorisms, epigrams, riddles, memorial verses, and the like are still with us today, but in recent years the interest in and familiarity with them seems to have faded, at least in the public. Only a few decades ago, it was very normal for students or other individuals to have memorized many of such short statements and to know how to apply them to their own lives. Many of them were regarded so highly that they populated the back pages of ordinary kitchen calendars and other publications for easy and public consumption. In foreign language classes, it was standard practice to work with some of those short texts, but today they often seem to be too conservative, naive, meaningless, and hence to be virtually irrelevant because of their putatively overly traditional, perhaps outdated values.¹ In fact, they seem to be belittled today and hardly enjoy the respect they really deserve.

Post-modern audiences appear fairly ignorant or even negatively inclined regarding the didactic messages contained in such texts. The reasons for such a disinterest or even explicit rejection of those short verbal messages containing fundamental and timeless lessons are many, but they are mostly indefinite and emotional, maybe because those spiffy statements sound too old-fashioned, too conservative, too trite, or even irrelevant for the modern, technology-driven world. However, considering that all proverbs, for instance, address universal truths pertaining to ethics, morality, and character, nothing should prevent us from studying them carefully, even today.² Throughout the centuries, scholars have collected vast volumes of proverbs and handed them on to posterity. Research continues the investigation of those genres, a research field called paremiology, but it might be questionable whether fables, for instance, which are closely related, really continue to enjoy the status and respect as in previous centuries.³

One simple example that might explain where the tensions rest, would be the German proverb, “Morgenstund hat Gold im Mund” (The morning hour has gold in its mouth). The content is clear and not hard to understand; the early riser will get the work done well and quickly (in the Anglophone world: The early bird catches the worm). This pertains, especially, to the world of farmers or gardeners, but the current younger generations seem less and less interested in the field of agriculture and rather pursue an urban lifestyle. The entire culture of drinking coffee signals clearly that getting up early in the morning is considered as uncomfortable and unpleasant; people need their caffeine to get into gear. However, in the professional world, including that of farmers, work needs to be done, and the earlier one begins with it, the better, which has nothing to do with conservatism or old fashions. Hence, the proverb continues to address elegantly the general truth about good work ethics.

Nevertheless, the proverb is curiously associated with folk culture, and thus tends to be relegated to the rural population, whereas urbanite intellectuals might prefer the aphorism or the epigram, if any of such didactic statements.⁴ May this be as it is, we can summarize and generalize that irrespective of the modern-day evaluations and low recognition of these short and sharply formulated verses or

narratives all those rhetorical statements reflect the basic need to observe human behavior, conditions, attitudes, and to carry out a critical analysis in a memorable manner by means of a brief verbal comment.⁵ Whether proverb or fable, which will be the focus of this paper, we are dealing with short narratives that provide didactic and philosophical teachings and instructions, that is, mostly statement determined by ancient wisdom, which all prove to be, more or less, of timeless value.

As Wolfgang Mieder observes, proverbs are commonly used for didactic purposes, offering advice, arguments, justifications, proofs, suggestions, and insights, and through their ‘proverbial’ nature they are easy to remember, helping the individual to acquire wisdom and rules of proper standards of life.⁶ Proverbs are often characterized by the use of personification, ellipsis, and hyperbole. All those brief and didactic statements rely strongly on formulaic language and structural patterns and often can be traced as far back as to the Old Testament and ancient Greek and Roman literature.⁷ Aphorisms and epigrams represent similar verbal comments, but on a higher intellectual level, and they all address fundamental issues in human life, pertaining to ethics, morality, political and social conditions, religion, and philosophy.⁸

The present paper, however, is not so much concerned with the proverb by itself as a genre, or with the related text types, but with the content formulated through these short statements. Specifically, my purpose is to focus on the fable, equally determined by didactic intentions and commonly operating with similar narrative features, where, since Aesop’s time, animals speak and interact with each other and thus represent human behavior, ideas, values, and concepts in a simplified and yet highly dramatic fashion.⁹ This literary genre has an amazing pedigree and does not need to be introduced here at any greater length.¹⁰ Instead, this study will revisit and examine the fables produced by the famous Anglo-Norman writer Marie de France (ca. 1160-ca. 1190/1200) and their meaning for us today. Those are not proverbs, aphorisms, or epigrams, and yet they contain very much the same kind of insightful, sharply formulated, profound, thus highly succinct and effective literary comments about fundamental human problems and conflicts, viewed through a critical lens requiring our reflections and then commonly a change in one’s worldview.

It would be anachronistic, if not absurd, to claim that the texts by a twelfth-century female author might represent the ultimate answers for our problems and questions today. The difference between the Middle Ages and us today are vast and cannot be overcome by means of flimsy rhetorical bridges. Both the social and the religious, both the political and the economic frameworks have changed fundamentally, so in a way medieval literature might enjoy only a museal interest for some of us today.¹¹ Nevertheless, although Marie composed a large collection of fables that seem to be far removed from our present world, at closer analysis, they prove to be stunningly relevant in their core reflections for people throughout time, just as proverbs or aphorisms.¹² By studying those short verse narratives and what they addressed, we can not only gain deeper insights into Marie’s intellectual, ethical, social, and moral thinking, but also recognize some universal statements that highlight the relevance of medieval literature also today. The purposes of this article are thus three-fold. First, the intention is to unearth the literary and social-historical significance of Marie’s fables; second, to examine their philosophical, ethical, and moral content; third, to probe how we can justify and explain the study of her verse narratives in the modern classroom or outside.

Scholarship has already paid much respect to Marie’s work, including her *Fables*, consistently emphasizing their high literary and didactic qualities. In fact, those were consistently regarded as her masterpieces, to the disadvantage of her *Lais*, well into the nineteenth century, when things changed considerably.¹³ Already in the Middle Ages, Marie’s narratives were considerably appreciated, as documented by the twenty-three manuscripts containing her texts (by contrast, only five manuscripts with her *lais* are extant today). We know that she copied or imitated many previous fable collections, which would be unavoidable in any fable literature considering the long and most ponderous impact of classical fables on the Middle Ages and the early modern age (Aesop). Nevertheless, a solid portion of her texts appears to be her own original composition, while the rest were translations, and yet as such still creative work from her pen. The issue, however, would not be whether or how much she imitated previous sources, such as the *Romulus Nilantii* (the first forty of Marie’s *Fables*),¹⁴ but the intent with which she pursued her goal of addressing social and political issues of her time by means of these traditional narratives.

We do not need to consider so much the specific content of her fables in general terms, especially because they often resemble those from ancient times and were subsequently repeated throughout the centuries by many other fable authors (Jean de la Fontaine, John Gay, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ignacy Krasicki, Lorenzo Pignotti, Félix María de Samaniego, etc.).¹⁵ Instead, we gain significant insights into Marie's viewpoints about social, economic, and political conditions at her time when we examine closely her final comments, the epimythos (or epimythiums), and those, in fact, contain universal remarks about shortcomings in human life that are of relevance both then and today. It does not matter at all that Marie resorts to much literary fiction, projecting a world of speaking, acting, and thinking animals; instead, to quote Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, she "invites her readers to seek meaning in the rich obscurities of her *lais*, as in the tension between narrative and morality staged in her *Fables*. Speaking or speechless, her animals have many a tale to tell us humans."¹⁶

Anyone having studied Marie's *Lais* would immediately agree that they possess a literary charm that easily transcends the many centuries that separate her from us. There she explores a variety of options regarding identity, personal happiness, love and marriage, sexuality, friendship, virtues, vices, passion, and also lust.¹⁷ Similarly, perhaps less appreciated and yet equally powerful, in the *Fables*, we confront a large corpus of relevant texts where the poet explores human conditions, but not so much on the inside (spirituality), but on the outside in the social and political context, very much in conformity with the genre itself.¹⁸

Literary critics have always known that their criticism of social shortcomings could easily face severe opposition, especially by the powerful and mighty. Hence, resorting to a veiled and symbolic language has regularly been an excellent subterfuge. After all, poets have hardly any real influence on their societies, except by means of their words, as subtle as they might be. In this sense, poetry represents a most critical tool to keep a watchful eye on the wealthy and authority figures, confronting them with critical perspectives that might not be so complimentary and flattering as they might wish. Repression by a king, a dictator, a tyrant, or even an elected president, or a police force in the name of the government leaves the individual rather helpless, except that the poetic word then suddenly emerges and proves to be surprisingly resistant to the ideological subjugation of the masses.

Revealingly, Marie de France as a woman was not an intellectual outsider at her time, quite on the contrary. Even though we cannot say for sure who she might have been, we can be certain that she belonged to the highest social class in Anglo-Norman England and might have been the half-sister of King Henry II, to whom she dedicated her *Lais*. The *Fables*, by contrast, do not contain any identificatory comments and jump, more or less, into *media in res*, apart from some moralizing remarks at the beginning of the text. Recent scholarship has begun to explore her work more in detail, but we have not moved much beyond what we can read, for instance, in the famous *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue français* (1984): "Ces *Fables*, au nombre de 103, touchent par la simplicité du ton et la tendresse de la morale."¹⁹

It is entirely clear that the poet voices a considerable degree of discomfort with the social conditions of her time, but it might not be enough, as Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken emphasize, to claim that she targeted shortcomings of feudalism.²⁰ Undoubtedly, Marie adapted and translated much older material for her own purposes,²¹ but, as Harriet Spiegel rightly underscores: "she made them her own. Most basically, she medievalizes her classical fables; hers are manifestly a product of the twelfth century, providing commentary on contemporary life, particularly on feudal structure and questions of justice" ²² Spiegel goes even one step further and alerts us to Marie's deep concern with a fair and just royal government so necessary especially for the masses of subjects. Along with this, she demonstrated great sympathy with the poor and their suffering, and with women in general.²³

We can certainly appreciate this reading, but we would go amiss if we viewed Marie's *Fables* only through a literary-historical lens and ignored their potentials for further reflections on the social conditions, both then and today. We could also, as R. Howard Bloch has done, examine the *Fables* in light of their reflections on the duplicity and ambiguity of human language.²⁴ But I do not intend simply to modernize them or to misuse them for current political or social issues; and yet, here we face a remarkable opportunity to come to terms with literary statements, similar to proverbs or aphorisms, that continue to speak to us today. As I have observed already above, poetry has often served as a political engine, addressing critical issues in society, but then resorting to veiled

language.²⁵ The fable as a genre met this requirement already in the Middle Ages as well, and it continues to do so today.²⁶

As such, the fable has always necessitated the reader's/listener's translation of the formal statements dealing with the animals in their interactions with each other in order to come to terms with the critical issue addressed here. The explicit use of animals as the main figures already indicates that human society is the real target, and since there is always a problem, the *causa narrandi*, we are immediately invited to think about the political or social meaning and implications of the individual fable. We might want to go so far as to assume, to quote Shakespeare, "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet*). Correspondingly, Marie reveals, through her fables, a whole host of problems within her society, and many of those appear to vex us today as well. Historically speaking, this would then make it possible for us to isolate those issues and compare them with comments in contemporary chronicles, for instance. Here, however, I want to universalize Marie's observations and figure out her humanistic concerns insofar as they address topics that continue to be greatly significant for us today and still await effective answers.²⁷

In fact, considering her own comments in the prologue to her *Fables*, she emphasizes deliberately that her narratives promise to provide her audience with moral teachings, drawing specifically from "bons livres e escritz" (3; good books and written texts).²⁸ As much as she relied on ancient or other sources in order to utilize them for her own purposes, as much can we build a bridge between her text and our contemporary issues. Marie fully understands what the deep and true nature of literature is, namely to contain, in the sweetness of the poetic words, philosophical ideas ("philosophie," 24). Pursuing this perspective, we can approach her *Fables* both in their medieval configuration and as timeless carriers of wisdom and truth, parallel to aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, and similar genres. In some cases, of course, we might face historical barriers, meaning that a narrative might address rather specific issues relevant only in the past; in others, we will easily recognize most poignant comments about human life, both then and today. Following I will draw on a short selection of Marie's *Fables* in order to illustrate the validity of this approach, and this even at the calculated risk of anachronism in literary-historical terms.

In "Del lu e de l'aiguel" (no. 1), for instance, the poet addresses the universal issue that 'might supersedes right.' The wolf, standing upstream, claims that the lamb, standing downstream, would be responsible for having soiled the water so badly that he cannot drink it. The lamb rightly points out that this would be impossible, considering the place where it is located, but the wolf does not care, simply turns the argument upside down, informs the lamb that it deserves punishment for its evil deed, and devours the innocent victim. The result presented here is unequivocal; the mighty and powerful ones abuse their positions, resort to highly dubious rhetorical arguments, and disregard morality and virtues to achieve their personal ends. For Marie, then, there are serious problems to be considered within her own society, where feudalistic structures have proven to be unreliable, even untrustworthy because the aristocracy does not only enjoy its own privileges, but in addition abuses the lower classes, swallowing them like the wolf does with the lamb.

Although the lamb is still very young and helpless, it knows well how to argue and thus to defend itself against the wolf's accusations, explicitly pointing out that the wolf's claims do not make sense because the water runs the opposite direction, and emphasizing that whatever its father might have done to the wolf, the lamb was not even born at that time and so would not have anything to do with the past events. Of course, as is only too self-evident, the father sheep had also been abused and then killed by the wolf, but that is not so much the point here.

In her epimyth, Marie then becomes very direct and charges both the great lords and the judges (32) of being corrupt and greedy, utilizing their authority to abuse the simple people. The poet's attack is primarily aimed against the legal system that does not work fairly and is unjust insofar as the judges deliberately confuse the defendants: "pur eus confondre" (35; they confound them). Justice can no longer be found at the courts, as the poet claims bitterly, and she places the finger squarely into the wound of feudal society, contrasting drastically the voracious wolf against the innocent lamb.

While this fable is predicated on the poet's criticism of sheer violence and cruelty, in many others we notice that Marie targets the general malaise with cunning, deception, trickery, false promises, and flattery, deeply concerned with the failure of society to uphold its own ideals of ethics. This finds its

dramatic expression in the account of the mouse and the frog (no. 3), both of which need their own area of existence and cannot survive in the respective other. The frog convinces its host to come along with him to visit his own home, but when they cross the river, both bound together by a string since the mouse cannot swim, the frog tries to drown the partner by diving deep into the water (69). Because the latter desperately struggles against this move trying to survive, a kite notices them and catches both, but it then devours the fat frog as a better meal and thus sets the small mouse unintentionally free, which leads the narrator to emphasize that plotting villains will be punished and die because they will never have friends with whom they would share anything (84-87). As much as Marie had voiced rather negative comments in the previous fable, here she formulates some hope that those who aim to gain advantages over others by means of “purchacer” (91; ensnare) will lose out at the end. In other words, there is some hope for justice, even under the worst possible conditions.²⁹

However, already the next fable, “Del chien et de la berbiz” (no. 4), in which a dog takes a ewe to court over a loaf of bread which he had allegedly loaned to the latter, the poet returns to her bitter laments about a fundamental shortcoming in her society. The dog proves his alleged claim by bribing the wolf and the kite to give false testimony, and since the poor sheep cannot defend herself effectively, it is eaten by the voracious liars. Again, Marie uses this as an opportunity to lament about the terrible fall-out of lying and deception at court where the poor people have no chance against the rich and powerful whose only care is to secure their own share at the cost of the others. The attack against the immorality of the aristocracy could not be more severe and more explicit (39-42). The dog used trumped-up charges, and then promised the two witnesses a share of the ewe, and since three are stronger than one, even though the latter has the right on its side, the deceivers win the game and utilize the traditional institution of the court to their own advantage.

True to the form of the fable tradition, Marie explicitly urges her readers/listeners to take her accounts as examples for the general improvement of people’s lives. Once the lesson would have been understood, subsequent errors could be avoided, as she introduces her sixth fable, “ Del soleil ki voit femme prendre” (no. 7). When the sun is looking for a wife, the people get deeply worried and ask for advice. Wise people then speak up and point out the danger for all the subjects if the sun had a partner since both together would exert more power than anyone else to the disadvantage of the entire society. As the epimyth then alerts us, there are truly evil “seignurs” (26; lords) who, once they have grown beyond all control, they turn into tyrants: “Cum plus est fort, pis lur fet” (31; the stronger the lord is, the worse is the [people’s] fate). There is no respect for the rank of a king by itself; instead, Marie perceives great dangers for society at large if the ruler grabs too much power to the disadvantage of all.³⁰

As subtle as this narrative appears to be, as concisely the narrator outlines where the real danger for the political system rests. Of course, Marie did not entertain any notion of democracy as we know it today, but by the same token, she indicated clearly her specific warning about a king who would disregard the well-being of his people and assume absolute power. She underscores in strong language that such a king would “Tuz jurs lur est mal en aguet” (32; All the time he is watching/spying). We might wonder whether Marie actually had in mind to criticize the royal system in place at that time, or whether she only wanted to warn about extreme cases since any king could grab more power than would have been good for society at large. But we can go one step further and recognize here a more universal statement warning the audience about the catastrophic consequences if one ruler would rise too high and repress everyone else, who then could simply not survive, as expressed in the image of a sun that would burn everything down, especially once it would have married.

The warning about this development is pronounced by the “meuz saveit” (12; the wisest), so for the narrator there is a clear position here: wisdom must rule, also in the political sphere, which the allegorical figure of “Destinee” then also confirms (21-23). In other words, Marie intended her fable not only for her contemporaries but for all times. Considering the universal applicability of her observations, we would have to agree that she probably achieved her goal since her statements continue to apply to our world.

While many of Marie’s fables quickly remind us of the ancient sources, such as Esop, the application of the meaning to current political conditions strikes us as remarkable, to say the least. In “De lu et da la grue” (no. 7), the crane helps the wolf by removing a bone that was stuck in his throat. The wolf

then does not grant a reward because he claims not having choked the other or subsequently bitten off the crane's head would be reward enough. His evil mind-set is thus clearly revealed, which provides the narrator with the opportunity to rant about the evil lords of whom she knows. Marie bitterly complains that those haughty individuals would abuse their subjects just as the wolf did with the crane. While they would be required to serve their lords, they would not receive a reward and must be happy even to be alive. The poet is not more specific as to whom she really targets, except for identifying the "mal seigneur" (33), but her criticism is loud enough. Remarkably, while being very early in her political criticism, Marie's opinions found numerous parallels in the philosophical and ethical discourse by Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and many others and she seems to have hit a true nerve with her powerful message.³¹ Of course, she did not question feudalism itself, the role of the aristocracy, and of the royalty, but she severely challenged those in power regarding the misuse of their power, in particular in the courts. In other words, she was not a revolutionary, but a sharp-tongued critic of critical ethical shortcomings.

We might wonder why she was even tolerated with her hard-hitting comments. Would not her peers have rejected her out of deep irritation? If we consider the fable "De la lisse ki ot chaëlé" (no. 8), for instance, the perspective widens and involves people at large, that is, those who abuse a good person's hospitality, magnanimity, and generosity. In this case, the situation addresses a kind dog who lets a pregnant hound stay with her until she has delivered her pups, but this quickly develops into aggression and the good host's suffering at the hand of the by then most unwelcome visitors. Here, Marie laments the tension between worthy and noble individuals and those who are only selfish and even brutal. For her, character matters centrally, integrity, honor, and virtues, whereas traditional social rank due to one's family would not justify any public recognition.

Several fables clearly indicate that the poet had a bone to pick with the king, whether specifically Henry II or some assumed king at large. In "Del leün, del bugle, e del lu" (no. 11a.) and "Del leün, de la chevre, e de la berbiz" (no. 11b) the king goes hunting in the company with some other, weaker animals, and once they have secured a prey, the king claims all for himself with rather dubious, completely arrogant and presumptuous arguments, revealing his tyrannical attitude which makes those companions submit without any protest, whereupon they flee because they will never get any rights and cannot pursue their own claims. In no. 11b, it's not even the king, but the rich man who takes it all: "Li riches vout tut retenir" (48), which could almost be read as a very early criticism of capitalism before capitalism.

However, we also would have to acknowledge the limitations of Marie's comments because she does not differentiate at all, criticizes the rich only generically, and does not examine in detail why and how the rich abuse the poor. Nevertheless, even under those circumstance, her epimyth deserves careful consideration in the context of twelfth-century courtly life insofar as the author directly challenges her aristocratic audience and admonishes them to remember true ethical values, the urgency to pay respect to the needs of the poor, and to bridle the lust and greed of the rich: "Li riches vout tut retenir" (48; the rich wants to retain it all). This finds an intriguing parallel in "De la suriz de vile e de la suriz de bois" (no. 9) where a country mouse visits a city mouse and quickly realizes that all the wealth in the city would not be worth the constant stress, fear, and threats by people who make the life of mice most uncomfortable. Marie highlights, resorting to the contrastive image of the presumptuous and the modest mouse, how much arrogance and luxury can bring about nothing but distress, fear, and danger. As the country mouse says, giving word to the poet herself: "Meuz amerieie al bois par mei" (50; for me the woods are much better). There is never a real remark in favor of the courts, and instead, Marie urges her readers to assume, as we might say today, to embrace an ecocritical thinking, to pursue a simple life style, and to be happy with one's humble conditions.

This could imply, of course, that she condoned the profound inequalities in feudal society, but she was not a radical reformer; instead, as this and countless other examples clearly indicate, Marie did not refrain from challenging social injustice, foolish materialism, and uncalled hunger for power. At the same time, if we take "De l'asne ki volt jüer a sun seignur" (no. 13) into consideration, the poet clearly draws the lines between the social classes and strongly objects to the ass's desire to strike a friendship with his master, which causes a true fiasco and a major melee at court. The birthright must be observed, as the epimyth informs us, and those who try to transgress it will face severe backlashes. However, here the criticism does not target so much those who want to rise up the social ladder and

cross into a higher class, but those who behave foolishly and act preposterously.

Marie's position becomes clearer in the fable "Del leün e de la suriz" (no. 16) where a lion spares a little mouse which later saves the lion from a trap. Although furious about having been disturbed in his sleep by the mouse, the mighty lion quickly realizes that it would be beneath his honor to exact revenge from this tiny intruder: "Petit d'onur, ceo dit, avereit / De li s'il la ocieit" (12-14; He said, there would be little honor if he killed it). The lion demonstrates benevolence and hence royal dignity. Subsequently, when the mouse can actually help him most effectively, the narrator emphasizes the great benefit of "humilitez" (44; humility). Of course, the narrator does not request any change of the social structure, and yet she insists that the rich should demonstrate "bone merci" (49; good grace, or charity). Just as in the case of the lion, they might need the help of the poor one day (51) and could use their advice (52). For Marie, then, the ideal would be if all social classes accepted each other and formed part of the same community, supporting each other in material and spiritual terms. In a way, the poet projects a form of social utopia, at least for her time, in which each representative would be recognized by the others in a harmonious fashion. Benevolence would thus be the core concept of such a world as suggested by these fables.

Of course, Marie could also take the very opposite perspective and lambast the ordinary people who would not appreciate a king's honorable rank and behavior. In the case of "Des reines ki demanderent rei" (no. 18), for instance, the frogs constantly badger Destiny for a king, but they are not content with a wooden log that happens to land in their pond. In fact, since they all squat on it and leave behind their dirt, it eventually sinks to the bottom. When the frogs demand another king, Destiny sends them an adder (poisonous snake) which swallows many of them. Again, the frogs are completely upset, but Destiny then refuses to help them further. For Marie, the meaning is clear, insofar as the masses tend to malign their lord and do not pay proper respect. Instead of giving him the necessary honor and service, they undermine his position and thus destroy their own political condition.

For Marie, then, the central issue was not so much how to maintain the hierarchical structure, which was not at stake at any rate, but how the feudal system with its three classes could be maintained by way of mutual recognition, which then would make possible the establishment of a harmonious and well-balanced community. Contemporary philosophers and theologians such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas similarly discussed this issue, referring to values such as magnanimity, humility, piety, recognition, and gratitude, irrespective of the political relationships.³² From a philosophical point of view, Marie argues that people are too cantankerous, partisan, selfish, and ignorant and should, instead, aim for mutual respect and helping each other out, irrespective of the social status and rank, otherwise they would experience the same destiny as the frogs.

According to "Des colums e de l'ostur" (no. 19), foolishness reigns supreme everywhere, and when doves decide to elect the hawk as their king, they should not be surprised that this bird of prey causes havoc amongst them. Naively they assume that granting him that rank and power would appease him and instill a sense of responsibility in him, protecting the subjects from external attacks. However, the very opposite is the case, so the narrator is filled with contempt about those who assume that a dictator or tyrant could be contained through the political system. Many dictators throughout time rose to power pretending that they had really the common weal in mind, but at the end the result has always been the same, the hawk then began to devour the doves. In a way, hence, Marie embarks here on a diatribe against tyranny, challenging evil kings who abuse their subjects who were ignorant enough to believe that they could trust him and so elected him as a king.

Following Mario Turchetti, since antiquity, there has been a discourse on this topic, but he does not consider the testimony of Marie de France.³³ It would be impossible to determine whether she had felt the first political ripples that ultimately led to the signing of the famous *Magna carta* in 1215, but her very popular fables obviously must have contributed to the public discourse on evil rulership by the king and the consequences of people's foolishness to elect such a terrible individual.³⁴ However, here as well, Marie did not simply identify the hawk as an evil character because killing doves comes natural to this bird of prey. Instead, to emphasize this as clearly as possible, the doves are to be blamed for their ignorance and naiveté, which suggests, at the same time, that the poet assumed that the ordinary people (doves) would even have had the opportunity to be involved in the selection and election of the king.

Nevertheless, the epimyth also does not shy away from identifying very explicitly the danger when an individual turns out to be “cruel hume u a felun” (25; a cruel human being and a villain). In short, her criticism is double-edged, against the evil rulers and against the foolish subjects, though it is unclear whether she really had the ordinary people in mind, or the high-ranking barons who were the only ones who could elect a king.³⁵ To be sure, the actions of the king are called ‘murder’ (“ocist,” 13; he kills), and there is no respect for the evil ruler, but the barons (doves) should have foreseen this, and yet utterly failed in the need to be cautious in political affairs.

Ethical and intelligent behavior is what the poet demands from her audience. The fable “Del larun e del chien” (no. 20) underscores this eloquently insofar as the thief does not achieve his goal of bribing the dog guarding his master’s flock of sheep because it would constitute treason, a significant topic both in the Middle Ages and today.³⁶ Those who artificially flatter people and buy their favors do nothing but to corrupt all of society and so deserve to be rejected or retained. True to form, then, Marie deserves great respect for her strong and convincing narrative efforts to come to terms with specific-historical and universal issues affecting all people. After all, there is a thief, a guard dog, and the bribe, which the dog does not accept. Much evil even in our own world is simply predicated on those factors, and with barely any need to translate this fable into modern terms, we suddenly face a powerful narrative that addresses universal concerns, both then and today. Honesty and virtues are at stake, and corruption threatens the ethical core of society. Marie de France was obviously bold enough to hold up a mirror to her own society, but we find ourselves reflected in it as well.

In “De la chalve suriz” (no. 23) we are confronted once again with the issue of treason, here pertaining to the bat that cannot decide whether it should side with the army of animals under the leadership of the lion or the army of the birds under the leadership of the eagle. While the narrative explanation why the bat is severely accused of treason might be a little confusing, justified only by Marie’s attempt to identify the bat’s curiously hybrid nature as a bird with feet, the epimyth matters most for us. Even though speaking globally, the narrator emphasizes the great threat to a country’s well-being if a servant such as the bat turns to disloyalty and disrespects its lord (52-55). She does not insist on subservience, but on loyalty as part of a social contract, whereas the bat was simply a turn-coat and could not be trusted, especially in the emergency of the war campaign. By being nothing but an opportunist, the bat thus loses “honour en pert e sun aveir” (61; honor and its possession). Although we would not be able to take this presumptuous explanation of the bat’s natural behavior at face value, the symbolic meaning behind this fable is loud and clear.

Those who do not live up to their own ethical standards and pursue only those goals that are convenient in any given moment, will not enjoy any public respect and deserve contempt. Marie does not, as far as we can tell, address a specific political situation, and yet her fable speaks a concrete language, targeting those who do not hold up their part of the bargain and are untrustworthy as friends or allies. Considering the strong position assumed by the poet, her epimyth reveals, after all, a definite political message that insists on the observation of fundamental ethical ideals.

The bat demonstrated that she could not be relied on, that she was fearful, wavering, and hence an untrustworthy fellow. Only slightly differently, in “De l’humme, de sun ventre, e de ses membres” (no. 27), the various body parts (mostly the extremities) protested against the stomach and charged it of being irresponsible and wasteful. As it turns out, however, the body immediately started to suffer when the stomach was neglected, so the narrator understandably concludes that society can only function well if all entities cooperate with each other in an honorable fashion. The lords ought to respect their subjects, and the latter ought to serve honorably their lords. Only mutual trust and respect would achieve the realization of the ideal of the wholesome entity of the entire body, that is, “honour” (21; honor).

In addition, as we are told in “Del cerf a une ewe” (no. 24), people tend to ignore what is relevant and important in life and idealize ephemeral, foolish, and irrelevant things. Here, the stag admires for too long his beautiful antlers when it stares at its own image in the water of a brook, not paying attention to the dogs and a hunter rushing up to him for the kill. The deer runs away, but then gets entangled with the antlers in the underbrush of the forest. Only when it is too late, and the dogs are already upon it, does the deer realize that it had failed to learn what is really important in life, such as in its case, attentiveness, swiftness, alertness. It might sound too general for most readers/listeners when Marie

concludes, “E blamer ceo qu’il deveient / Forment loër, s’il saveient” (23-24; they blame what they should praise if they only knew). Nevertheless, we can recognize here a profound epistemological insight in people’s inability to recognize the full truth, meaning that they are deceived by material conditions and fall prey to external appearance, instead of appreciating the inner truth and value.

At the same time, Marie strongly favored the ideal of individual freedom and personal independence, as formulated in the fable “Del lu e del chien” (no. 26). Although the wolf was commonly identified as a threat to people and regarded with great suspicion,³⁷ as Marie had indicated herself in the second fable (see above), or also in the fables “Del lu ki fu reis” (no. 29) and “Del lu e del mutun” (no. 50), here the narrator makes him to the hero of her account insofar as he proves to be a representative of freedom in the wilderness of nature. The wolf at first believes that the well-fed dog represents an ideal lifestyle, and wants to copy him, submitting himself under the master’s control. But as soon as he realizes that this also would entail the complete loss of freedom, he leaves the dog and abandons the original plan to serve the dog’s master. As he emphasizes: “Meuz voil estre lus a delivre / Que en cheine richement vivre” (37-38; I rather be a free wolf than to live a life on the chain).³⁸

We might wonder how this argument could fit into the framework of medieval feudalism, or the world of the royal courts. Drawing from the wolf, normally regarded as a wild and ferocious animal hated by everyone, Marie projects him as the representative of those individuals who desire nothing more than freedom, almost in the modern sense of the word. The wolf spies the collar and the leash on the dog and immediately realizes the danger he himself is in because the lure of good food and material security would threaten his independence and personal happiness. He himself would never voluntarily accept a chain: “Ja chaëne ne choiserai!” (36; I will never choose a chain). Freedom depends on having a choice, and that’s exactly what the wolf prefers: “Quant uncore pois estre a chois” (39; as long as can choose myself).

Considering the overarching concept of feudal obligations, the supreme role of the Catholic Church, and the rigid class structures, this fable truly comes as a surprise as it could have easily be written in the nineteenth century, for instance, as a literary manifesto for individual freedom. In fact, Marie virtually idealizes the wild forest as a space where social constraints are not at play,³⁹ and we are left with the impression that with this fable she wanted to project a social utopia far away from the world of the courts or urban locations (“vile,” 40).

In later fables, Marie turns her attention also to non-animal accounts and ridicules, instead, peasants, for instance. But this does not change anything in her epistemological thrust, to expose people’s foolishness, vices, character flaws, ignorance, aggression, and even violence. Only when the ruler, such as the wolf (no. 89), remains impassioned and fair, would there be hope for a good government. That, however, would also require good advice and council, as the fable “Del lu e del cheverol” (no. 90) outlines. Without going too much into detail, Marie simply warns us to stay away from “feluns e li desleial” (27; villains and disloyal ones). She does not explain how individuals should achieve that goal, but the whole of fables is ultimately supposed to teach enough lessons for this to become reality. Unfortunately, as the fable “De la bisse e de sun feon” (no. 92) instructs, there are many foolish people who wait too long before they call for help and do not ask for advice when there still is time (33-36). Wisdom always emerges as the key aspect in most of the fables, and so here as well. There is regularly the “fol” and the “sage” (35), but the majority of people appear to belong to the first category.

Curiously, in our day and age of ‘fake news’ and serious efforts to discredit scholarship and science in the name of some political agenda, the epimyth in the fable “Del vilein e de sa feme cuntrariuse” (no. 95) sounds so apropos for us today, disregarding the actually horrible content of the narrative itself where a wife is described as highly contrary, the husband as extremely brutal and violent. Marie emphasizes unequivocally that many people act and speak like fools, whereas those who belong to the wise and learned are not listened to because the fools want to drown out any reasonable opinion (34-36).

We might disagree with some of Marie’s conclusions and opinions, but since she does not refer to specific, historically verifiable events and only formulates broad moralizing and didactic advice about the proper way how people should try to live with each other, either within marriage or at court, in a community or in some kind of social company, her fables prove to be impressively insightful,

poignant, and relevant, both for her own time and for us today. She never hesitates to criticize high and low, both the king and foolish peasants, both men and women; both the pretentious courtiers and silly individuals in various stations of life.

In many respects, Marie emerges as a strong voice addressing both general shortcomings in the late twelfth century and universal concerns in human society at large. But we must not forget some of her most powerful examples of criticism against the tyrannical king, the abusive nobles, the disrespectful ordinary subjects, and the failure of her society at large to form a harmonious and well-balanced community in which everyone would pay all respect where it is due, where the individuals live their lives to their best abilities, striving for an intelligent and yet also humble mode of existence. For this Anglo-Norman poet, both violence and hunger for power, especially in kings, emerge as some of the worst banes of her world, but she also proves insightful enough to convey many universal messages that ring throughout time and allow us even today to comprehend why her fables were so popular during the high and late Middle Ages. They are as topical and relevant now as at her time.

To conclude, just as the proverb, the aphorism, the epigram, or many other short and succinct literary statements, the fable, and here especially the epimyth, proves to be an invaluable source for universal comments about wisdom, foolishness, wrongdoing, human failures, character weakness, victimization at the hand of evil individuals, dangerous political developments (tyranny), and abuse of the ordinary people by the mighty and powerful. But no one is really exempt from the poet's criticism; the ordinary subjects who do not fulfill their social obligations and do not live up to their own responsibilities are also targets of Marie's critical comments.

We might not agree with every remark rounding off her fables, but we can be certain that this poet successfully addressed major problems in human life and formulated powerful and succinct statements exposing the foibles and failures of the various culprits. She also voiced strong empathy for victims of evil acts, crime, ignorance, and plain stupidity. In a way, we are confronted, through these animal narratives, with the kaleidoscope of human society, with no one being spared here. But Marie's criticism both of an overpowering king and an abusive aristocracy stands out most clearly, and in this context she addresses such important issues as loyalty, trust, treason, betrayal, deception, and the failure to live up to one's responsibilities.⁴⁰

Both pedagogically and philosophically, both morally and religiously, both ethically and socially, these fables, as is commonly the case in this genre, serve the great task of examining and analyzing critically and even sarcastically the many failures and shortcomings in human life.⁴¹ Certainly, here we deal with important literature from the high Middle Ages,⁴² and Marie was not the first and not the last to operate with this genre.⁴³ Many of her texts have already been carefully examined from a variety of perspectives, but here we have uncovered more of the ethical, social, and political dimensions that mark her contributions as some of the best of her time which continues to carry meaning and relevance for us today.

Unabashedly she attacked and criticized her contemporaries and forced them to come to terms with their own shortcomings. Surprisingly, although she took the king and the powerful aristocrats most painfully to task, her opus of fables enjoyed significant popularity, obviously because she succeeded in formulating her observations and insights so astutely and poignantly. Pedagogically speaking, these fables prove to be powerful literary comments on political, ethical, moral, and philosophical issues in everyday life, both in the high Middle Ages and today. True to the tradition of fable literature, Marie seems to write about issues in animal life only, but in reality she addressed major themes in human society, high and low, allowing us to engage in critical discussions about them, which thus can transform the ordinary classroom into an intellectual forum where fundamental concerns can be examined and analyzed most productively, and this just as much today as in the medieval past.

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- [5] Gustav Bebermeyer, “Sprichwort,” *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*. 2nd ed., ed. Klaus Kanzog and Achim Masser. Vol. IV. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1984, 132-51.
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